The Maw

by TurtleNovas

Summary

Steve submits, because he has no choice.

Notes

Please heed the tags and warnings. The depictions of violence and abuse are very graphic, and there is a graphic suicide. If you are reading the series and don't want to read this content, I will put a vague summary of what you need to know going forward in a note at the end of the last chapter. Please protect yourself if you need to.

To Harringrove shippers: I'm not trying to harsh your shipping experience, so I'll tell you now, this is not a happy fic. There is no redemption. Billy doesn't get the help he needs. There is no fluff. This isn't the darkest possible iteration of them as a pairing, but it's pretty fucking close. Read at your own risk.

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 01

He's fairly certain he's alone in the locker room at this point, having lingered in the shower for the specific purpose of avoiding interacting with anyone. It's lunch next period, so he'll be okay staying longer than necessary, won't miss anything important, considering his appetite is fairly low anyways. He pulls his shirt on slowly, winces a little at the deep ache in his shoulders from being jostled and body checked by Billy and his cronies during practice, and then he just stands, forehead resting against the cool metal of his locker, and tries to breathe.

It's been a long couple of months, he can acknowledge, and the stress of everything may be starting to get to him. He's grateful that, outside of this place, he at least has the Hendersons to dote on him and keep his spirits high, but at the same time, he doesn't want to tell them about his problems. He thinks they've done enough for him, been brought into his shit enough times, and now they deserve to be lifted up, not dragged down. So he keeps it to himself that he's pretty alone these days, aside from Dustin, and occasionally the other kids from the big supernatural clusterfuck. He doesn't mention when Dustin asks about his days, that Billy Hargrove has been hounding him relentlessly, there to menace him and push him around every time Steve turns a corner. He sees, when he's with the kids, that Max is happy, and that Lucas is happy with her, and the one time he straight up asks if Billy is giving them problems, Max says, "No, he's fucking scared of us now."

To which, he replies, "Language, asshole!" And her laughter warms him a little, makes him feel like at least his days aren't wasted picking up all the flack that Billy is keeping from her.

Then there's also the Nancy problem, which isn't so much a problem, really, as it is a wound that can't quite close when it's being rubbed open again each day. He tries not to be bitter or jealous, but even his best efforts can't stop the hurt when he sees Nancy and Jonathan together, happy and sickeningly sweet. He still remembers the way Nancy had chided him, had made him feel guilty for his overly fond displays of affection, and it hurts to realize that it was because he simply wasn't good enough. She's glowing now, delighted to receive similar attentions from Jonathan, and it makes Steve wonder just what it is about himself that is so unworthy. He knows there's something, because Nancy is smart and has standards that he clearly couldn't meet, but no matter how closely he examines his faults, he still doesn't understand what more he could have done to make up for himself. It's hard to admit that he probably just isn't capable of becoming good enough for her, no matter how hard he tries.

He guesses it doesn't really matter, in the end. She is better off without him, and the fact that his friends all jumped ship when he finally grew a conscience just means they weren't very good friends in the first place. Still, it doesn't make it any easier to deal with the constant double threat of seeing her, or, infinitely worse, seeing Billy. All things considered, Steve is just tired.

He groans, knocks his forehead gently against the locker to clear his thoughts, tries not to wince as he hits harder than he meant to. He startles a bit when he hears a sound behind him, jumps, and whirls around, dread flooding up his stomach and into his chest and throat when he sees that it's Billy, standing with a look of aimless threat on his face. He finds eye contact almost as soon as Steve sees him, and Steve feels like he can't look away. He knows that showing fear like this only urges Billy on, but he is so exhausted by the whole song and dance at this point that he can't help himself. He is afraid, worried about what Billy will try today, whether he'll smack Steve in the head and bring on another migraine that takes him three days to recover from.

"Well, if it isn't King Steve," Billy greets, in his usual venomous tone, sharp edged and mocking. "I thought you might've run on home after that pitiful showing on the court just now."
Steve just collapses back against the lockers, already resigned to his fate, and shrugs. "I guess I've just lost my touch." Billy stalks a few steps closer, puts one foot up on the bench between them like he might vault it, and Steve has to fight with everything he has to suppress his flinch. He sighs, and finds that he has no fight left. "What do you want, Hargrove?" He knocks his head back against the lockers, turns his gaze upwards, unsure if he's feeling tears building or his eyes are just dry from the long eye contact. "What do you want?" He repeats, utterly defeated.

He regrets it almost instantly, as suddenly, Billy is there, bodily shoving him back, crushing him bruisingly into the lockers with a hand tight over Steve's neck. His eyes are wild, the whites visible all the way around, and Steve can feel him shaking as he forces eye contact again. His nostrils are flaring, and suddenly Steve's heart is beating triple speed, the dread rising even further, so that it rushes black, and then white across his vision, blurring everything at the edges. He thinks he might be hyperventilating a little, and wonders distantly if he might actually be about to die.

And then there's pain exploding over his face, splintering fast and sharp behind his nose, up into his eyes, radiating like a lightning strike through his skull and down into his shoulders. His vision goes completely black for a few seconds, and he can't breathe at all anymore. It takes him much longer than he thinks it should to realize that Billy's mouth is on his - a hard, vicious press of teeth and tongue, biting enough to sting and ache, pushing the taste of blood into Steve's mouth unrepentantly. Steve tries to rear back, but he is already caged against the lockers, and he just ends up hitting his head, groaning in misery as one of them (he can't tell who) bites his tongue. The hand around his neck tightens, and Steve swallows hard around Billy's tongue in his mouth, panic welling up as he realizes that he really might be suffocating.

Billy doesn't stop, just keeps gnawing at Steve's mouth, prying him open with his tongue, fingers pressed up under Steve's jaw, hard enough to bruise, and it almost doesn't register when he shoves a knee between Steve's thighs, straight into his balls, hard enough to hurt. Steve is already so dizzy and off balance, and the pain in his head is so bad that he's not even sure if the pain between his legs is real or just referred.

Steve doesn't know how long it goes on, just knows that, when Billy does finally slow down and loosen his grip, it's because Steve is scrabbling desperately at his wrist, sinking his nails into the skin hard enough to draw blood, survival instinct kicking in as he's unable to even make panicked noises to indicate that he can't breathe. Billy looks as surprised as Steve feels when he pulls back, hand barely touching Steve's neck anymore, knee lingering between his legs but not pressing. Steve gasps, trying not to double over into Billy's space as he gulps in air, trying desperately to ignore the ricochet of agony behind his eyes and in his chest. When he finally has enough oxygen to speak, his voice sounds rough and abused. "What the fuck, Hargrove?"

He doesn't even have the presence of mind to realize that it was a mistake to say anything before Billy's hand is tightening again, and their faces are barely an inch apart, Billy's breath hot and savage over Steve's bruised mouth when he says, "If you fucking tell anyone, I'll fucking kill you." Then there's a long pause, and he's searching Steve's face, looking at him hard and steady, so Steve just nods mutely, trying to put every ounce of submission he can muster into his expression. Apparently, it's not enough, because, even as the grip on his neck loosens, Billy says, "I won't have any problems going after your princess bitch." He searches Steve's face for a reaction, tilts his head a little and smirks, his tone corrective when he continues, "And, I know where all those little fuckers live, even your favorite little nerd with the hair. Don't think I won't do what's necessary if you tell anyone."

The fear Steve feels at that opens like a maw in his chest, void and consuming everything around him until there is nothing else left, and he realizes in that moment that he will do anything to keep that threat from becoming reality. He nods again, holds his hands up in submission, even tilts his head to the side a little to bare his neck, anything to make Billy see that he's giving in. "I won't tell
anyone. I swear." His voice cracks and scrapes, and he can hear tears in it even though his eyes are
dry now. He thinks if he were any less tense, he'd probably be pissing himself.

Billy looks at him for another long minute, a slow grin spreading over his features as he wipes
Steve's blood from his own mouth. "You're mine now, Harrington. Don't fucking test me."

Then he's gone, strolling casually out of the locker room as if nothing has happened while Steve
collapses to the ground, legs shaking so hard that he can't stand any more, even with the support of
the lockers. He doesn't cry, but he thinks it's only because he's so overwhelmed that crying wouldn't
be enough. His hands are shaking as he touches his face, realizes his nose is probably broken, and
that he has a split lip. It takes him the entirety of lunch, and half of the next period to peel himself up
off the ground and get to the nurse's office. She asks him what happened, but he refuses to say
anything, just says he had an accident and needs some ice and some headache medicine.

She calls his parents, but they decline to come get him. He goes to his next class as if nothing has
happened, ignores the whispers and giggles when he walks in, thinks he might throw up if he looks
at Jonathan's shocked face. When Jonathan leans over to ask if Steve is okay, Steve just scowls and
tells him to fuck off.

When he goes home that night, his dad yells at him for getting in fights, while his mom sits silently,
his eyes hard and unsympathetic. Steve just nods and accepts his grounding without protest. He goes
to sleep without doing his homework, stomach rolling and head awash in the kind of pain that takes
his sight and melts it into something sticky and unusable. He sleeps fitfully and dreams of monsters,
and when he wakes up in the morning, there's blood on his pillow.
Dustin gives him a radio the next time they see each other, and it sends a staggering, sick rush of guilt through Steve when he explains, "Because your parents wouldn't let you talk on the phone while you were grounded and I was worried. This way, I can always get a hold of you."

It's a headset, just like the one Dustin was wearing during their big adventure, huge antenna and all. Dustin shows him what channel to put it on, shows him how to turn it on and off, all the bells and whistles, and Steve wonders exactly how much this had cost him, how many allowances he'd saved up for it, what those allowances were supposed to go towards instead. When he realizes Dustin is looking at him anxiously, expression unsure, like he thinks Steve might not appreciate this, Steve makes a concentrated effort to beam at him. It hurts his face, pulls at his still healing nose, but he doesn't give a flying fuck. "Thanks, Dusty. This is awesome. I'll make sure to keep it on at night."

Dustin looks relieved, and he has a big smile on his face when he says, "Awesome! I'm glad you don't think it's stupid."

Steve ruffles his hair affectionately. "Of course not. I love it."

When he goes home that night, he radios Dustin before bed, just to test it out. Dustin reminds him for the fifth time that day to put ice on his face to help the bruising go down faster, and Steve isn't sure why it makes him feel a little shy and warm that someone cares about him enough to remind him that many times. His parents haven't said a word about it, though he knows they're dying for him to look presentable again. He promises Dustin that he will ice for at least a little while before he goes to sleep.

The next day is Sunday, and he's chaperoning Dustin's entire party to the arcade for the afternoon. Mrs. Byers and Chief Hopper still aren't too keen to let the kids go places by themselves, and Nancy and Jonathan are both busy. Dustin had volunteered Steve without asking, and had come to him looking sheepish and hopeful. Steve had been unable to say no.

Apparently, there are high scores to be maintained or something. Steve doesn't really know how it works, if he's honest, but as he watches the kids bound around from machine to machine, dumping quarter after quarter into each one, he doesn't mind. They look happy, and more importantly, care free, the way people their age are supposed to be.

He sips on his soda and watches fondly from the end of the row of machines, so that he can see all of them at once. He feels good here, like he has a purpose, and is doing something right after a long time of only making mistakes. He feels like, at least in part, he can claim responsibility for their smiles, and their cheerful whoops of victory. It makes him feel like he might be worth something after all. So when they all come running up to him at once, complaining that they're out of quarters, but Dustin is just so close to getting his top spot back, Steve can't even conjure up any real annoyance.

He makes a grand show of rolling his eyes, but he thinks he probably looks far too fond to really sell it when he takes out his wallet and hands them a twenty dollar bill to exchange for more quarters. They run off with money in hand immediately, but halfway to the counter, Dustin comes rushing back and says a quick and flustered, "Thanks, Steve, you're the best!"
Steve sort of thinks there's nothing he would've rather done with his twenty dollars, and a few minutes later, when the entire arcade is filled with the screaming excitement of six kids, he knows it was worth it.

Things wind down not long after that, and soon Steve is waiting out front with them as their parents come one by one to pick them up. Mrs. Byers comes first, accompanied by Hopper, and they take Will, Mike, and El with them. Lucas's mom is next, and she thanks him for looking after the kids, even though she seems a little baffled as to why he's there. He remembers that she doesn't know about any of the shit that went down and politely tells her that he had fun and it was no trouble. Then it's just Dustin and Max, and suddenly Steve is feeling a lot more tense.

Nothing has happened with Billy since the day in the locker room, but Steve has a constant, lingering expectation that any time he sees Billy could be the next time it happens again. There is a look in Billy's eye when he taunts Steve now, and it reads more hunger than rage. It makes Steve's skin feel tight and painful, like a bad sunburn, and it puts his teeth on edge, makes his brain feel itchy and off kilter, to the point that he's found himself spooking at nothing more than once as he traverses the school halls.

He casts a glance over at Max, and she looks perfectly relaxed. There is none of the fear or tension that he saw in her at the house that night, when Billy had pulled into the driveway, and Steve had decided that he had no choice but to go out there and finally give him the confrontation he wanted. Seeing her calm is the only thing that keeps him from vibrating out of his skin as they wait, and even so, he still jumps and flinches when Billy's car comes screaming into the lot.

