## Part I: The Return

Hawkins in the winter was always a desolate place for Will Byers, even as a child. Now, as an adult, there was a certain added amount of foreboding to it, as if the bare trees were skeletal warnings, saying “BEWARE: ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK”.

Or maybe he was projecting. A traumatic childhood can do that to a place, make it feel more menacing. Even as the rental car ambled down the pockmarked road, he recognized the same street where bullies had sent him crashing to the ground during Halloween, triggering a panic attack that had sent him hurtling to that other place, the real place of foreboding and evil. The place Eleven had always called “The Upside Down”. The memory alone had him breaking out in a cold sweat.

A hand on his own made him jump nearly out of his skin.

“Whoa, hey,” Darius said, holding his hand up as if to prove it wasn’t a weapon. “Jumpy much?”

“Sorry,” Will answered meekly, embarrassed. He’d thought he was over it. All of it. He’d thought that if he put enough time and distance between himself and the place that had given him so many scars, he would start to heal. Maybe, eventually, even become whole again. It wasn’t a good sign that he was already starting to unravel at the seams. Maybe he should’ve waited longer. Maybe forever. He’d been doing so much better lately but now, just driving through Hawkins, all of the old hurts were rising right back up to the surface.

“You okay?” Darius asked, taking his eyes off the road to glance at him in concern. “You’re looking a little… sick.”

Will said nothing. He *felt* sick.

Darius placed his hand back on the one Will kept clenched tightly in his lap. Darius’ coffee-colored skin always looked so stark against his own, putting Will in mind of the black and white cookies he’d always tried to extort from his mom before he’d understood how poor they were. Looking at their hands together had the same calming effect on Will as it always did and he found the tightness in his chest ease enough for him to breathe, truly breathe, for the first time since arriving in Hawkins.

“Baby, it’s okay.” Darius’ soothed. “Everything’s gonna be fine. I’m gonna be there with you, remember? And no matter what happens, you’ll always have me, and Jonathan, and Zoey, and the rest of your New York family.”

The reason he’d come back to Hawkins this Christmas had momentarily taken a backseat to the fresh pain that came from reopening nearly closed wounds. Having to think about both made his head hurt and his stomach roil. If this kept up he was going to chicken out altogether and have Darius turn them around and head straight back to New York. He could always call his mom from the road, tell her he got sick or something and wouldn’t be able to make it after all. The excuses had become so easy by now. *No, I can’t come this year, I’m behind on the rent and can’t afford the bus fare.* Or *No, I can’t come this year, my friend’s going through a breakup and doesn’t have anyone else.* Or *No, I can’t come this year, I have to work over the break to save up for next semester*. He’d told himself he was finally done with excuses, with lying. This was going to be the year. Finally. It had to be. It *had* to.

He sniffed once, the cold making his nose run even inside the car, and he turned as sweet a smile as he could muster towards Darius’ concern. “I know. Thanks again for doing this. I don’t think I could go through with this without you.”

Darius’ smile was huge and blindingly white in his dark face. “Are you kidding? I wouldn’t *let* you come without me.”

Will’s smile turned slightly more genuine.

The Byers’ home hadn’t changed much in the three years Will had been away. The gravel path leading up to the house was still overgrown with weeds and the porch still sagged in the middle. The only difference was the semi-recent coat of mint-green paint on the siding, and the sporadic mounds of old snow on the roof and ground, patchy like some kind of albino mold.

Darius’ pulled the rental car up alongside Mom’s barely-holding-together Pinto. Even though it was only four in the afternoon, the sun was already setting behind them, casting the house and surrounding woods in a sad sepia, like a faded Civil War photograph. Butterflies cascaded through Will’s stomach as they made their way to the front door and Darius lifted his fist to knock. But, of course, El had to make an entrance.

The door was pulled open before Darius’ fist ever made contact and revealed Eleven’s mass of chestnut hair, barely restrained in a ponytail, and her stoic, doll-like face, with just the curl at the very corner of her lips belying her impassivity.

“Finally,” she deadpanned. “I thought we were gonna have to send out the fire brigade.”

Will couldn’t stop a grin from splitting his face in half as he wrapped his arms tightly around her shoulders. He still wasn’t used to her being taller than him, and he thought he might never be. “I missed you, weirdo,” he said into her hair, softly and only for her.

She squeezed him back, bruisingly hard. She might not have always been taller than him, but she’d always been stronger. “I missed you too, zombie boy.”

