F*ck Me Up (On a Spiritual Level)

by Dariary_Absentee

Summary

He got all of Steve's memories in sharp fragments and horrible pieces. Who knew all this pain would come from Steve 'Princess of All that is Good' Harrington--the perfect golden boy himself? Billy certainly didn't. It wormed deep within him, made Billy hate himself more than he already does, made him want to beg for that Wheeler girl to come wrap her arms around him, made him hate these woods and the demodogs that might be in them. Billy knows what a demodog is now, and it's all thanks to Steve.

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Billy is an experiment, a faulty one at best. When his powers start kicking up again, things get out of control and Steve finds himself being the Mike to his El.

(Several chapters have been written already)

Notes

Soo...this is it...the BIG ONE. I've written a few chapters I should have a pretty decent uploading schedule for a while if anyone ends up interested in this (even then I'd still post it because...there are a lot of chapters...). Not gonna lie this is like my "magnum opus" (I know, sad), it's already the longest thing I've ever written and I'm so so proud of it.
I don't really know how I would go about this but I want to thank the youtube channel Shainira for making "No Parents, Big House" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0Z9Ov13tHk) without watching this video the idea for this fic would have never come to me and I watched it a lot for inspo. I highly suggest you watch it ;)

Thanks for clicking! <3

See the end of the work for more notes.
I. Never Trust a Chad

Steve Harrington was a normal eighteen year old in Hawkins, Indiana looking to graduate in June and really not much else; unless you count babysitter for a bunch of 14 year olds as something else.

He's not a monster hunter, not anymore.

His baseball bat lays dormant in the trunk of his car like some slumbering beast. He tried not to think about a time when it would have to wake up again... if it’ll ever have to again.

Hawkins has settled down, much like the nagging feeling that sits on his skin whenever he thinks of the last remaining months of 1984. After Barb’s funeral, after Hawkin’s Lab shut down, after Will Byers remained just Will Byers. Things were finally the way they used to be. For better or for worse. Like any town, anywhere, they forgot about those strange, horrifying incidents that haunt their small town.

Even he did, a little.

A little.

The college kids at Roane County Community College were throwing a rager, letting the incoming freshman get a taste of a real party.

Steve scoffed at that, a real party. His first ‘real party’ at Lori Vaster's house. Some junior at Roane he didn't remember ever meeting, invited him.

It’s almost April and he’s been ghost-like. He knew he'd only have these years for a short while longer and a short while keeps getting short with graduation coming up. He’s a bullet train speeding through a tunnel and everything’s about to start going downhill. Showing up at Lori’s was just his version of trying to push down on the brakes.

He could at least try to pretend to be normal again.

He was once King Steve and once parties were his whole scene. The smell of 'pure fuel' and hormones wafting up his nose used to be grounding, now it felt like someone shoved a wet gym sock under his lip.

It feels like he’s grown out of old clothes.

Parties aren’t his scene anymore; too much shit goes down and it never ends well. Nancy pulled him under and drowned him like a tidal wave and the demogorgon pulled Barb into the Upside Down, both at a party.

Steve stared at his reflection, he wasn’t drunk enough to blur the boy staring back him or to forgive the little things that everyone else does. His skin’s too pale to be his own, his big brown eyes look too big and sorrier than ever, and his hair is too flat. He was trying to find peace or God or the right answer to ‘what the hell is wrong with you?’ The roadmap to those things, unsurprisingly, wasn't
on his face.

He looked down at his watch, ten to midnight and he’s already decided he’s done here. It’s time to hop back into his car, and speed off back to his house and call it all a wash. Tomorrow he’ll wake up, watch TV, and attempt to do his homework again.

Except that’d be just too easy.

The sounds of somebody screaming sent electric rippling under his skin. *Jesus, this is what you’ve been waiting for?*

He’s *twisted.*

His body prickled with a sudden feeling he hadn’t felt in a long time, it settled over him like a blanket and his mind went clear. If it was a demodog attack, he had nothing to fight with, and that was fine by him. He could make do with whatever Lori had in her house.

Steve pressed against the door and listened. His shoulders slackened, his fist unclenched and his skin stopped buzzing--no demodog attack, there’s only one person screaming.

The old gym sock smell slapped in the face again. He opened the door to Lori’s guest bathroom in time to see Billy Hargrove fly past him in a blur, the sounds of screaming came and went like an ambulance siren.

“Holy shit…”

Steve jolted when he felt a hand clap onto his shoulder, his eyes couldn’t move from the back door that he ran out of, still screaming. Steve tore his eyes away to see Tommy’s ugly freckled face, laughing.

He looks uglier when he’s asshole, Steve’s noticed and sometimes he wondered if Carol noticed it too. He doubted it.

Tommy looked at the bathroom Steve was hiding in, understood immediately that he was hiding in it and gave him a brief unimpressed look. His face burned with embarrassment, and Tommy for the first time in a long time, didn’t take the opportunity to ridicule him.