Billy doesn't say anything, just stares at Steve over the rim of his sunglasses, smirking a little dirty, and a lot mean. Max gets into the car, and Steve hears her yell, "Fucking drive you douchebag!" He can't tear his eyes away as they peel out, tires screeching on the turn. His heart is in his throat, and he doesn't realize how fast he's breathing until Dustin is holding his hand, and he hears his name, faintly, as if he's underwater, or very far away.

He snaps his gaze over to Dustin, who looks deeply concerned. "Sorry," he says, and his voice sounds weak and shaky. He realizes he's squeezing Dustin's hand hard enough to hurt, but can't quite bring himself to let go.

"It's okay," Dustin replies, in what Steve has come to know as his soothing voice. "It's okay," he says again after a beat, like maybe Steve didn't hear him the first time. Steve realizes he's shaking, more than a little, and tries very hard to take long, slow breaths. Dustin waits patiently, doesn't say anything more, doesn't try to let go of Steve's hand.

Steve feels extremely stupid. He's never needed to hold hands for security in his life, but right now, he thinks that grip is all that's keeping him from tipping over into a real panic attack. He feels guilty that Dustin has to see this and that he'll definitely worry about Steve now. He's tried so hard to make sure Dustin thinks he's okay, and now his cover his blown. It's just another thing that he hasn't been able to do right, and his anger at himself pulls him a little further from the mist of fear that's confounding him.

"Let's go to the car, yeah?" He says, and sounds a little more normal.

"Sure."

Dustin refuses to let go of his hand, even when Steve consciously tries to loosen his own hold. Steve is secretly grateful.

It's a quiet drive back to the Henderson's house, and Steve wonders briefly where Dustin learned this
kind of emotional tact. He knows Dustin is dying to ask him if he's okay, and to interrogate him about how things are with Billy, but he keeps his mouth shut and barely even looks pained about it. When they finally pull into the driveway, after Steve puts the car in park, he says resolutely, "I'm fine, I promise," and it almost sounds believable, even to him. "Sometimes he just scares me a little, but it's okay." He makes sure to make direct eye contact with Dustin, trying hard to impress upon him that this lie is actually the truth. "Everything is fine."

Dustin looks like he doesn't believe a word of it, so Steve is surprised when all he says is, "Okay."

When they go inside, Dustin regales Claudia with the story of taking back his high score. He tells her that it never would've happened without Steve's help, and she beams at him and then bakes cookies, "To celebrate," while Steve and Dustin sit in the living room playing with Tews and talking about anything but what happened.

When Steve goes home that night, he takes the container of cookies up to his room, and sets it on his desk, unwilling to risk leaving them in the kitchen to be eaten by someone else. He falls asleep staring at the oddly comforting bright green lid lit up by a shaft of moonlight coming through the window.

Chapter End Notes

$20 in the 80s is about $50 now, in case anyone wants to know how much Steve is spoiling the kids.
It's another two weeks before it happens, and Steve has just started to fall back into a sense of security. Billy has still been harassing him, but it's not been anything unusual - just calling him out in the halls, trying to intimidate him with looks and words, and only the occasional minor physical altercation (shoving him into lockers, slamming into him from behind to get his attention, and the like). Somehow, he's convinced himself that maybe it was a one time thing, that Billy's threat at the end, about Steve being his now, had just meant Steve was supposed to keep the secret, not that more was to come. He'd thought for sure, if Billy was going to come for him again, he'd have done it by now.

Steve realizes now that he was very wrong. He's not sure at what point he stopped checking to make sure there was always someone else in the halls with him, but he realizes too late what a mistake that was. Billy has him pinned, shoved up into a corner behind a set of unused lockers, so the view of them will be almost completely obscured until someone walks directly in front of them. Steve is so tense that it's sending sharp pain shooting through his shoulders and thighs, and he can only manage shallow breaths as Billy leans close into his space.

There is a long stretch of silence, as Billy stares at him, a slimy smile smeared on his face, and Steve is helpless to do anything but look back, eyes stinging from his inability to blink, for fear of giving Billy an opening. He startles a little when Billy moves, slow and languid, like he doesn't have a care in the world, and pulls something out of his pocket. Steve doesn't dare to look and see what it is, until Billy is shoving it unceremoniously into Steve's mouth, hard plastic clacking against his teeth painfully. It's a pen, Steve realizes, and his confusion loosens him just a bit, distracting him from the abject fear. He feels a little bit of incredulity in his expression when he resumes eye contact with Billy.

Billy's smile has teeth now, and Steve's heart is back in his throat instantly. "Your phone number, Darlin'," he says, as if Steve is an imbecile for not intuiting that on his own. Steve feels Billy's fingers push into his front pocket with an unnecessary and painful jab to the soft place next to the bone of his hip. He looks down slowly, terrified to break eye contact, but more afraid of ignoring something Billy clearly wants him to pay attention to. Billy slides his fingers slowly back out, makes sure to catch the hem of Steve's shirt with his knuckles on the way, untucking it just enough that he can graze the skin of Steve's stomach before dropping his hand back to his side. His other arm is braced on the wall by Steve's head, creating the fourth wall of the cage that is keeping Steve in place.

There is a small piece of paper sticking out of Steve's pocket, and he assumes that's where he's meant to write his number. All he can think as he plucks it from his pocket, and turns slightly to bear down on the wall as he writes, is how much he doesn't want Billy to have his phone number. He sick with it, even as he scrawls the numbers, clear and legible. He turns back, holds the slip of paper between them like a shield, flinches again when Billy leans down to take it from him with his teeth, lips just barely grazing Steve's fingers in a way that can only be intentional.

Billy's other hand comes up to snatch the pen from Steve's limp grip, bringing it up to his own mouth and trading it for the slip of paper. He clicks his teeth against it dangerously, smiling in satisfaction as he slips the paper into his own pocket. He plucks the pen from his own mouth delicately and slides it behind his ear. "You're gonna tell me the next time you're home alone for a few hours," he says, almost sweet, and leans in close enough that Steve tastes the cigarettes on his breath. "If you don't, I think you know who I'll visit instead."

Steve swallows hard, and can barely wrangle a whisper out of his throat when he replies, "My
parents are out of town this week." He shuts his eyes hard, ashamed for giving himself up so easily, but not willing to take the risk of Billy following through. Billy's mouth hits his with bruising force, and Steve is surprised, even though he'd already convinced himself this would happen. It's quick this time, only lasting a few seconds before Billy bites him, hard enough to hurt, but not to draw blood, and pulls away with a swipe of his tongue.

"I'll call you before I come over, so you better fucking answer."

Steve doesn't have a chance to gather a reply before Billy walks away. He's proud of himself for only standing there shaking and breathing fast for ten minutes before he pulls himself together. It's a distinct improvement over last time, and all he had to do was refuse to think about what Billy might be coming over to do.

By the time Steve gets home, his plan to not think about it is in tatters, and it's all he can do to sit by the phone, entire body shaking as he tries to breathe. There are a lot of possibilities, he tells himself. What those possibilities are, Steve isn't even sure. He's only barely thought about the idea of other guys in the past, and had settled on, 'interesting prospect, but too dangerous with my parents'. He thinks he's probably going to have to take a trip to the city, somewhere that no one will recognize him, and buy a magazine or two to educate himself if he comes out of tonight with any knowledge gaps left.

Steve's homework is spread across his bed, untouched and abandoned. He leans over and starts tidying it into a pile, just to have something to do. He thinks if he doesn't do something, he's going to start crying before Billy even calls. It occurs to him that he should radio Dustin now to let him know that they won't be able to talk tonight.

After their conversation is over, and Steve realizes he's successfully convinced Dustin that everything is fine, even though his world is legitimately falling apart right now, he has to rush to the toilet and vomit. The twenty minutes of dry heaves that follow aren't quite enough to distract him from knowledge that he has no one to blame for this but himself.

If he were stronger, maybe he could put Billy in his place, and wouldn't have to lie to one of the only people that really cares about him. Maybe if he were stronger, he wouldn't be sitting here thinking about how technically, he's consenting to whatever's going to happen, simply by nature of his own cowardice.

When he finally trudges back out of the bathroom, stomach still cramping a bit, but seemingly finished seizing up, he catches sight of the empty container that had held Claudia's cookies. It reminds him that maybe it's not all cowardice, that maybe there is a little bravery in knowing when to submit for the good of the people he wants to protect. It makes him feel a little better to think of it that way, and by the time the phone rings, he even manages to answer without a waver in his voice.

It's thirty more minutes before Billy arrives, and Steve spends the entire time standing nervously by the door, sweating profusely, and trying to think of any possible way out of this, even though he's not actually sure what "this" is yet. He's so far in his own head, that he actually yells a little in surprise when Billy pounds on the front door.

After he comes in, Billy spends a long time wandering around Steve's house, making derisive comments as Steve trails warily behind him. Then, finally, when he comes back around to the foot of the stairs, he turns that predator's grin on Steve again.

"So, I assume your bedroom is up there." He leans on the banister, body easy and relaxed, legs splayed a little wide and shirt open almost to his navel. Nausea rolls across Steve's stomach as he recognizes the stance from Billy's interaction with girls at school. Steve just nods, unable to get any
words out. "Well, fucking show the way, Princess."

Steve tries to skirt as far away from Billy as he can when he starts to climb the stairs, but Billy just lunges into his space, grinning and snapping his teeth when Steve flinches so hard that he nearly stumbles. For a quick moment, Steve considers taking Billy into the guest bedroom, wanting desperately to keep the memory of whatever is going to happen out of his space. He knows, though, that it will be obvious it's not his, and thinks Billy may be willing to punish him for trying it.

He walks resolutely past the door and on into his bedroom, Billy crowding up close behind him. There's another long few minutes of respite while Billy examines Steve's bedroom top to bottom, picking up knickknacks, moving things around, knocking things over delightedly, and Steve can't stop himself from rolling his eyes. He's grateful that Billy has his back turned.

Steve is busy wiping his sweaty palms on his jeans and trying not to run screaming from the room when Billy finally turns around to regard him somewhat more seriously than usual. Steve shifts uncomfortably on his feet, unsure what to feel in the face of it. Billy's expression lacks that manic edge it usually has, and he doesn't seem to be trying to intimidate Steve in that very moment. It really does look like he's just thinking about how to proceed.

Steve savagely represses the urge to start a conversation to fill the silence, doesn't want to give Billy any indication that they are in this together unless he has to for self-preservation. The silence seems interminable, and the wait is agony.

Finally, Billy smiles a little, nonthreatening, but still unsettling, and says in what Steve thinks is meant to be a comforting tone, "I won't hurt you if you don't force me to."

Steve ruthlessly suppresses his first instinct towards sarcastic skepticism, and forces himself instead to nod, then to shrug, and then finally to reply, "Okay," as noncommitally as possible. He's already decided that he's going to do this, for the sake of his own conscience, and more importantly, the safety of the people who really matter. There's no point in making things any more difficult than they have to be, and if he can keep Billy placid, maybe he can get out of this with his body mostly intact.

"Come here," Billy orders, voice still calm, and it's honestly sort of weird to hear him talking without that edge of crazy violence. Steve does as he's told, closes the distance between them in a few steps, and has very little warning before Billy's mouth is on his.

He's actually kissing Steve this time, without excessive use of biting force, and his hands around Steve's face don't feel like they're ready to crush him at any moment. More, it just feels like Billy knows Steve wants to bolt and is holding him in place. Steve doesn't know what to do with his own hands, so he just grabs lightly at Billy's wrists, ready to scratch and tear at the sensitive skin if he needs to defend himself. Billy pushes his tongue into Steve's mouth and makes an impatient noise in his throat that Steve interprets as a warning. Steve tilts his head slightly, and meets Billy halfway, kissing him back even as panic alarms blare in the back of his mind.

This is nothing like kissing Nancy, or even any of the other girls who had meant less than Nancy. Those kisses had been fun, and soft; an effervescent and exciting expression of Steve's genuine affection, however shallow, for the girls he was with. This feels like an exercise in control as Steve tries to recall how to kiss someone without recoiling, without flinching and biting down instinctively on an invading tongue. He's proud of himself when Billy steps closer and slides one hand around to the back of Steve's head. He clutches Billy's shirt with the hand that had been on that wrist, hoping it will help maintain at least some space between them.

Instead, Billy uses the little bit of leverage he gains to walk Steve backwards until his knees hit the end of his bed, and he tumbles down onto it. He scrambles for a few seconds, panic almost taking
over as he tries to settle into the least vulnerable position possible, but there's no helping that he's on his back and Billy is above him. Billy regards him quietly for a moment, and then leans down and pries Steve's knees apart. Steve is tense, and not even fighting on purpose, but Billy clicks his tongue in annoyance and says, "You remember the rules, Princess." He digs his thumbs viciously into Steve's legs, burrowing them into the divots on the insides of Steve's knees and doesn't let up, even when Steve drops his legs open immediately.

The pain is intense, and it takes everything Steve has not to struggle, knowing it will only be worse if he does. Billy looks like he's waiting for something so Steve squeezes his eyes shut against what he thinks might be tears, and tries to tether his breathing to a normal pattern. "Sorry," he grinds out, terrified that it won't be sincere enough to to satisfy, but Billy lets up immediately, and the pain dissipates a little. There will be bruises in a few minutes, Steve thinks.

Billy crawls over him then, hooking his arms under Steve's knees and bringing his thighs up to bracket his waist as he settles. "Good girl," he says, a little bit of the taunting bite back in his tone, and then kisses Steve again. He's got one hand tangled in Steve's hair, gripping tight enough that it almost counts as pulling, and the other is a threatening weight against Steve's hip, fingers digging into bare skin where his shirt rode up when he fell.