When Will pulled back she was beaming, all dimples and sparkling brown eyes. He turned to Darius then, who’d been watching the exchange with a mixture of amusement and fondness.

“Dare, this is Jane, my step-sister. I call her El sometimes, though. It’s just a nickname from when we were kids.” He put a hand on Darius’ shoulder then, though he could barely feel it through the layers of padding of his jacket. “Jane, this is my roommate, Darius.”

“Duh,” El replied dryly. “It’s not like you told us you were bringing him or anything.” She held out her hand and they shook. Will could tell that Darius was surprised by the strength of her grip. He could also tell that Darius immediately liked her. “Nice to meet you. Joyce is making dinner and Hop’s out back chopping wood.”

Will wrinkled his nose. “Why? We don’t have a fireplace.”

“Beats me. Says it keeps him in shape. I think he just wants to feel extra manly every now and then. Also, there’re no games on.”

“That explains it.”

“Jane!” Will’s mother’s voice came from inside, sounding frazzled and taut as a cord, like usual. “Is that Will?”

“Yup!” El hollered over her shoulder. “And he brought his hot friend.”

She left the door hanging open and sauntered back inside like a bored cougar. Will and Darius followed dutifully after her, lugging their bags behind them, while Darius tried and failed to conceal a smile.

The warmth inside was stifling after the frigid winter air and Will found himself immediately peeling off his parka and scarf before even setting down his bag. The interior was cheerily decorated with Christmas lights that still made him shudder and an anemic but lovingly trimmed tree that was crammed into a corner between the TV and Hopper’s lounger. The whole house seemed to be sweating cinnamon and cloves, but under it were still the permeating scents of teak and mold that had defined Will’s childhood. The feelings of familiarity and nostalgia were so overwhelming that Will felt momentarily dizzy. He tried to blame it on the suffocating heat.

“Oh my God, *Will*.” His mother’s screech was preceded by her bony arms twining themselves around him like steel cables, her grey-streaked head tucking itself just under Will’s chin. Before he could even hug back, she’d pulled herself away, holding him at arm’s length to scrutinize him with wide eyes. There were more lines on her face than he remembered. “Look at you! Look how tall you are! You’re so *thin*! Jane, doesn’t he look thin? You’re not eating enough in New York-” And to El, “- Didn’t I say he wasn’t eating enough in New York?”

“You did say that,” El replied as she snatched a cooling chicken nugget from the kitchen counter and popped it in her mouth.

“Sweetie, no, those are for dinner!” Mom admonished with her usual urgency. Everything was always the end of the world for Joyce Byers.

“Mom,” Will deftly recaptured her attention before it wandered too far. “This is my roommate, Darius. I told you about him.”

She released Will in favor of Darius. “Of course you did. I’ve heard so much about you, Darius. It’s so good to finally meet you.” And then there was hugging and back patting and Darius looking mildly alarmed by the tiny tornado that was Will’s mom.

“Come and help me set up for dinner and you can tell me all about your drive from *New York*.” She always said “New York” like she was saying “Paris, France” or “The Moon”. “I still can’t believe Jonathan won’t be here until Christmas eve. That’s so unlike him, he always stays for two weeks.”

“Maybe you should let the guys put their stuff away before you force them into indentured servitude,” El suggested from the couch, very pointedly not helping with any kind of preparation, dinner or otherwise, but doing a valiant job of using the remote instead of her powers to turn the channels on the tv (for their guest’s benefit, one assumes).

“Oh, of course!” Mom smacked herself histrionically on the forehead. “Of course! Sorry, you boys go ahead, get settled, we’ll talk over dinner.”

“Jonathan and Zoey had to go to her parents’ place,” Will heard El explain as he and Darius made their way down the hall towards his old bedroom. “That’s the danger of being in a committed relationship with someone who has a family.”

“God, of *course*! I can’t believe I forgot-”

Her voice was abruptly cut off when Will closed his bedroom door. The silence was so relieving that his chest barely tightened when he saw his familiar walls, papered in rock band posters and his first amateur attempts at illustration.

“You’re family’s so…” Darius began.

“Intense?” Will offered, throwing himself down face first on his only slightly dusty bedspread. It was amazing how it still smelled like him, like he’d never left.

“I was gonna say ‘awesome’.” Will could hear the smile in Darius voice.

“Just wait until you meet Hopper,” Will mumbled into the *Star Wars* themed comforter.