The next look on his face said he has bigger fish to fry than him, and that bigger fish probably had something to do with Hargrove.

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“Bigger they are, harder they fall,” he said like they never stopped being friends. “Nobody’s gonna look at him like he’s the second coming after this.” Steve shoved him off violently, causing Tommy’s smile drop. “What?”

Steve doesn’t know why he’s asking, doesn’t want to know, but he can still hear the screaming and Hargrove doesn’t scream in fear. “What did you do to him?” Tommy snorted, “April fool’s prank.” His tongue snaked out across his lips in a very Billy
Hargrove kind of way, it made Steve cringe. “Wasn’t my idea, it was Chad’s. Billy’s always talking about how tough he is, so he slipped a little giddy-up into his drink.” His beady black eyes glimmered, “obviously he can’t take it.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “Chad drugged him?”

Why can’t the high king of Hawkins ever be a decent human being? You know, like... that word he heard Jonathan say once. Benviolent. Why can’t Hawkins ever have a benviolent ruler? They’re always a raging asshole, like the title’s cursed and Chad Price, who graduated two years ago, was no exception.

Tommy’s nose wrinkled at that. “Well, yeah...” He said like that’s a logical thing to do to somebody on a Saturday night.

They heard a large crash from outside and more screaming only now it wasn’t just Billy. Tommy’s grin was back and he was shoving through the crowd to get outside to the patio where the pool (somewhere Steve definitely doesn’t want to be) is.

Steve trailed after him, his heart thrumming loudly in his ears, something sick resting menacingly in his stomach.

Who just drugs a person?

He pushed his way through the crowd outside following just behind Tommy. The little shit and everyone else was doubled over laughing. Steve’s eyes landed on Billy who was thrashing, flat on his ass with his leg stuck in a lawn chair like an animal in a bear trap. Even from here he could see his pupils blown up to the size of basketballs. All black and barely any blue.

Billy pulled helplessly against the plastic vinyl, but it didn’t budge. “Get away!” He screamed, his blackened eyes darting from face to face. “Stay the fuck away!”

If he hated Billy more, he’d be laughing like everyone else. But there’s no sick kick in his stomach or uncomfortable titter that made him want to, all he can do was swallow and stare at the mountain of aggression and bravado crumble, watch Billy lose a hopeless battle against a lawn chair like it’s a four hundred pound beast.

Sometimes Jonathan Byers is right. High schoolers are annoying, primitive animals.

He found it pretty fucking accurate when they were gathered around the pool like a watering hole and cackling like a bunch of hyenas.

Steve knew the smart move would be to duck back right back into his car and leave now before the cops show up, before this all gets out of hand.

But he’s an idiot.

You’re an idiot, Steve Harrington.
And this party got out the hand the moment Hargrove took a sip.

He shoved Tommy and whoever was on the other side of him aside to get through to the absolute front.

Billy’s eyes trained on him, he started thrashing more. “No! No! Not you! Not you! Fuck! Not you!”

Steve tried not be offended that Billy seemed to prefer the lawn chair currently gnawing on his ankle over him. If it were Steve in Billy's place he'd probably have the very same reaction. “Hey man,” He sighed, kept his voice low like there wasn't a whole audience of high schoolers watching them. “I'm not trying to hurt you.”

“Harrington! What the fuck are you doing?” Chad yelled. He burst through the front of the crowd just in time to stop Steve from ending their fun.

Y’know, like the raging asshole he is.

He’s tall and blonde with curly waves that could compete with the ocean and a dazzlingly smile to match, too bad he’s such a shitty human being on the inside. “Let him be, the outsider needs to learn some respect.”

Steve snorted and rolled his eyes, he turned around to look at a Chad and the cackle of hyena-kids behind him. “Clearly,” he gestured to Billy, “he’s had enough, you got him tangled in a lawn chair, man. You won, happy?”

Billy was still jerking and trying to get away. “Stay away from me,” he whimpered. And that wasn’t that a kicker? Billy whimpering like a five year old.

Chad grabbed onto his shoulder and hauled him up by his shirt. “C’mon Harrington! Don’t worry about it, you got a problem with it go home, tuck yourself in and forget about it.” He grinned, so overwhelmingly confident and dominant, he’s pretty sure he heard some girls’ knees buckle. “Give your mom a kiss for me while you’re at it.”

He didn’t feel the jab, his mom hasn’t been home since February anyways, he just felt exhausted. “I’m so sick of this kindergarten shit, man.” Steve shoved Chad again-- right into Lori’s pool.

Steve noted for a moment even Billy stopped to look at him. For a moment he looked calm and curious like a child in a stroller. The crowded oooed and Billy startled again. It took every bit of his patience not to yell at everyone one of them to get lost. This shit isn’t funny, never will be funny, and it never was. Steve went back and knelt in front of Billy. “Hey, you’re okay, alright?”

“Just stay away from me,” Billy shook his head and shook it again all feverish and jerky like he’s losing his everloving mind. “Stay back.” He shook. “Just stay away from me.”