Billy, Steve is terrified to realize, is hard. He feels the solid length of it pressing into the crease of his hip as Billy grinds into him just a little. The effort not to recoil is monumental, and Steve only manages it by forcing himself to do the opposite. He leans up into Billy, opening his mouth a little more, pressing his thighs a little harder into Billy's sides, letting his tongue come forward against Billy's a little more aggressively.

He doesn't think about how it makes him feel, because if he does, he worries any number of bad things might happen. He might cry, or hyperventilate, or have to push Billy off and run to the toilet to dry heave some more. So instead, he focuses on blanking his mind, thinks of nothing but a cold, distant narration of what he will do next. They go on like that for what feels like several minutes, Steve forcing his body to go through the motions of a make out session, eyes resolutely closed so he can focus on the performance as Billy makes slow circles with his hips, still pulling just a little too hard at Steve's hair, hand steady but not gentle at Steve's waist.

When Steve realizes that it's getting hard not to let his mind wander, he resolves to up the ante, hoping to shock his mind into quiescence, and possibly finish things before he loses too much to bear in a single night. He shifts under Billy, pushing up on an elbow, but not breaking the contact of their mouths. He hears the low, threatening growl Billy gives, feels him pull hard on his hair, and ignores it in favor of reaching with his free hand for Billy's belt. The grip on his hair loosens again, and Steve feels his pulse drop a notch in speed. He thinks maybe this will work.

He's pretty good at getting into pants at this point in his life, and is able to make quick work of the belt, button, and fly. He reaches into Billy's underwear with all the false confidence he can muster, takes hold of him as if he's done this a thousand times, and runs his hand firmly up the length of him, pressing his thumb tightly into the slit when he gets there. It's an awkward angle, but the stress on his wrist is the last thing Steve is worrying about right now. He can get by with a sore arm for a few days, if it means he can keep himself safe from worse things tonight.

Billy groans, and Steve feels it in his own chest, like a fist to his solar plexus. He breaks the kiss for just long enough to grab a bigger breath, and then lunges up again, heedless of everything except his desire to finish this as quickly as he can. The hand on his hip slips further up his shirt, and Steve wants to snap in protest, to demand that he stop, because isn't Steve already doing enough, but instead he doesn't react. He just lets Billy put his tongue back in his mouth, and keeps moving his hand, grip solid and soft all at once, the way he would do it to himself.
He's more than a little surprised at how quickly it all goes from there. Only a few minutes of focused, dry strokes, Billy's tongue in his mouth, hand splayed wide over Steve's left pectoral, and then Billy bites hard at Steve's lip, groaning loud again. Steve feels the wet on his hand, notes the twitch of Billy's cock, and tries not to snarl at the pain in his lip, or the tang of blood in his mouth.

When it's over, after a few seconds of quiet stillness, Billy leans back. Steve drops his hand to his side, and meets his gaze evenly. Billy smirks at him as he tucks himself back into his jeans, then slaps Steve across the face hard enough to sting and says, "Well it looks like you haven't lost all your talents, Darling."

He uses the corner of Steve's bedspread to wipe himself down, even though most of his spunk ended up on Steve himself, and then walks out of the room, stopping in the doorway to say, "You know the rules."

Steve nods and says, "I won't tell anyone." He's proud of how hard his voice sounds. Billy just smirks and continues down the hall, whistling as he goes.

Steve doesn't move for several minutes, listening hard to the sound of the front door slamming and Billy's engine rumbling to life, and then fading away as he backs out of the drive. When he finally does move, he strips himself naked, and then his bed, and hauls everything to the laundry room. He throws everything in, stuffing the comforter down because it's a little too big for the machine, and uses twice as much detergent as he normally would, running the cycle on hot even though the colors are all dark.

He showers in scalding water, standing under the spray until his skin feels brutalized and raw, and then puts fresh sheets on his bed. He lays down, staring hard at the radio Dustin had given him. It's painful to hold himself still until the urge to use the radio fades, but he manages, knowing he is doing the right thing.

He once walked into a junkyard full of inter dimensional carnivorous monster dogs with nothing but a baseball bat to keep those kids safe, he tells himself. If this is what it takes to do the same now, then it's a sacrifice he's willing to make.
Chapter 04

Time seems to pass in somewhat of a blur from then on, the passage of days slurring into itself so that Steve's life becomes nothing but a smudge of consciousness, stitched together by bouts of nightmares that never seem to end, even when he wakes up again. The only time his path seems to clear is when he's with the Hendersons, and he's surrounded by their easy affection, their quiet acceptance, and tireless love. In those moments, time still seems to be barreling onward at frightening speed, heedless of his need to slow down, but it is at least coherent to him - a bright, crisp segment of relief against the cloying swamp of the rest of his days.

Sometimes, when it's time for him to leave them, he sits in their driveway, hands gripping the steering wheel tightly enough to make it creak under the pressure, and has to count backwards from one hundred, or try to sing lyrics from songs he knew ten years ago, just to keep from crying. Sometimes, even that isn't enough, and he sobs on his way home, the tears blurring his vision, as his life sinks back into the mud and grit, confusing and muffled under the morass of his constant fear.

There are other times when things are pulled into sharp focus. But in those moments, it's as if time has stopped completely, and Steve wonders if he will ever be able to move forward again, suddenly desperate for the murky swamp water to clog up the lungs of his life once again, if it only means he can get away from this. There are a lot of those times, now, since Billy has realized that Steve really isn't going to fight it, that he really is scared enough to keep his mouth shut about everything, so long as there's still a threat against the kids.

Steve had taken that trip into the city after all, but not until after the visit when Billy had shoved him roughly to his knees and used his mouth until he was struggling to breathe, and struggling even more to keep his dinner down. Until then, Steve had been thinking he might get away with never going further than jerking Billy off, but Billy seemed to catch on to what he was trying to do, and it had made him angry. He hadn't been gentle with Steve that day, and when he left, Steve spent an hour hugging the toilet, trying to vomit, but unable to, wishing he hadn't fought it so hard just a little while ago, when it had seemed inevitable. He'd gone to bed that night and felt like his stomach was burning where Billy's cum sat like acid. He hadn't slept that night, and when he'd gotten up the next morning, he'd decided he needed to prepare himself for whatever came next.

So the next weekend, he'd told his parents he was going out with friends, and had driven two cities over, to a place where he was sure no one would know him, and had gone into a book store with a rainbow flag hanging over the door. The man behind the counter had been gentle and friendly, had patted Steve on the back, and squeezed his shoulder like a father as he'd shown him around the sections of the store and given him a stack of free pamphlets covering everything from the basics of sex with another man, to the latest information on the AIDS crisis.

When he'd seen that, Steve hands had started shaking, and the guy had pulled him gently into a hug and told him that everything would be okay, that he was perfectly normal the way he was, that as long as he was smart and safe about sex, he would be okay. It was everything Steve would have wanted to hear if he were coming out of the closet, and Steve was thankful, at least, for this stranger who was willing to support him, even if he didn't actually know what Steve was going through. Steve had thanked him profusely, and bought several books that he could take home without worrying his parents to show his gratitude.

After he left the shop, he'd sat in his car for several hours, poring over each pamphlet as thoroughly as possible before he'd realized he had to head back home now or he'd be in serious trouble. He'd thrown the pamphlets in the garbage, along with the receipt, which had the store's name and logo.
printed across the top, and spent the long drive home reciting the facts in his head, to make sure he remembered them.

He'd spent the next several weeks after that trying to accustom himself to the feeling of what he expected would be coming soon with Billy. He'd started slowly, with just a couple of gentle fingers, and escalated from there. After the first few days, he'd been less gentle, expecting that Billy wouldn't care much for his comfort when he took this from Steve. He'd also gone, with a roiling pit of anxiety gnawing at his stomach, and bought a box of condoms, hoping desperately that having them available would make Billy inclined to use them. He didn't think Billy would be doing this with anyone else, was fairly certain the magnitude of the secret was too great to risk it on more than one person, but he still had the horrifying details of the AIDS pamphlet emblazoned on his mind. He didn't want to take the risk unless it was absolutely necessary.

When it does finally happen, it's already March, and Steve has been dreading it for over a month, but is also happy to have had the time to really prepare himself, to get used to his own rough handling before he has to suffer Billy's. It's another weekend that his parents are away, and Dustin is busy with...something that Steve didn't totally understand, but had been happy to listen to him rant about, so he won't require any of Steve's attention. It's become a custom for Billy to call Steve midweek to ask about the whereabouts of his parents, so that they can avoid any sort of suspicious contact at school outside of Billy's choosing, and once again, Steve hadn't dared lie to him.

As a result, it's 8am Saturday morning and Steve is already wide awake, pacing nervously around his house, even resorting to cleaning to distract himself from the stress, despite the cleaning lady having come less than a week ago. He's mopping the kitchen floor furiously, having already vacuumed the entire house, and cleaned the counter tops when the phone rings, and he startles hard enough to drop the mop altogether. He winces at the raucous clatter and splash, then rushes into the living room to pick up. Billy, apparently, is also feeling somewhat anxious today; says he will be over in an hour, and Steve had better be cleaned up for him.

Steve's hands are shaking as he puts the mop away, and he sloshes dirty water all down the front of the counter when he dumps the bucket. He soaks it up quickly with a towel and then heads for the shower. He makes it quick, not wanting to still be naked when Billy arrives, hoping somehow that the extra obstacle might deter him. He keeps the water on cold, in an effort to shock himself into calmness, dries himself roughly, giving himself a short moment for rage before he locks it away again. He can't let Billy see that if he wants to get out of this in one piece.

He's learned by now that what Billy wants is for him to pretend it's all fine. It's okay if he stays still and unresponsive, but Steve has learned that if he wants it to be over more quickly, he needs to at least feign reciprocation. He sits on the bottom stair, eyes glued to the front door, hands clasped tightly together, and waits. His hair is still damp, and he probably has time to dry it, but this way, he thinks, Billy will know he did what he was told. He's cleaned himself up, and now he's here, waiting patiently, ready to give up whatever Billy wants to take without a fight, because he has no other option.

When Billy does arrive, he doesn't say anything to Steve as he pushes his way in. He just grabs him by the elbow and drags him relentlessly up the stairs, doesn't let go until they're in Steve's room and he shoves him face down onto the bed. Steve exhales shakily, fists already clenched tight in his comforter, and shifts his knees under himself so his ass is in the air. "If we're going to do this," he says, and is proud of how steady his voice is. "There are condoms in the top drawer." He looks over his shoulder at Billy then, makes eye contact, but keeps his head lowered onto the bed in submission, and adds, "Please," as agreeably as he possibly can.

Billy's eyes are hard, and he's scowling like Steve has threatened to out him to the entire town, but he
nods stiffly and goes to yank open the drawer. He tosses the entire box of condoms onto the bed, and they spill out in front of Steve's face. Steve listens, but doesn't dare look as Billy rummages some more, and then he hears the pop of a cap and exhales a slow, trembling breath of relief. If there's going to be lube, he thinks he can at least withstand whatever damage comes to him.

He flinches and goes tense when he feels Billy tug roughly at his shorts, pulling them down just enough to bear his ass, leaving the waistband tight around his thighs. He takes a deep breath, and tries very seriously to relax, to let himself sink into the mattress and not think about what is happening to him right now. He's practiced this before. He knows it won't be the same, but his body is used to this type of intrusion now, and he'll be okay if he can just remember to breathe and not tense up.

"Don't move," Billy says gruffly, voice closer than Steve had thought it would be. Then he's pushing two fingers unceremoniously into Steve's hole, in one quick stroke, and Steve can't bite down on the agonized yelp that rips out of him. It's okay though, he thinks, it's not as bad as it could be. The pain is sharp and achy at the same time, radiating through his lower back and into his stomach, and he feels tears welling as he focuses on regulating his breathing. Billy moves his hand and the drag of it stings as well, but not as much as it had when Steve had done himself dry, just in case. He bares down, trying hard to ignore the weird feeling that brings, and focusing instead on the small increment of relief that comes every time he does it.

Billy is silent behind him, moving his fingers in and out at a fairly quick pace, his other hand wrapped bruisingly tight over Steve's naked hip. Steve tries not to make any noise, and is mostly successful, aside from the occasional pained whimper. It's not long before Billy, without warning, adds another finger, and even more quickly after that, Steve is empty again, listening to the sound of a condom wrapper being opened.

He squeezes his eyes shut, ignores the feeling of tears pooling hot in the hollow at the corner of his eye, and breathes as purposefully as he can. When he feels the nudge of Billy's cock against his hole, he accidentally shifts away, which earns him a smack and a warning growl. Steve mumbles a quick, "Sorry," just to be safe, and holds himself as still as possible. When Billy starts to push in, Steve breathes out, and bares down again.

Billy is rough with Steve, going fast, hard, and deep, ignoring the series of pained whines he's punching out of Steve's gut. Steve is full on crying after a minute or two, a new, stabbing sort of pain exploding inside of him on every thrust, like Billy's hitting something in him that he hadn't ever been able to reach himself. Steve clenches his hands tight in the sheets and breathes as deeply as he can through his mouth, his nose stuffing up with the force of his tears. He's not sure how quiet or loud he's being, as the blood rushing in his ears is too loud for him to hear anything else, but he's relatively certain he can feel his throat moving around some sort of sound.