“You can call me Jim,” Hop’s deep voice rumbled around his cigarette. “Pass the potatoes, kiddo.”

“Hop, not at the table.” Mom plucked the cigarette from his mouth and mashed it into a handily located ashtray which Will stopped himself from pointing out happened to be on the table where smoking was allegedly not permitted.

El passed the potatoes. Will chased his peas around his plate with his fork.

“Darius, you have to tell us everything,” Mom enthused and Will’s stomach dipped sickeningly. “You know how tight-lipped our little Will can be. What are you studying, where are you from, how long have you and Will been friends, where’d you meet-”

“Come on, babe,” Hop said evenly, piling mashed potatoes onto his plate. “One question at a time.”

“Sorry, sorry!” She held her hands out apologetically. “You’re right. I just haven’t met any of Will’s *New York* friends before.”

“Well,” Darius began, amused. “I’m from Brooklyn, born and raised. I’m studying dance at Hunter but Will and I met in an intro to theater class, actually.”

Mom looked positively floored, her eyes big as saucers as she gaped at Will like she’d never seen him before. “You were in a *theater* class? I never knew you liked acting! You’ve always been so shy and-”

“Darius is being modest, Mom,” Will deflected, as he always did, away from anything that put him in the spotlight. “He doesn’t just study dance, he runs his own dance studio on Water St. He’s even been in a couple of music videos.” He drank quickly from his water glass, feeling Darius’ narrowed gaze on him.

Mom’s gaping was easily transferred from him to Darius and even El raised a mildly impressed eyebrow. “*No*! Darius!” She said his name like an accusation. “That’s amazing!”

“Anyone we’d know?” El asked casually.

“I was just a backup dancer,” Darius tried to downplay.

“Michael Jackson,” Will helpfully up-played.

“That’s pretty impressive, kid,” Hop supplied around a mouthful of mashed potatoes. Will secretly suspected he was *only* eating the mashed potatoes.

Mom made an undignified squawking sound of amazement.

“Some people say he should quit school and focus on his career full time,” Will added while omitting that he was the “some people”.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Hop said. “A college degree can open a lot of doors these days.”

Will didn’t have to look to know that Darius was giving him a stern “I told you so” look. He drank more water instead.

“Oh, I don’t know,” El said wryly. “I get along pretty well.”

Hop huffed. “That’s different.”

“Jane’s at the police academy,” Mom preened proudly. “She’s going to be Hawkin’s Chief of Police one day, just like her dad.” She ran a fond hand through Hopper’s thinning hair, leaving it sticking up at odd angles.

“You’re the Police Chief?” Darius inquired politely, just as eager as Will to shift the attention away from himself.

“Was,” Hop corrected laconically. “Retired.”

“He was the best Police Chief Hawkins ever had.” Mom hadn’t had much to be proud of during her life, so she took every opportunity to be as proud as she could as often as she could.

“Maybe,” Hop said, which was close as he ever came to agreeing with that statement.

“What’s wrong, sweetie? Aren’t you hungry?”

Damn. He’d thought he’d been so subtle about it. “I think I’m just tired from the drive over.” He made an effort to put a chicken nugget into his mouth and chew. He could barely taste it.

“You just need a good night’s sleep,” Mom agreed, happy to offer a practical solution to a practical problem. “Will always was a picky eater,” she said as an aside to Darius. “Especially when he was little. The doctor was always so worried that he wasn’t putting on any weight.”

Will managed to swallow his mouthful of chicken and was proud of himself for not choking on it from sheer mortification.

“I still can’t believe it took you *three years* to make it back for Christmas, Will.”

Will felt the familiar guilt as a lump in his throat and was just about to bring up one of his ever-ready excuses or apologies or both when his mother took mercy on him.

“But you’re here now and that’s all that matters.” She reached across the table and smoothed out his hair, the same hair he’d spent twenty minutes that morning quaffing into something that wasn’t “limp as a dead fish”.

“Do you boys have anything planned while you’re in town?”

A silence descended and Will realized that Darius wasn’t going to take this one for him. He finally lifted his gaze from his plate and met his mother’s inquiring eyes, so happy to have him back and so worried she’d do something to scare him off back to New York.

He swallowed back a fresh wave of guilt and summoned a smile from thin air. “I thought we could go see my old school. Maybe get some cocoa from Joe’s.”