It's over pretty quickly, Steve thinks, though he can't be sure, as time has all but ground to a halt in his mind. One minute, Billy is pounding into him at a relentless, agonizing pace, and the next he's stuttering to a halt, and Steve can feel his dick twitching inside of him. Then, suddenly enough to punch the breath out of him, he's totally empty, and Billy's hand isn't at his hip anymore, and Steve collapses onto his side before he can catch himself. He feels raw, like he might be bloody if he looks, and there is a persistent, dagger sharp ache in his abdomen that he thinks could mean trouble if it doesn't fade soon. He lifts a violently shaking hand to his eyes, presses his thumb and forefinger at the inside corners to try to clear away some of his tears.

When his head lolls to the side, he sees Billy fully dressed as if nothing has happened, face twisted in pain, as if he's the one who's just been raped. His eyes are red, and Steve can't be totally sure, but it looks like he's actually crying. Steve wants to sneer, bites out a nasty, "Are you okay?" before he can
find the sense to hold it in, his tone caustic and uncaring, incredulous and mean. He regrets it immediately, terror flooding in to cleanse him of his anger, and he feels his eyes go wide, his mouth trapped in a terrified 'o' as Billy moves in a flash.

He has a fucking switchblade in his hand that Steve has never seen before, and he's got the razor edge pressed just so against Steve's cheek, the tip resting right at the soft part under his eye. His hand is shaking, making the edge of the blade press dangerously into Steve's cheek, just enough to sting, but not to actually break skin. Billy's voice is steady, quiet and venomous when he says, "You didn't fucking see anything, you piece of shit." He stares hard at Steve, face devoid of his usual manic delight at the threat.

Steve swallows hard, reminds himself not to nod, lest he lose a fucking eye. "I've never seen anything, and I never will," he chokes out, voice a cracking, grating whisper. Billy angles the blade just slightly into his cheek, making a quick, shallow incision before pushing himself back up off of Steve. He doesn’t say anything else as he leaves, no parting taunt or lascivious, triumphant grin. He just storms out, slamming the front door behind him as he goes.

Steve doesn't move for a very long time.
Dustin knows it's only been nine days, but to him, it feels like he hasn't seen Steve in ages. He's gotten so used to having Steve around at least a few times a week, to having his sarcastic humor and sweet compliments for Dustin's mom at the dinner table. After so long of this being the new status quo, it feels empty in their house without Steve there, as if, now that Dustin has noticed the hole in their lives that Steve had filled, he can't go back to ignoring it any more. Dustin also realizes that Steve's long absence is likely to become more and more common once the summer begins. Steve will be working for his dad part time, moving into an apartment on his own, closer to the city college, where he'll be starting classes in the fall. Dustin hates to admit it, but the next couple of weeks before school is out will probably be the last that he has Steve so close at hand.

It's with that thought in mind that he's biking over to Steve's house, a grocery bag holding a container of fresh baked cookies draped over his handle bar. Steve had said that he needed to study tonight, for finals, and Dustin totally respects that. He's just planning to drop off the cookies, say hi, and leave. He doesn't want to mess anything up for Steve, but he also doesn't think Steve will mind just a minute or two of distraction (especially if his favorite cookies are involved). Dustin doesn't realize at first, who's car it is that he's watching pull out of Steve's driveway, is too busy trying to keep the bag of cookies from hitting his front tire as he bikes, but when he finally does notice, he veers sharply off the road, and scuttles himself into a shallow trench behind some trees.

It's Billy's car, with Billy inside, looking smug and deadly, and suddenly Dustin is filled with fear and confusion, wound tight and vibrating with the desire to rush up Steve's driveway to check on him, regardless of whether or not Billy sees him. He does have at least some self preservation instincts, though, so he stays hidden until he watches the car disappear around a corner, and then hauls himself desperately out of the ditch into which he'd collapsed. His mind feels like it's going a million miles a minute, stumbling over itself to provide increasingly less likely explanations for why Billy was at Steve's house. The most plausible thing he's come up with so far is simply, "to kill Steve", so when Dustin begins knocking frantically on the front door and hears no response, he panics.

He bursts through the door in a frenzy, barely stopping to shut it behind himself as he's running up the stairs, tripping twice, and catching himself, the cookie bag looped over his wrist making him even clumsier. Steve's door is open when Dustin finally gets to it, and Dustin is caught silent by his shock, not even startled out of it by the sound of the cookies hitting the floor as the bag slides off his wrist. Steve is laying on his back, covered in sheets up to his waist, but obviously not wearing any clothes. His hands are covering his face, and he looks like he's shaking. His voice sounds like it's been put through a meat grinder when he says, "Did you forget something?"

Dustin doesn't know what to say, doesn't know what's going on even. Well, he can deduce from the evidence what's happened, but it's clear that Steve is miserable, which, he knows, is not how you're supposed to feel after sex. Plus, there's the whole, it was with Billy thing, which Dustin has yet to really wrap his mind around, and probably won't for quite some time. He doesn't know what to say, so he just utters a quiet, somewhat heartbroken sounding, "Steve?"

The reaction is instantaneous. Steve explodes into movement almost violently, shooting up into a sitting position, pulling the blankets over and around himself so he's covered almost completely from the neck down, a broken glass smile shattering over his face, even though his eyes are huge and obviously filled with tears. "Hey, Dusty!" he says, manic and terrified sounding. "What's up? Are you okay?"
Dustin's chest and throat are tight, like his heart is swelling, trying to fill all the spaces, making it hard to breathe, making him want to cry for how broken Steve looks right now, and for how hard he's trying to hide it, despite being caught by surprise. "Yeah, I'm okay," Dustin says, picking up the cookies gingerly and carrying them over to Steve. He puts the cookies down in front of Steve and hugs him as tightly as he can.

It's a little bit awkward with the edge of the bed between them, and Steve still facing the door, but Dustin manages to get his arms all the way around Steve's chest, and tugs gently so that Steve tips into him a little bit. He may not be totally clear on what's going on right now, but anyone could see that Steve needs a fucking hug, and Dustin isn't going to be the guy who denies him that at a time like this. Steve is stiff and tense, like he's not really sure what's happening, but he doesn't fight the hug, so Dustin just stands there and holds onto him. He doesn't know what to say, so he doesn't say anything, just waits for Steve to relax enough to either hug him back or move away.

It seems like a very long time before Steve slumps into him, and says rigidly, "I don't know what you saw, but..." He trails off, like he didn't really have a plan for what he was going to say, but felt like he had to say something.

Dustin rubs his shoulder gently, as close as he can get to a comforting pat on the back in this position. He takes a deep breath, and tries to sound as accepting as possible when he says, "I saw Billy leaving, and I can put two and two together, but you don't have to explain anything to me, Steve."

Steve seems to deflate even further, tension bleeding out of him as he frees an arm from the sheets and hugs his hand around Dustin's elbow in a sort of awkwardly angled return hug. There is another, shorter bout of silence, filled with the sound of Steve breathing roughly, but not quite crying, and then he speaks again, "It's not what it looks like, though." Another quick beat, filled with a small, frustrated groan. "Okay, maybe it is, but he's not my..." He lapses into quiet for another long moment, seems to be desperately struggling to come up with what he wants to say. Dustin wants to shush him, to tell him he really doesn't have to explain, but it seems important to him that Dustin understands, so instead he just waits. He hasn't forgotten the times Steve has done this same thing for him, has let him cry for ages into his shoulder, has gone above and beyond the call of friendship to make sure Dustin is happy. He won't fail to return the favor, even if he has to stand here all night.

"Okay, he is my...boyfriend," Steve spits the last word with a kind of venom that Dustin has never heard from him, and it makes Dustin flinch and hold onto him tighter. "But it's not like - I know he's not good, okay? I know, that, but this way he won't -" He cuts himself off with a monumental shudder, squeezes Dustin's arm hard enough to hurt, though Dustin's sure he doesn't realize he's doing it. "This way he won't..." He can't seem to get it out, and Dustin can feel him starting to breathe fast, can hear the way his voice is starting to sound watery, like he's going to burst into tears at any moment.

Honestly, he can gather a lot from context here; has figured out that, at the very least, Steve seems to have a reason for what's going on with Billy, and seems pretty fucking miserable about the situation. Dustin does shush him then, stopping him mid word as he tries again to finish his explanation. "It's okay. I understand," he says, and tries not to let his voice waver, even though he can feel rage and sorrow rising up inside his throat, warring with each other to see who will come out first. "You don't have to say anything else, Steve. I understand." He gently frees his arm from Steve's grasp, consciously doesn't acknowledge the soreness left by his grip, and reaches for the cookies. "Here," he says, pulling the container out of the bag. "Have a cookie."

Dustin is relieved when Steve obeys, sniffling quietly as he eats his cookie and leaning into Dustin so he can keep getting hugged while he does it. After he finishes, Dustin steps away just a little, rubs his
back comfortingly when Steve startles, and says, "I'm going to go get you a glass of water. Why
don't you get dressed while I do that?"

Steve looks down at himself then, face splashed with a strange mixture of chagrin in dismay as he
seemingly remembers he's only wearing his bed sheets. Dustin just squeezes his shoulder and says,
"It's fine. You're fine. I didn't see anything." He turns back when he reaches the doorway, hesitant to
leave Steve by himself even for a little while when he looks so small and defeated. "Okay?" he asks,
trying not to sound too much like he's talking to a scared child.

Steve smiles at him, and it looks painful, but not as fake as the first time. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'll be
okay."

Dustin closes the door gently behind himself, and focuses very hard on not freaking out until he's
reached the kitchen, very far out of Steve's ear shot. Even then, he only lets himself sigh explosively
as he fills a glass of water for Steve. His hands are shaking just a little, but he thinks he can allow
himself that. He stands at the counter for a few minutes, trying to give Steve plenty of time before he
goes back upstairs.

He wonders to himself how many times Steve has told him he was studying, or out, or busy and was
really...doing this. Suddenly, a lot of things make sense about Steve's behavior recently. Dustin can
look back on how fragile Steve has seemed for the last few months, can pinpoint times when he'd
sounded like he needed help, but Dustin hadn't known what was happening, or what to say, and had
only been able to invite Steve for dinner, or give him an extra hug.

He represses the urge to hit something, rage clambering through every part of him, making him want
to lash out. Fucking Billy Hargrove. It's obvious that whatever is happening is all on Billy, that he's
given Steve a very good reason to submit to something he doesn't want to do. Dustin can even guess
what the reason is, seeing as Billy hasn't bothered any of them, including Max, in several months. He
can feel himself tearing up, on the verge of full on angry crying, and wipes furiously at his eyes to
stymie the flow. He can't freak out right now, because Steve needs him to be calm, and he can't risk
Steve thinking Dustin is mad at him.

He waits until his hands are steady again, breathing slowly and purposefully, and then picks up the
glass and makes his way back up to Steve's room. He knocks gently at the door, and goes in when he
hears Steve's muffled, "Yeah." Steve is sitting his his desk chair, looking somewhat akin to a lost
kitten. Dustin can't really blame him, considering that the thing that Dustin assumes is his biggest
secret has just come out. Dustin hands him the water, watches as Steve opens the bottle of
prescription migraine medicine that's sitting on his desk with shaking hands and swallows two pills
along with half the glass of water. Steve sighs deeply after that, sounding exhausted and world
weary, and it makes Dustin want to take him home and feed him pasta and wrap him in blankets.

"Listen, Dusty," Steve says, tired and quiet, full of regret. "You can't tell anyone. If you do he'll..."
Steve shrugs expansively, refusing to look up. "Honestly, I don't know what he'll do, but it won't be
pretty."

Dustin knows. He wishes it were different, wishes he could go to Billy's house and kill him with his
bare hands, or at the very least tattoo the word "rapist" across his face for all the world to see, but
he's seen Billy lose it, knows how unhinged he really is. "I won't tell anyone. I promise.” He exhales
slowly, then adds, "But you have to promise you'll come to us if-if things get too bad, or go too far."
Dustin frowns, frustrated, not really meaning what it sounds like he's saying. "I mean," he tries again.
"It's already gone too far, obviously, but, just...you don't have to suffer alone, Steve. I can be here for
you, even though I'm just a kid. My mom can be there for you, even if she doesn't know what's up.
We care about you."
Steve looks up at him then, all doe eyes and a soft, small smile. He looks guilty, and relieved, and immensely sad all at the same time, but he sounds affectionate when he replies, "Thanks, bud. I know I can count on you, but I still wish you didn't have to deal with this shit."

"Yeah, well," Dustin replies firmly, "I wish you didn't have to deal with this shit, so we might as well paddle this boat together."

Steve huffs a tiny, barely real little laugh then, and some of the reservation seems to melt out of his face, though the tired sadness stays firmly in place. He reaches out and takes Dustin's hand, holding him by the wrist very gently and says, "I really mean it. Thank you."

Dustin doesn't know what to say, wants to tell Steve how much he's grown to love him, but feels uneasy, like he's not supposed to say stuff like that. So instead he just hugs Steve again, and tries to channel all of his affection and his desperate want to keep Steve safe into it. He hopes that Steve hugging him back means that he understands, that he knows that he'll always have a place with Dustin and his mom, knows that they're his family now, even when no one else is taking care of him the way he deserves.
Chapter 06

Middle school graduation is on a Saturday, and Steve and Claudia arrive early enough to snag seats together in the front row. He cheers loudly for all of the kids, proud of them for having been through so much, but still managing to make it to this milestone, happy that he can be there to support each of them, in even just this small way. It's not entirely purposeful that he cheers loudest for Dustin, and he feels a little guilty, but doesn't think any of the others will mind. He's pretty sure they all know Dustin is his favorite, and there's no way they've missed that Steve has been picking up the slack where they've been drifting away from Dustin over the last six months.

When the ceremony is over, everyone heads to the Byers's house for a little party. All of the kids are there, plus Jonathan (and Nancy as his plus one, which doesn't sting as much as Steve had thought it would), Hopper, and everyone's parents, except Max's. Steve is relieved to note that Billy is also nowhere to be seen, had spent most of the ceremony keeping one eye warily posted on the crowd, hoping desperately not to catch sight of him. It's a relief to know he won't have to deal with that today, but still, he can't seem to force all of the tension out of his shoulders. He knows that if Billy were invited, he'd be here by now; knows, too, that all the kids would've thrown a fit if anyone suggested inviting him, none of them having forgiven him, despite his apparent willingness to leave them alone after what happened in December. Steve sighs, and wonders privately if there will ever be a time that Billy doesn't rule his life in at least some small way.

He ends up dropping himself onto the couch, a plastic cup full of punch in his hand, which he sips at slowly as the party goes on around him. After a few minutes, Dustin makes his way over, and sits down next to him, knocking their knees together playfully. "Hey, I made it!" he says, and Steve can't help but grin at him.

"Yeah, you did. I'm proud of you, man." He musses Dustin's hair gently, not enough to ruin his style, but enough to convey his affection playfully. Dustin grins at him, and launches into an incomprehensible speech about some movie that is coming out this week. Steve is charmed by his excitement, if nothing else, and tries to interject interestedly at the appropriate points to keep Dustin talking.

Eventually, the other members of the party all gravitate towards them as well, and soon Steve is surrounded by a ring of teenagers, all bickering back and forth about when they will start their next Dungeons and Dragons campaign, and who will play what role. He sits quietly, happy to listen to them banter until he realizes he's out of punch and feeling a little thirsty. He extricates himself delicately, assuring them that he'll be right back when they start whining about him leaving, even though he hasn't contributed to the conversation in at least half an hour. He's smiling as he ladles more punch into his cup, feeling warm and happy, like maybe he can let go of the stress for just a little while.

It all comes crashing down around him a second later, when he feels a hand come down on his shoulder, and hears a quiet, deep voice say, "Hey, can we talk?" very close to his ear. He flinches harder than he has in months, ramming his body into the table, and spilling punch not just from his cup, but from the bowl also. He's breathing fast, barely registers that his entire front is soaked in sticky liquid, can only focus on the run for your life, feet pounding on pavement beat of his heart against his sternum, in his neck, behind his eyes. It takes him several moments of trying to finally pull in a full breath, and then another, and another, until finally he's breathing normally again, and the little creep of black at the edge of his vision starts to fade away. Billy's not here, he reminds himself scathingly, trying to blank his expression as he turns around.
Jonathan is standing there, hands up like a criminal caught in the act, face twisted in a truly epic level of confusion. Steve forces himself to smile, gives a half-hearted laugh, and says shakily, "Sorry, you startled me. I was totally spacing out."

Nancy has come up behind Jonathan, now, curious, Steve is sure, to find out what's going on. Steve is flabbergasted by his own desire to sneer at her nosiness, pushes it aside immediately, and blames it on the panic still jostling around in his chest. Jonathan just nods, seemingly skeptical, like he thinks maybe Steve has done this on purpose to make him look bad, and it's a concentrated effort on Steve's part not to scowl at him.

Then Dustin appears, pushing his way between, and then in front of Nancy and Jonathan with a loud, impatient, "Excuse me, thanks." He looks at Steve, with a hard, assessing stare, and then turns to look at Jonathan the same way, hands on his hips, like he's ready to be the mom here if he has to. Steve can feel everyone looking at them and tries not to let his smile falter, tries to put on the "haha silly me, I'm so clumsy" mask, so that no one will know that he's actually losing it.

"Do you have any clothes he can borrow?" Dustin says to Jonathan, pointing back over his shoulder at Steve.

There's a long beat, where Jonathan looks warily over Dustin's shoulder, until Dustin snaps his fingers and inch away from his face and says, "The words came out of this face, down here." And Steve can't help the snort of laughter that bubbles out of him, because God bless Dustin Henderson and his stupid, sassy mouth.

He smiles a little realer and says ruefully, "Yeah, I could probably use a change. I got myself pretty good."

Finally, Jonathan relaxes and nods. "Yeah, come on," he says, half way to a mumble.

Steve follows him down the hall to his bedroom, and is relieved when Nancy stays behind, but Dustin doesn't. Jonathan gives them a weird look, but doesn't say anything as he rummages through his drawers. He comes back with a pair of sweats and a t shirt.

"Sorry I don't have anything in your style," he says, and Steve honestly can't tell if he's being passive aggressive.

"No worries. Anything's better than punch soaked chic." He gestures to himself with a flourish, forcing a little laugh.

Jonathan doesn't even crack a smile, just nods uncomfortably, looks between them a few times and then clears his throat and says, "I'll just leave you to it, then."

Once he's gone, Steve turns to Dustin, who is looking after Jonathan, making faces, and says, "Thanks, bud."

Dustin looks back at him, concerned. "Are you okay?" It's a loaded question, heavy with Dustin's knowledge of Steve's big secret, and Steve knows he's okay, because it makes him feel warm and fuzzy to realize how worried Dustin is.

"Yeah," he replies, putting as much gratitude in his voice as he can. "He just startled me, is all. No one else usually comes up behind me like that. I'm fine."

Dustin spends a long moment staring at him, wearing his detective face, as if he's going to suss out any trace of a lie in Steve's story. It makes Steve want to smile, so he does. "You're a good kid, Dustin. Always saving my ass."
Dustin returns the smile then, says cheerfully, "It's the least I can do, what with you always saving my ass, too."

Dustin leaves him to change, and when Steve comes out and settles back in amongst the kids, he doesn't even look in Jonathan's direction, unwilling to risk ruining this fragile moment of peace with whatever he'd wanted to talk about. Steve can guess anyways...probably something about everything that had happened; either an apology, or a serving of blame for Steve. He's not really interested in either. He's mourned Nancy as much as he can, and now he's taken anyways, so relationship drama is beyond his scope of capabilities.

Instead, he spends the rest of the party surrounded by the kids, dragged outside for their game of tag, then back inside for a game of scrabble, during which Steve gets caught cheating, but they all decide he can have the handicap, since he clearly needs it. Will, apparently, is savage with the two word combos, and the rest of them have all been doing a lot of extracurricular reading. Steve is happy to take whatever advantage he can get.

Once everything winds down, and the families start filtering out, Steve leaves with Dustin and Claudia, having ridden with them and left his car parked in their driveway. He's surprised when Dustin sits in the back seat with him, leaving the front seat open while Claudia drives, but she doesn't seem bothered, so Steve doesn't say anything.

When they finally get home, Claudia goes inside, but Dustin lingers in the front yard with Steve, clearly having something to say. "What's up, bud?" Steve asks, unsure if he should be worrying.

Dustin just shrugs and looks at the ground when he says, "I know you're moving, and starting your job and everything, but don't forget about me now that school's over, okay?"

Steve can feel the surprise take over his face, wonders briefly where this came from, but realizes, he hasn't exactly been the most reliable lately. "Hey," he says softly, reaching for Dustin and pulling him into a bear hug. He rests his chin on Dustin's head and says to the yard, "I could never forget about you, alright. You're my best friend. I need you."

He hadn't ever considered it that way before, but in honesty, he thinks that's been true for quite a while now. In fact, Steve doesn't even have any friends his age, which means the party are, essentially, his only friends, and Dustin is definitely the closest of them all. Dustin is definitely the one he doesn't think he could go on without.

He feels Dustin hug him back, nodding against his chest, and sighs softly. "It may be a hard adjustment for a while, and I don't know how things will be with...you know. But everything will work out. Don't think for a second I'm gonna miss out on your high school years, okay?"

Dustin squeezes him a little tighter, gives a muffled, "Yeah okay," then pulls back to look Steve in the face and say, "I'm glad."

Steve beams at him, and is happy when Dustin grins back.
Chapter 07

Steve is acutely aware, as the months begin to fly by at a rate that he hadn't previously thought possible, of his promise to Dustin and what a poor job he's doing at keeping it. He has made sure to make room at least once a week (usually on Saturdays) to go to the Hendersons' for dinner, refusing to budge on it, even in the face of his father's annoyance and anger. ("How will you ever make a good impression on the clients if you aren't willing to put in the hours for a Saturday night business function, son?" To which Steve had replied, more than somewhat tartly, "I make copies and get everyone's coffee, Dad. I'm not in a position to need to make an impression yet." That statement had quickly been followed by a screaming argument that had devolved to the point that Steve's mother had intervened and sent him back to his apartment to "cool off".) He had also made sure to drive Dustin to school on his first day, despite having been late to his morning class because of it. He'd apologized to the professor and told him that it had been his little brother's first day of high school, hoping desperately that no one there knew his family tree well enough to rat him out.

Still, he regrets having to tell Dustin and the others that they can't visit him at his new place. He'd ached at their disappointed faces, wanting to take the words back, cram them into his chest, and never let them out. It was too much of a risk though, with Billy spending so much time barging in on Steve's life now that he didn't have to schedule it around Steve's parents. He was around so much, in fact, that Steve had finally summoned up the courage to tell his first lie to him.

"There's only one key, and the landlord won't let me make copies," he'd said, voice steady and placating, as if maybe he actually regretted it.

Dustin had the spare key, tucked away, safe in his bedside drawer, "Just in case," Steve had said, when he'd asked Dustin to keep it. Dustin had given him a grave and weighty look and replied, "Just in case," as if he understood exactly what Steve was getting at.

Billy is over most days now, and it's gotten to the point where he calls midweek to check when Steve won't be around, rather than to check when Steve will be available. Steve is managing as best he can; tries to schedule his life around Billy's inevitable presence, tries not to let the feeling of endless drowning overtake him in the times when Billy's not there to make it worse. He's proud to say, he's even learned to stop crying when they fuck, to mask the hurt well enough that Billy doesn't get irritated and angry with him so often. He's impatient, and violent, and everything he's always been, but if Steve doesn't react poorly, Billy keeps a much tighter leash on himself. It's good information to have, and Steve is glad that, if he must give everything he is to this man, he has at least learned to protect himself in some small way.

Steve also learns to go to sleep as quickly as possible after Billy is finished. He doesn't take the time to clean up, and he's never come himself, so when the mornings roll around and Billy has gone, Steve only has to deal with the mess of dried lube. It's a sacrifice he's willing to make, considering how much of a deterrent it seems to be when it comes to second rounds. It's no surprise, then, that he and Billy rarely, if ever have any sort of conversation that doesn't involve Steve desperately begging for something gentler if he's feeling too sore, or for condoms if Billy is trying to be extra mean and go bare. (Thankfully, Billy doesn't seem to understand AIDS well enough to realize that Steve can't actually give it to him, since if Steve has it, it will have come from him in the first place. It's an ignorance that has saved Steve several times by now, and he desperately hopes it will continue to do so.)

Sometimes Billy still feels the need to get in Steve's face, to say things like, "Not a word to anyone,
Princess,” or "Keep your fucking mouth shut, Darling," or most special of all, “Keep your faggot mouth shut, or you know what happens.” As if he thinks Steve may have somehow forgotten why it is he endures all of this with ever increasing frequency.

So, it's sort of a shock when one evening, after Billy has pushed past him into the main room of his apartment, he pauses to give Steve a long, searching look. Steve stands frozen, having long since accepted his complete lack of courage in the face of Billy acting unusual, and tries to maintain a regular breathing pattern, lest he pass out and make Billy angry.

"Are you afraid of me?" Billy asks, with astonishing sincerity.

Steve is sure he misheard, debates the merits of making him repeat himself, and then decides it will be better than responding inappropriately if that's not really what Billy said. "I'm sorry, what?" He tries not to sound too incredulous, doesn't want to stir anything up when Billy seems unusually chilled the fuck out.

Billy frowns. "Are you afraid of me?" he says again, with an edge of annoyance.

Steve swallows hard, and ignores the overwhelming urge to step back, to move to put more furniture between them, to run screaming into the street. "I mean..." he says, and curses the derision that leeches into his tone. "Yeah?"

He feels like he's stepped into some sort of alternate universe as he watches Billy's face crumple. He can hardly even process the absurdity of it all when Billy asks, "Why?"

He scoffs before he can stop himself. "Like, really?" He asks, voice hard and shaking, dropping so far that it's several octaves lower than usual. "You have taken everything from me that I could possibly give you! You haven't given me a choice in anything! You threaten the people I care about constantly, and I know you'll follow through, because you once tried to beat me to death! I have migraines all the time now because you gave me fucking brain damage! There are days when I can't even see, but if I didn't go somewhere else to deal with it, you'd still happily come here and fuck me into the ground like my ass is some magical, self repairing hole that'll never break!" He's yelling, and he can't seem to stop himself.