“Oh, that sounds nice,” she smiled earnestly, thankful to be connecting with him. Will wondered briefly when they’d stopped being close. But the answer came to him almost immediately. They’d stopped being close when he’d run away.

“You should take him to the theater too, you know how nice they always decorate for the holidays. Oh!” She slapped Hop’s arm as a brilliant idea occurred to her. Hop’s hand barely wavered on its journey to deliver potatoes to his mouth. “You should get together with Mike! He always comes home for Christmas. He’s probably already here.”

Will was about to try another chicken nugget but the way the blood drained from his head at the mention of Mike’s name made it clear that if he put anything more in his mouth he would throw up.

“You remember Mike Wheeler, don’t you, Hop?” His mother continued mercilessly.

Hopper grunted in agreement.

“What ever happened between you two? You used to be thick as thieves. He’s such a good kid, Mike. Isn’t he a good kid, Hop?”

Hopper grunted in agreement.

“You should ask him over for dinner!”

Will didn’t think he could take much more of this. “Yeah,” he managed weakly, his gaze firmly on the clenched fists in his lap. “I’ll do that.”

“I can’t wait for Jonathan to get here,” El said casually, rescuing Will with the effortless grace she always did. He could’ve kissed her. “Zoey’s the bomb. If they ever break up I want to keep her instead.”

“*Jane*.”

“What?” She shrugged innocently. “It’s true. Back me up, Hop.”

“She’s not wrong.” Mom looked at Hopper as though he’d betrayed her. “Zoey’s a good kid. She’s good for him. No offense to Nancy, but I never thought they were right for each other. It’s good to see Jonathan going out with a girl with more meat on her bones.”

“*Hop*!” Will and his mom cried in unison.

“What?” Hopper asked, genuinely perplexed. “It’s true. Back me up, El.”

“He’s not wrong,” El grinned cheekily.

“I’m sorry about my family,” Will said softly, one hazel eye buried in the pillow, the other watching Darius. They were cramped in Will’s childhood twin bed, but it would still be more comfortable than one of them sleeping on the floor like they’d told Will’s mom they would.

“Don’t be sorry,” Darius told him just as softly. Being in bed required a soft voice. “I love them. Especially your step-sister.”

“I did warn you that you’d like her more than me.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. You’re pretty cute.” He reached out and tweaked Will’s nose. Will laughed and swatted his hand away. It was the first time he’d laughed all day. Darius had that effect on him. He reminded him of home. His real home. The two-bedroom POS apartment they’d left behind in Brooklyn. The one where the walls didn’t constantly remind him of translucent barriers he could never break through. Where the shadows didn’t make him jump because they might be creatures come to drag him back to that place. Where he could breathe and smile as easily as normal people could.

“Remind me why we broke up again,” Will breathed.

Darius smiled fondly at him, indulgently. “Come on, baby. Not that again. We’ve been through this.” His hand was soft and terribly warm against Will’s cheek. “We’re not good for each other that way. It gets so complicated so fast. You know I love you, Billy Bear, but we’re better at being friends.”

“I know,” Will sighed into Darius’ palm. “I love you too, Dare Bear.”

Darius kissed him lightly on the forehead and pulled both his hand and his lips back. He quirked a mischievous smile at Will. “So, who’s this Mike guy?”

And just like that, all the warmth was sucked out of the bed, and the room, and possibly the entire house. Will rolled over onto his back, gazing up the same popcorn ceiling he’d gazed up at a thousand times before, the same “N” shaped crack beside the light fixture where it’d always been.

“Just some guy I used to be friends with,” Will said, his voice sounding hollow even to his own ears. He didn’t lie often or well, especially not to Darius.

The silence that greeted him suggested that Darius was waiting for more, or that he’d caught on to Will’s lie and was too gracious to rub Will’s nose in it. Either way, Will’s guilt made him elaborate. “We were best friends when we were kids but we had a… fight, when we were in high school, and never really made up after that.”

After a pause Darius asked, “Did you like him?”

It could’ve been an innocent question, and Will could’ve answered it innocently. He could’ve laughed it off and said “of course I liked him, or else I wouldn’t have been friends with him!” But he knew that wasn’t what Darius meant, and he knew he couldn’t answer in any way other than the truth.

He closed his eyes, saw Mike’s face, the way he’d looked that day, and sighed lengthily, as though he could breathe all of the memories out of his lungs at once. Finally he said, “Yeah. I did.”