Billy looks dismayed, and he makes a move towards Steve but quickly aborts when Steve stumbles backwards violently. He reaches for the nearest heavy object and comes back holding a lamp like a bat in front of him. He yanks the cord angrily out of the wall, and resumes his stance. "Don't you fucking come near me. Not fucking today." He pauses for a long moment, gaze hard as he watches to see what Billy will do.

Billy doesn't move, doesn't say anything, just stares back at Steve with that same, sad look on his face.

Steve scoffs in disgust. "You need to fucking go. You can come back tomorrow, and I will go back on my knees for you and do what I need to do to keep my kids safe, but for tonight, if you don't fucking go, I swear to God I will kill you, and you won't be able to fucking stop me this time."
Steve is shaking with adrenaline now, his entire body filled with a rush of heat and pain, like he's a live wire, conducting electricity with only the power of his rage.

Billy stares at him for another long moment, his face slowly going hard and uncaring, but he holds his hands up in surrender as he moves towards the door, leaving Steve a wide berth.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he says, and for the first time, it doesn't sound entirely like a threat.

Steve drops the lamp, heedless of the sound of porcelain breaking, and rushes to lock the door, then shoves the chain in place. It takes him three hours to stop shaking long enough to find his radio and call Dustin.

Dustin doesn't question him when he asks if he can come over, even though it's almost midnight, and Steve had woken him up on a school night. He just says, "I'll be waiting, come on over."

So Steve does, and he sleeps in Dustin's bed, because Dustin refuses to let him take the sleeping bag or the couch, insists that the host should always be the one on the floor. And in the morning, Claudia is surprised to see him, but greets him with a big hug, calls him sweetheart, and forces him to eat extra syrup on his waffles, because, "It's good for soul," as if she knows everything Steve is going through, even though all she knows is that he showed up at her house in the middle of the night because he couldn't bear to sleep in his apartment alone.

He complies gratefully, and almost feels normal again by the time he drops Dustin off at school, and drives to his own classes, late again.

He spends the day dreading going back to his apartment, mind cycling through hundreds of possible scenarios, detailing all the grisly tortures that Billy might visit upon him that night. When Billy calls at nine thirty and tells him to leave the door unlocked, that he'll be by later, Steve obeys, almost entirely out of fear for what will happen if he doesn't.

When Billy hasn't shown up by midnight, Steve collapses reluctantly into bed, all of the adrenaline having washed out of him hours ago, leaving him exhausted and sore, unable to carry on any longer. He's left the door unlocked, as instructed, so Billy will just have to wake him up for punishment whenever he gets around to showing up. Steve is asleep within minutes, unable to stay awake, even with his fear and anxiety still heavy in his chest.
It's three am by the time Billy works up the nerve to walk up the stairs and open Steve's front door. His heart is pounding in his chest, and his hands are clammy, his fingers almost numb with cold, even though it's swampy and warm out. He's quiet when he enters, hoping that he's left it long enough for Steve to be asleep. The lamp Steve had wielded yesterday is lying broken by the front mat, and Billy cringes as his boots crunch over the pieces.

He moves quietly through the apartment, back into the bedroom, and stands, watching Steve sleep for a long moment. The gun is heavy in his hand, the barrel only slightly warm in his cold grip. He runs his thumb lightly over the safety, pushing it off and then back on again as he contemplates what he's about to do. Steve, he thinks, is good. He's a good person, with the heart of a lion, and an instinct to protect his loved ones that makes him like steel, and yet, Billy knows, he's broken him.

Billy thinks of his father, of the man who convinced him that there are only so many ways to be a man, and that kindness and gentleness are not among them. He thinks of the man he hates with more ardor than any other human being in existence, and in that man's image, he sees his own reflection. Billy reaches into his pocket, pulls out the piece of paper there and places it on Steve's bedside table, just behind the small alarm clock, so that it won't get too messy to read if there is a lot of splatter.

Then, he crawls carefully onto the bed, trying hard not to jostle Steve, praying with everything he has that Steve won't wake up before he's finished. He settles on his side, inches away from Steve's back, and resists the urge to touch him. He flicks the safety off again, and slowly brings the barrel of the gun to his mouth, moving carefully to avoid shaking the bed. He pushes it as far into his throat as he can manage without gagging, aiming it upwards as best he can. His hands are steady, and he feels calm.

Pulling the trigger is the easiest thing he's ever done.
Chapter 09

Steve comes awake screaming, knows he's doing it because of the howling, raw ache in his throat, but can't hear himself over the deafening sound of ringing reverberating all around him. He scrambles around, eyes not yet adjusted to the darkness, and feels his hands squelch on the pillow next to him. He tries to struggle out of the bed, but realizes someone is lying next to him. He shakes and pushes them, but they refuse to move, so he climbs over, fumbling desperately for the lamp switch when he finally tumbles onto the floor.

For a moment, he's blind under the sharp rush of light, and then he's screaming again, can feel it tearing at his throat, even though he still hears nothing but that shrill, piercing note. He scuttles backwards, away from the bed, into the corner, a defensible position, and curls in on himself. He can't breathe, thinks he may still be screaming, and that's why it's so hard to pull air in, but can't be totally sure. There are scalding tears pouring out of him at an astonishing rate, and his heart feels like it's trying to scramble out of his chest with the desperation of a drowning bird.

Steve is frozen, unable to force any more movement out of his body as he huddles in the corner, knees pulled tight to his chest. He can't look away from the bed, his view distorted behind the sheen of tears. It's Billy, he thinks. He recognizes the shape of the body, haloed as it is by a massive splash of red. It's dripping down the walls, and the lamp shade, and the bed spread, and everything there is for it to have touched. The back of Billy's head looks like the discard pile at a butcher's shop, all unidentifiable, meaty pink and red, with shards of white peaking through. Steve feels his gut roll, can't stop the heaving pulse of vomit rising in his throat, is too paralyzed to move so that he doesn't spit the mess all over himself.

He coughs, choking a little on the vomit, and snot, and panic. He rips his eyes away, and it's the most difficult thing he's ever done. He looks at his hands instead, sees that they're coated in red as well, and that there are chunks of...something stuck to them. They won't stop shaking, and he thinks he'll vomit again if he keeps looking at them, so he buries his face in his knees, sobbing as the world continues to shriek around him.

He has no idea how long he sits there, but when he feels hands on his arms he recoils fast enough to smack his head on the wall, ripping a pained groan out of his chest. He looks up, sees that the room is now swarming with people in uniforms. Cops, he thinks, or paramedics...maybe both. The person in front of him is talking to him. He can see her mouth moving, but the sound of her voice is far away, muffled under a thousand layers of cotton balls, drowned out by the violent wailing still filling his ears.

He swallows his fear, chokes and coughs for a bit before he can speak. "I can't hear," is what he tries to say. He can't hear himself either, so he can only hope that she understands him. It's very difficult not to resume his sobbing immediately, and he has to gag down a couple of waves of panic before he's able to pull back from the edge. The woman has turned to say something to someone over her shoulder. Steve doesn't look past her to see who she's talking to, doesn't want to risk catching sight of the corpse laying in his bed.

Everything is a bit of a blur from then, and he finds himself unable to concentrate on much of anything as he's whisked off to the hospital, where a parade of people come and go, but there is always a police officer standing in the corner of the room. His hearing is coming back slowly, the ringing fading to a background sound, while everything else gradually comes back, clearer, but much quieter than he's used to. Steve thinks that, at some point, he tried to ask the officer what was going on, can't recall the answer he was given. He catches sight of a clock when they take him from the
hospital and put him in the back of a police car. He has enough presence of mind to remember that it reads sometime past 4am.

At the police station, they treat him kindly enough. They let him sit in a comfortable chair, allow him to change into an old pair of sweats and police department t shirt (the stink of vomit is so strong that he thinks he still reeks even after changing), offer him snacks and a drink. When they ask him questions, he doesn't feel like he's being interrogated, is hopeful that he's not in trouble. They say things like, "We're just trying to figure out what happened," and "If there's anything you can tell us about why he would do this." It makes Steve frustrated and embarrassed, but he tells them everything he can.

They show him a note that Billy apparently left. It only says, "I'm sorry." It makes rage bubble up inside of him, but since he can't scream, or hit something, or do anything really, he just ends up crying and mumbling to himself about what a fucking piece of shit Billy is.

When it's all over, and he's detailed the entire history of his relationship with Billy several times over, the officer that he's talking to asks him if there's anyone who can corroborate his story. Steve feels the nausea come slamming back through him, riding a wave of guilt that he thinks would be strong enough to floor him if he weren't already sitting down. He nods slowly, hating himself for dragging Dustin into this. "One of my friends found out." He looks away, "But he's young, man. He's only 14. This shit is so heavy. I never even wanted him to know." He feels his voice crack as much as he hears it, since everything is still just a little muffled around him. "Shit," he curses. "Is there any way you can leave him out of this?"

He turns a hopeful look on the officer, but the man just looks sorry. "Is there anyone else?"

Steve shakes his head, buries his face in his hands and sighs. "No, I...wasn't allowed to tell anyone. Dustin only found out by accident."

He feels the officer's hand on his shoulder and jumps just a bit.

"Sorry," the guy says. "Sorry." He sighs. "Listen, everything is gonna be okay. You've been through a hell of a lot. The good news is, he left a note. The bad news is, if we really wanna get you off the hook today, we need to talk to your friend. So we're going to need his phone number and address."

Steve can feel the tears welling up again, is surprised he's not too dehydrated to make any more of them at this point. He writes the information with a violently unsteady hand, and slides the paper back over to the officer. He watches, dismayed, as the man gets up and goes to his partner's desk. Steve forces himself to look away, to breathe, and try to slow the tears before he breaks into full out hysterics again.

He doesn't know how long he's been sitting there, staring at his hands, trying to stop crying when he hears someone say his name. He lifts his head so fast it makes him dizzy for a second, and then he sees Dustin and Claudia, pushing their way across the room, with a frazzled looking cop following behind, and suddenly he can't control himself anymore. He feels his face crumple, and a wretched whimper hacks it's way out of him as relief and agony engulf him in a rush. Then they're both hugging him, on their knees so they can reach him where he sits, and he's sobbing uncontrollably into Claudia's shoulder while Dustin squeezes him around the stomach with everything he has. He tries his best to wrap his arms around both of them, though the angle is awkward, to hug back and show them just how grateful he is that they're there, how much he loves them, even as he chokes and sputters around the force of his crying.
They are allowed to stay with Steve long enough for him to get his tears back under control, and Claudia would very much like to stay longer, to hold his hand while he goes through all these terrible things, but the officer in charge comes to inform her that they need to question Dustin now, and asks if she'd like to go along. She looks at Steve, sees his face, splotchy and red, heavily stained with tears, and a splatter of blood at his hairline, his eyes huge and mournful, and she knows that she can't let anything happen to him, knows that she's not willing to sit and listen to Dustin spilling all of his secrets if Steve doesn't want her to. The officers had explained the bare bones of the situation when they'd called, and Claudia hadn't hesitated to wake Dustin up and tell him that Steve needed them.

Dustin's eyes had gone big, his mouth pressed into a tight line, guilty, she thinks, for having kept the secret. She had told him that it was alright, that she wasn't angry, had asked if he had it in him to go tell the police what he knew. Dustin had looked angry at the implication that he would do anything else, and she'd felt a tinge of warmth to chase away the cold feeling of dread that had taken root in her heart during her call with the police.

"Steve, honey," she says, waits for him to look up at her. "Is it okay if I go with Dustin while he talks to them?"

He looks lost, confused and small, still just a babe in the scheme of things, but faced with such horror, she thinks it's a miracle he's survived this long. He nods, looks away and says quietly, bitterly, "Everyone's going to find out soon, anyways."

She nods resolutely, picks his hands up in hers and squeezes them gently. "You just wait here for us sweetie. We're going to take care of you."

He nods again and she thinks he is somewhere faraway, suffering alone, even with all these people surrounding him. She sets his hands delicately back in his lap. "Alright officer," she says, turning to the man who had introduced himself as Officer Wicks. "Let's get this over with."

He leads them to a small room in the back. It looks like it's partly a storage room, and partly for times like this, when they need to have a private discussion. Claudia takes a seat in the corner of the room as Dustin and the officer sit on either side of the small table near the center. Officer Wicks is suitably polite to Dustin, keeps his tone of voice gentle, even if he's not the best at keeping his expressions neutral. Claudia scowls at him, because she gets the feeling he might be judging Steve, but she doesn't want to cause a fuss and drag things out longer than necessary.

It's hard for her to listen as Officer Wicks asks Dustin questions like, "Is it true that you are aware of the relationship between Billy Hargrove and Steve Harrington?" And then when Dustin replies in the affirmative, she has to stifle a displeased tut when he continues, "Can you please explain to me, in your own words, the nature of that relationship."

Dustin looks nervous and pained, and also a little guilty, so she says encouragingly, "It's okay Dusty. Telling them what you know will help us get Steve home faster."

Dustin just nods, and tells the officer in a rush, "Billy was forcing Steve to have sex with him, and has been for a long time. I only found out by accident because one time I went to Steve's house to give him cookies, even though he said he had to study and Billy was there. He's scared of Billy, because Billy beat him up really bad one time, and because he threatened me and my friends. And two nights ago, he came and stayed at our house, because something happened, and he was too scared to stay at his house. He's fidgeting with his hands as he talks, and his voice is wavering because he hasn't stopped to take a breath until now. He pauses for a noisy inhale, and says more slowly, "I don't know many details, because he didn't want me to have to deal with this stuff. But I know he's been terrified, and miserable, and he's had a lot of 'unexplained' injuries this year." He lifts his hands to make sarcastic quotations of his fingers when he says "unexplained", and any other time
Claudia might scold him for being rude, but not today.

Officer Wicks has been taking notes diligently and makes a noncommittal sort of noise when Dustin finishes talking. "Okay, kid. I understand. Thank you for your help. I think that this is plenty for us to release him for tonight." He turns to Claudia then. "He'll need to stay in town for a while, though. Just in case."

She nods. "Have you contacted his parents yet?"

"Yes ma'am. They said they'd be down as soon as they can get here. They didn't sound too happy at all." He looks at the desk and sighs explosively. "It might be best for the two of you to stick around until they arrive." The implication is clear that Officer Wicks doesn't think Steve will be getting any support from his parents, and Claudia feels a lump in her throat just thinking about it.

"Of course," she says, as firm as she can manage.

When they follow him back out into the main room of the station, she sees Chief Hopper sitting at the desk where they'd left Steve. He looks up when they enter, and has a fire in his eyes the likes of which Claudia hasn't seen in quite some time.

"What the hell, Wicks? What in the actual hell are you thinking? We don't need to bring a fourteen year old kid in here to talk about this shit, when all the evidence already says suicide! Why are you making it harder for our victim than it already is?" He turns to Claudia, and continues, "I've already said it to Steve, so I'll say it to you too. I am a very sorry for my idiot deputies. This was totally inappropriate and unnecessary."

Claudia is a bit taken aback, but still pleased to see that the Chief appears to be fully in Steve's corner. "It's no problem, Chief Hopper. Dusty and I are happy to be here to support Steve however we can."

She smiles when she hears Dustin pipe up at her side, "Yeah, Steve is family." It makes her proud to know she really did raise him right.

Steve, meanwhile is just looking at the both of them with those big, soulful eyes, tired and miserable, but with a little bit of hope beginning to peek through. She closes the distance between them with Dustin close on her heels, and rests a hand softly on his shoulder. "Steve, we're going to wait here with you until your parents come, and then you can decide what you want to do from there, okay?"

He just nods and replies almost inaudibly, "Thanks."

She squeezes his shoulder, and then turns to pull up two more chairs so that she and Dusty can sit next to Steve while they wait.

It doesn't escape her notice when Dustin takes Steve's hand in his and doesn't let go.
Chapter 10

Steve is quiet while they wait for his parents, and Dustin makes no effort to get him to talk, just holds his hand, and hopes that it will give him some sort of comfort to know that he has people on his side. Dustin appreciates, too, the protective aura Hopper seems to be projecting around the area where they're sitting. Dustin knows the Chief has his own office, but he's set up station at the desk where they're all seated and is grumpily filling out paperwork with the air of a man who will injure anyone who approaches him. Dustin thinks that's his way of showing that he cares, that he hasn't forgotten all that Steve did for them on those terrifying nights when evil broke into their world.

When Steve's parents do finally arrive, it's with the type of commotion that Dustin has always associated with people who think far too much of their own importance. Dustin recognizes Steve's dad as soon as he steps through the door at 8am, and assumes the woman following close behind must be Steve's mother. They are already full of bluster when they spill into the room, Mr. Harrington demanding to see Steve before anyone even has a chance to greet him. Dustin feels Steve flinch, and looks over to see him staring wide eyed and dreadful in his parents' direction.

Dustin squeezes his hand and says under his breath, "It'll be okay." Steve is silent, but he's holding onto Dustin's hand hard enough to grind the bones together painfully. Dustin doesn't let go.

When Steve's parents finally barge over to the desk where everyone is sitting, Steve is still looking up at them with a silent, soft sort of fear, like he's expecting to be punished now, despite having done nothing wrong. Hopper stands up weightily, grinding his chair back loudly and slapping the file he's holding on the table. "Mr. and Mrs. Harrington, I presume?" he says, holding out his hand with authority. "Chief Hopper. Glad you could finally make it."

Dustin watches with only a small flare of satisfaction as Mr. Harrington begrudgingly shakes Hopper's hand, face hard and twisted. When he speaks, it's to Steve. "Son, would you care to explain what you've gotten yourself into?"

Steve looks petrified, mouth slightly open, eyes wide. It makes Dustin angry to see it, to witness first hand the callousness of the man who is supposed to care more about Steve than anyone else. "He didn't get himself into anything," he says, before he can stop himself, or think better of it. "It wasn't his fault." He can't help the edge of scorn in his tone, or the angry twist he can feel coming over his face.

Mr. Harrington looks at him like he's a piece of soggy garbage stuck to his shoe. "Oh, and I'm sure you have all the authority to make that determination. Please, introduce yourself so I may know the name of Hawkins' newest police officer."

Dustin's mom makes an offended noise in her throat, and pushes out of her chair to stand up for him, but Dustin just scowls hard at him, says, "We've met before," at the same time that Steve finally breaks his silence with a harsh, "Dad, stop it."

Mr. Harrington's gaze snaps back to Steve, and he's sneering when he replies, "No, son, I don't think I will untill someone here explains to me what in tarnation is going on. Your mother and I get a call at five in the morning, telling us we need to get down to the station right away because our son has a boyfriend who has apparently committed suicide, and I know that can't be right, because no son of mine."

"That's enough!" Hopper's voice booms throughout the station, loud enough to echo in the small space, and Mr. Harrington sputters to a halt. "Mr. Harrington, your son has been the victim of a
series of crimes, and the person who perpetrated said crimes chose to take his own life last night in Steve's apartment. Steve is in no way responsible for what has happened, and we only called you in because he has been subject to some fairly serious trauma, and we expected he might like to go home and be with his family. However, you will note that Steve is legally an adult, and is well within his rights to choose where he goes now that he is being officially released from custody."

Mr. Harrington looks a little dumbfounded at that, and Dustin feels a vicious, mean sense of victory just looking at his face.

"Well," Mrs. Harrington pipes in, sounding more than a little affronted, "I'm sure he will be happy to come home with us and explain everything, won't you son?"

Steve looks so tired, it makes Dustin want to hug him immediately, overbearing, asshole parents be damned. "I don't..." he says quietly, trailing off and frowning. He turns to Dustin's mom, and sounds almost angry when he asks, "Can I please stay with you tonight?"

Before she can reply, Steve's father butts in again, "Absolutely not! You will come home with us this evening, so that we can figure out what the hell we are going to do about this mess. This is going to be all over the papers, Steve! Do you understand how this is going to affect all of us?"

Dustin's mom steps in, then, placing herself firmly between Steve and his parents with a plastic, friendly look on her face. "I'm sure we can all figure this out together," she says, and if Dustin didn't know her so well, he'd think she sounded perfectly genuine. She holds out her hand to Mrs. Harrington. "I'm Claudia Henderson. Steve is good friends with my Dusty." Mrs. Harrington takes her hand disdainfully, and Dustin feels himself bristle, but knows an outburst would be counterproductive right now. "I know that everyone here just wants what's best for Steve, so maybe we can work something out that will satisfy all of us." She looks at Steve's parents and then turns to Steve himself with an encouraging smile. "What do you think about everyone coming back to our place for now? Steve, you can get cleaned up, and get into a nice change of clothes, and then you and your parents can sit down and talk everything out over a nice, warm breakfast."

Steve looks at her and Dustin can see the gratitude falling over him as he nods, seems to visibly try to firm himself, and then gives a shaky, "Yeah, okay."

She smiles at him beatifically, and turns back to his parents, "It's settled then. Chief Hopper has our address and can give you directions to our house. We'll meet you there in an hour. I'll have breakfast for you when you come." She doesn't give them time to respond, ignoring Mr. Harrington's indignant spluttering as she turns to Hopper, "Chief Hopper, thank you very much for your hard work this morning. Is there anything else we need to know before we go?"

Hopper smiles at her, that gruff, tired smile of his that's full of affection and amusement and says, "The apartment is still a crime scene, so everyone will need to steer clear of there for a while. I'll give you a call to let you know when you can go back. Also, I have deputies out making the notification to Billy's family now, so it may be best to try to steer clear of them for a while. I'll be sure to keep Steve updated with the case progress."

"Okay, then. We'll be in touch," she replies, nods sharply and turns to offer Steve her hand. "Shall we go, sweetheart? You look like you need a long, hot shower."

Dustin can appreciate the look of awe on Steve's face, as he's sure he has a matching expression on his own as they follow his mom out into the parking lot, Steve's parents looking on, seemingly stunned into inaction. Dustin catches a glimpse of them through the windows as they're pulling out of the parking lot, and feels a little guilty to see Hopper standing there as Mr. Harrington yells and gesticulates in his face. Still, the look of sheer relief on Steve's face as he says a quiet, gut wrenching,
"Thank you," is enough that Dustin thinks it's definitely worth it.
Steve is still feeling more than a little foggy, like his mind can't totally wrap around what's going on, and thinks maybe he's going to wake up any minute and find out it's all been a dream. He's exhausted, and hungry, and sore like he hasn't been since the night Billy beat him up the first time; since he picked up that bat and went into those tunnels, body screaming for him to stop. His vision is also coming in and out, bright splashes of color floating into view at random intervals, everything coated in static, as if he's watching on a poorly tuned TV. The ringing is barely audible now, but still, the sound of it is like a drill, boring relentlessly into his skull, sending a wash of aching, hot sensation over his brain, behind his eyes, into his teeth. He feels each tooth where it enters his jaw, like the roots are made of razor blades, constantly sawing at his bones. He knows it's only a migraine, but still, with everything that's happened, he can't quite force the majority of his brain to listen to the logic of it. His body is convinced it's dying, no matter how much he knows that this has happened before, that he will be fine.

They're just pulling into the driveway now, and Steve realizes that this feeling is the start of a panic attack. He turns to Claudia, reaches out because he doesn't think he can speak, is finding it too hard to breathe. She notices and takes his hand immediately, and through the fog of everything, Steve can feel Dustin's hand on his shoulder as well.

"You're okay, sweetie," she says, her voice clear and gentle, like a small, tinkling bell. "Here, just breathe with me. In and out. Nice and slow. In and out."

She takes him through several cycles of breathing, and slowly he feels himself starting to calm down, the panic bleeding back out of him as he finally gets enough oxygen. The pain is still there, but now he feels calm enough to say, "I need some migraine medicine, I think."

Claudia pats his hand and says sweetly, "Don't you worry about a thing, sweetheart. We've still got a couple of doses inside, and your change of clothes. Let's just get you in and we can take care of it."

Steve feels disproportionately relieved, considering he already knew that he'd left an overnight bag here in case of emergency. Claudia and Dustin help him out of the car and up the front path, letting him lean on each of them as they make slow progress, neither seeming impatient, despite his own annoyance at how unsteady he feels. They settle him on the couch once they get in, and it seems like less than a minute before Dustin is handing him a glass of water and two chalky, blue tablets. He swallows them with a grimace, hating the bitter taste as they go down, but willing to do anything it takes to curb the migraine before it gets into blind, vomiting, unable to even stand up straight territory. Especially when he knows his parents are probably on their way over right now.

After he finishes the glass of water, Dustin takes it from his hand and sets it aside. "Do you want to shower now, or do you want to wait until after your parents leave?"

Steve looks up at him for a long moment, and tries to think of an answer, but feels his thoughts skimming over his brain, like whispers, loud enough to hear, but not quite discernible. He feels like, if he could just reach out, he might be able to catch one, but he doesn't have any hands inside his brain, so instead they're all just trickling away. He stares at Dustin, and the worried look on his face makes Steve's stomach flutter a little bit.

Dustin really cares about him, really wants to protect him and see him happy. He feels himself laughing a little, delighted. Now Dustin looks confused also, and he's reaching out to put a hand on Steve's forehead. Steve thinks it's a little absurd, since he's not sick, just tired and sore, and wishing with every fiber of his being that he could just go to sleep and not talk to his parents ever again. Or,
at least, not for a few days.

Steve grabs Dustin's wrist, pulls his hand gently away from his face and sighs, the thought of his parents bringing him back out of the clouds just enough that he can form a response. "Sorry," he starts, "I'm just a little loopy. I'll shower after they leave, when the medicine's kicked in." He honestly thinks he might fall and hurt himself if he tries it now.

Dustin just continues to look at him, sad and searching, and Steve can't seem to look away. He's happy, he thinks, underneath all of the terror, and pain, and exhaustion, because he's here, with Dustin and Claudia, and they both care about him. He's built a life with them, in bits and pieces, and he thinks that not much of anything could take that away from him, even if every other part of his life is a raging dumpster fire.

"Thanks for coming to the station," he says, and hopes that it's enough to convey what he really means, which is, 'Thank you for saving me.'

Dustin smiles, sad and uncomfortable, like he wishes he could read Steve's mind. "Duh, we couldn't leave you hanging. We wouldn't do that."

Dustin sits with him on the couch, the morning news playing on the TV while Claudia bustles around the kitchen, cooking, and filling the house with the smells of breakfast. Steve feels his stomach grumble, and realizes that he's ravenous, so when she finally comes out and offers to let them get started before the Harringtons arrive, he doesn't hesitate.

There's eggs, and bacon, and even pancakes, and Steve is more than halfway through his second serving when he hears the knock at the door and nearly drops his fork. He continues eating, more slowly, as he listens to Claudia answer the door and usher his parents inside, the lightness in her voice somewhat startling when she says, "Come on in. The boys have already started eating. They were both pretty hungry since they've been up since before four!"

It's passive aggression at it's most cheerful, and after today, Steve is starting to understand where Dustin gets it. This woman is stone cold and sweet as pie all at once, and it fills him with warmth, even as he's dreading the next few hours. The warmth fades a bit as his parents enter the room, and the storm of their wrath feels almost palpable. They sit stiffly at the table, and his father tries to refuse the food out of spite, but Claudia steamrolls him with a sweet, "Oh nonsense, we've all been up a long while, and a little bit of sustenance will keep us going. It's going to be a tough day!"

It's almost satisfying to watch his father robotically shovel eggs into his mouth as his mother picks delicately at her pancakes. Except that Steve knows full well that once they're finished, they are going to lay into him, and he's a little bit worried about his entire future right now.

When they do finish, Claudia spends a few minutes clearing the dishes, and then re-seats herself at the head of the table opposite his father. Dustin is next to Steve, and Steve's mother is sitting across from him. If he were feeling slightly more jovial, he might be amused at the dichotomy of the two sides of his life illustrating itself so literally. Instead, he just sighs, looks at his father and says, "I guess I'll get this started. I know you're not happy, but there is nothing I could have done differently. I kept quiet to try and prevent any sort of uproar, because I knew if I said anything, he was going to do something a lot worse than what happened last night." He pauses for a breath, sees his father opening his mouth to speak, and cuts him off, "And yes, there could've been a lot worse. The only one that really got hurt last night was him, but he would've taken everyone down with him if I'd told his secret. I was trying to protect us all."

It's only sort of a lie. Steve had been trying to protect people, and his father doesn't need to know that the scandal of it all had never crossed his mind when he decided to keep quiet. The omission will
play in his favor, he thinks.

His dad is quiet for a long time, face hard, expression unreadable. Then, just when the silence is starting to become unbearable, Steve's mom touches his father's arm and asks, "What are you thinking, dear?"

The man lets out a big sigh, and says almost regretfully, "We'll have to find you a job somewhere else. We can't have this reflecting on the company. Just until all this blows over. You can focus on school, and come back to work for us after you graduate."

Steve feels all the tension run out of him at once as relief pours in. His father isn't angry. Or, at least, he's willing to let enough of it go that he won't take Steve's entire future from him. Steve can honestly handle being fired, if he knows that he'll still have a place to work once he graduates. "Okay," he says shakily. "I can start applying for jobs in a couple of days."

His father nods brusquely, approving, but with a storm still brewing in his expression. "Good," he says. "Now, as for the other matter." And Steve honestly doesn't have a clue what he's talking about, so he just waits.

"I hope you aren't planning on having any more boyfriends, now that you see how badly it works out. Honestly, after a girl as nice as Nancy, I just don't see how you let this happen?"

Steve feels it like a boot in his chest, has to fight the urge to physically recoil, his mind suddenly blank, his thoughts like the rushing white static on an empty radio station. He feels the world is spinning, like he might be slipping back into a panic attack, his chest aching because he can't figure out whether he needs to breathe in or out.

Claudia saves him. He's never heard her flat out angry before, but it's like a cleansing fire, burning away his impending panic, razing the static from his mind so that he can think clearly again, realize he needs to breathe in or out.

"I'm sure we can all acknowledge, based on the events that have transpired and what Steve has said that that monster wasn't his boyfriend. He was a violent criminal and a rapist, and calling him anything but is just wrong." She turns to Steve, "I'm sure if you had a boyfriend, it would be just as lovely as having a girlfriend, if that's what you wanted. There's nothing wrong with you either way. We will all love you no matter what, isn't that right, Parents?" She's glaring daggers at them, voice hard and razor sharp.

Steve almost wants to laugh, except that he also wants to cry, and he thinks if he does either, he won't be able to stop, so instead he just sits in silence, waiting for someone else to respond so that he doesn't dig himself a hole he can't get out of.

His dad looks like he might burst a vessel from how hard he's trying not to throw a fit, but he just nods and says, "Of course we love you, no matter what, son. But there are important considerations when you are deciding who you want to bring into your life, and I just hope you will do a better job of choosing in the future."

Steve does let out a sharp, barking laugh, then, piercing and agonized. "I didn't choose Billy." he says, and it comes out fairly steady, although he feels like he's wailing. "I didn't choose anything about what happened." He looks over to Claudia, her face set, fire in her eyes, and then to Dustin, who is watching him with a steady, calm gaze, and he finds the last shred of courage he has for this day. He meets his father's eyes, resisting the urge to flinch and look away, and continues, "And the people I have chosen to bring into my life, are wonderful and beyond reproach."
He pushes back from the table delicately, stands on wobbly feet, and gives himself a minute to recover from the dizziness. "I'll go back to class and start looking for jobs next week. Also, I will need to discuss with you the possibility of moving back home for a little while, since I'd rather not go back to living in that apartment, and will need to save up some money while I'm working a lower paying job. If that's not okay, I'm sure I can find somewhere else to go." He lets it sink in that he means he'll go here, to these people, and thinks his father would rather die than let that happen. It would be terrible for his image, for one, to be seen to be neglecting his son after a trauma. "As for today, I think I'm just about done. I'll be staying here for a little while. We can talk more about everything when I come home."

He walks out without waiting for a response, registers the sound of chairs scraping, and then Dustin at his side, saying in a loud whisper, "Dude, that was totally badass."

He smiles and bumps Dustin's shoulder with his as they make their way to the back of the house.
Chapter 12

When Dustin goes back to school on Monday, after taking Thursday and Friday off to stay with Steve, the news has already gotten around. Steve's name had been kept out of the papers, but it's a small town, and all it took was one blabby deputy, and now everyone knows that Billy killed himself in Steve's bed on Wednesday, and that they've apparently been sleeping together all this time. It's all anyone is whispering about, and Dustin has spent the morning with a slow, simmering rage bubbling under his skin, barely clamping down on the urge to lay into every person who says Steve's name. When lunch rolls around, he's looking forward to spending some time with his friends, needs to be around some people who aren't gleefully spreading rumors like it's their jobs. What he's not expecting is for things to be so tense around the table, everyone greeting each other stiffly and then falling into grumpy silence. Dustin is confused and annoyed, and after about ten minutes, loses his patience and snaps, "What? Why is everyone acting weird?"

It's Mike who finally answers, scowling like Dustin has personally offended him. "Why do you think?" he asks, and it reminds Dustin of last year, when all Mike could muster for anyone other than Will was spite and anger. Dustin shrugs expansively, hoping his over the top expression will indicate his abject annoyance. "Steve!" Mike says, spitting the name like a curse. "We all thought he was so cool, but he's been sleeping with Billy this whole fucking time! And now Max has to deal with this shit at home, and you're over here all cozied up with him anyways! What the fuck man?"

Dustin is stunned, but only long enough for the rage that's been simmering, barely kept in check, to heat again, to come to a boil and explode out of him. He stands up, pushes himself away from the table almost violently, worried that if he doesn't step back, he might take a swing at one of them. "So, you all think," he says, voice quiet and shaking. "That Steve, our Steve, was just carrying on with Billy all this time for fun? For no reason? Just because he wanted to?" His voice is steadily rising in volume, and he's distantly aware that the school cafeteria isn't the best place for this kind of outburst, but he can't stop himself now. "Did it ever occur to ANY OF YOU that he was doing it to PROTECT us? Didn't you fucking notice that Billy left us all the fuck alone? The he hasn't bothered Max, or Lucas, or any of us since last year? Did you think that was a fucking coincidence? That he was scared of Max because she threatened him one time with a baseball bat?" He's escalated to full on yelling, and he can see everyone staring at him, notices a teacher getting up to come over and see what's going on.

He scoffs, and steps forward to grab his bag and his tray with shaking hands. His voice is quiet again when he says, "It was Steve, you morons. The whole time, it was Steve protecting us by keeping what Billy was doing to him a secret, and now Billy fucked him over in the worst way he could think of, and you want to act like every single one of us doesn't owe him our lives. Fuck all of you. Don't talk to me again until you rethink your stupid ass priorities."

He walks out as quickly as he can, throwing his half eaten lunch away, and then rushing to one of the less populated bathrooms to dodge any curious teachers and cry his angry tears in peace.

He doesn't speak to any of his friends for a week; ignores them in the hallway, turns the other way if they try to speak to him, only tunes his radio to Steve's frequency, tells his mom to answer any phone calls and inform them he's not home. He doesn't tell her or Steve why he's fighting with everyone now, because he doesn't want to stress Steve out any worse by telling him that all the other people who are supposed to care about him are actually traitorous little shits. It's not until one night he realizes Steve is hailing him on the radio and slips his headset on only to hear Max's voice say, "Dustin, please don't turn off the radio," that he finally gives in.
"What do you want?" he asks in a clipped monotone.

"We went to see Steve, to see if he would make you stop ignoring us, and he told us what channel to use. Dustin, we all apologized to him, and he said it was okay, so can you please stop ignoring us?"

Dustin sighs. It's been a pretty miserable week without any friends, he can admit, but he's just not sure he's ready to forgive them, even if Steve has. Steve has a notorious soft spot for all of them and would probably forgive them for trying to murder him if they looked sad enough. It's up to Dustin to be mad on Steve's behalf, when he won't protect himself. But still, Max sounds really hopeful, and they have all been hounding him pretty relentlessly this week, so he thinks that maybe he can give them a chance.

That weekend, they all gather at Mike's for their first DnD session in quite some time, and Steve comes along as well, as if the party are all trying to show Dustin how much they totally accept Steve again, even though Dustin won't forget any time soon how quick they were to assume the worst. Steve seems to have at least some fun, despite his total lack of understanding about what's going on. He laughs, and smiles, and looks fondly at them all, though Dustin can't help but notice he seems quiet, and a little dim compared to his normal self. Afterwards, he comes home with Dustin for dinner, and perks up a little more, but Dustin knows it will be a long time before he heals; knows that, in reality, Steve may never be the same again.

Life after everything is somehow both totally different, and yet exactly the same for Steve. Nothing about his school schedule changes. He still goes to class four days a week, still makes excuses about being late on the days he drives Dustin to school, still wanders campus, basically anonymous, though now a few people look at him with sympathy or disgust. In the afternoons, and sometimes on the weekends, he goes to work, though now he's at the grocery store, working the registers, or doing stock instead of getting coffee for all his dad's employees. People around town generally pretend not to know that it was him involved in all the hubbub, too embarrassed or too overwhelmed with pity to say anything to him. When someone does bring it up, it's usually someone who takes issue with him having sex with a man, more than anything else, and Steve doesn't mind that so much. He doesn't have a problem with people thinking he likes dudes. After everything he's been through, it hardly seems worth it to be bothered by something so small.

He's moved back in with his parents, and they're still gone just as often, still just as tense and unforgiving when they're home, but he thinks that, in their own ways, they do care. He goes to therapy on Saturday mornings, which is something his dad wants him to keep secret, but which he'd told Dustin and Claudia about over dinner the evening after the first session. He thinks it's helping, at least a bit. He doesn't wake up screaming nearly as often, doesn't slide into panic attacks at the drop of a hat, is able to pull himself out more quickly when he does have one.

He's pushed his bed into a corner, and stacked pillows on the whole thing, so there is only enough space for him to sleep, because he finds it too difficult to fall asleep if he thinks someone could crawl in without waking him. He sleeps on the outside edge of the bed, so anyone coming in will have to climb over him, and will have to topple the mountain of pillows he's made, both of which will surely wake him. His therapist has been trying for weeks to convince him to dismantle this setup, tells him it's an unhealthy coping mechanism, but he's not ready yet...he tells her every week that he'll think about it, but never really tries.

He spends more time than his parents find comfortable at the Hendersons. He finds it easier to relax
there, surrounded by their warm laughter and gentle hugs, Tews's soft purring and gentle licks to his knuckles. His therapist says it's good for him to spend time with the people who make him feel safe, so he lets himself have that and doesn't feel guilty about it. When he's not working, he also spends a lot of time chauffeuring the kids around. In a year or two, they will all have licenses and won't need him anymore, but for now, he's going to get as much time in as he can. He tries not to think about what will happen when they all grow up and leave him behind. He tries to tell himself that Dustin, at least, will always stick by him.

He'd worried, at first, that things would be awkward with Max, after everything that happened, but he hadn't needed to. She had been the first to come to him, after apparently being set straight by Dustin. She had come by herself to his house, days before they all came as a group, and apologized for assuming he'd done it willingly. She had told him that she knew more than anyone how Billy could control people, and that she was sorry that Steve had suffered for so long to keep all of them safe from that.

She'd scowled, and her voice was fire and venom when she'd said, "I'm glad he's dead. For all our sakes." Steve had just thanked her quietly, and sent her off with a hug, feeling weak and afraid at the thought of being glad for a person's death, hating himself for agreeing with the sentiment. No matter what Billy had done to him, he had still been a person, and Steve thinks, not for the first time, that maybe he deserved everything that happened, just a little bit, for not being good enough.

End Notes

For anyone who couldn't read: Billy blackmails Steve into a non-consensual sexual relationship that lasts for over a year. Dustin finds out towards the end and comforts him, but is powerless to help. Billy feels regret and ends it by committing suicide next to Steve while he sleeps. Dustin and Claudia care for Steve in the aftermath, because his parents are jerks about it.

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