“You’re stuck,” Steve explained to him since he clearly can’t process there’s a reason he can’t run. “I’m gonna let you go, do you understand? But just stay put. I’m not trying to hurt you.” That
didn’t seem to calm Billy, not that Billy’s ever been calm. “I’m not going to do anything to you.”

“Don’t touch me, I don’t want you. I don’t, I don’t,” Billy shook his head repeatedly, sweat poured off him making his blonde curls dark and stick to his forehead. “Stay away from me.”

“I know,” Steve decided to say, someone told once to just agree with people when they’re fucked up instead of trying to argue with them. He wished he knew that sort of information when he was with Nancy. “I know, I know,” Steve sighed. “Stay away from you.”

Billy nodded, “stay away.”

He pulled apart the plastic slats of the lawn chair and let Billy’s foot ease out from the trap, that’s when the jeering picked up again. Billy’s eyes widened, “hey, hey, Billy, Billy, it’s okay. No one’s trying to get to you.” Steve reached out to him, which admittedly was stupid because trying to grab him is the exact opposite of staying away.

He crawled across the patio, pathetically Steve thought dimly, until he was back on his feet and bolted down through the crowd of hyenas now turned big eyed meerkats all watching and letting him race away from them.

*Shit!*

“Stay the fuck away from me!” He howled. He ran like Lori Vaster’s house was the live set of an action movie.

“Look at him go!” Tommy hollered, causing everyone to keep on laughing again.

Chad whooped from the pool’s edge in dripping wet clothes. His soaked polo meant less to him seeing as he got what he wanted, to see Hargrove turned into a laughingstock. “Go get your boyfriend,” he grinned with satisfaction. If he had more time and it really meant anything he’d punch Chad in the face, but Billy ran off into the thick woods.

The woods in Hawkins, Indiana are dangerous and no one should be in them alone.

Steve ran down the slope of the backyard leaving the loud laughter and booming music of the party behind. His hearts hammering, his ears strain over the noise to try to hear footsteps or at least Billy’s ragged breathing.

“I am in such deep shit,” Steve muttered. Both his hand balled into fists at his side, he hates the woods and he’s officially swearing of parties. Steve willed the sight of a face opening up out of his mind and pressed forward, trying to keep himself calm. “It’s just the woods and it’s just Billy, and Max might hate him but if her step-brother dies she won’t have a ride and that means I’m driving her too.” That’s right, that’s a reason to give a shit about this. He thought about also being the one to last see Billy Hargrove alive and that wouldn’t sound good at all considering how well they get along.

He heard Billy before he saw him. His knees pulled up to his chest, even in the dark he could see the outline of his shaking form. “Billy?” Steve started slowly.
Billy jumped up on his feet again. “Fuck off! Just stay away from me! You don’t understand! You don’t understand!”

Steve would’ve snorted, he understands he’s hallucinating something awful in his place. “C’mon, it’s just me.” He sighed, arms crossed, he looked away from him. “You know, pretty boy or whatever it is you call me.”

“No! Just stay away!” Billy backed up several feet the closer Steve inched toward him. This time he was prepared for him to take off again, he could see it in the tight coils of his muscles.

Just as he did, Steve grabbed Billy by the legs toppling them both over to the ground. “Billy! You need to stop! You’re gonna hurt yourself!”

Billy started sobbing from underneath him, he squirmed and fought to get out from underneath him. “Get off!” He screamed desperately. “Fuck! Get off of me! Understand you need to stay away from me, Harrington!”

He does recognize him, Steve thought.

He tried to wrestle all of Billy’s muscular limbs into submission. His nails dragged into his leather jacket in an attempt to wiggle his way up his bod and the treads of his shoes snagged and pulled against his jeans. “Billy, it’s just me, it’s Steve. Breathe, alright?” Steve clambered up his body until he was straddling Billy’s waist in an attempt to keep him still. “It’s okay, I’m not going to hurt you! Just...Jesus! Just stay still!” Something resigned flashed over Billy’s face seconds before Steve grabbed him by his wrists and forced them over his head.

He felt it immediately, something hot washing over his brain like his skull has been cracked open on a warm sidewalk and left to scramble in the sun. It wrapped itself around him and for a moment he thought he was going to vomit directly in Billy’s face.

Billy felt it hit him all at once. His head throbbed when he felt the pull—the big pull. He could feel the whole world stop. His eyes rolled back into his head and white-hot bolted down his limbs from his brain.

It’s bullshit!

Those shits are real trouble y’know?

We--we’re partying! P-Partying!

Slay 'em dead.

Let’s just pretend like we’re stupid teenagers.

You said you wanted to help.

You’re bullshit!
Just…just go away Steve

Mama, why can’t you come home?

Stevie’s in love!

Now I know you promised Nancy you’d keep us safe, so keep us safe.

Atta boy, Steve!

Did you see Barb leave?

King Steve everyone!

The world doesn’t revolve around you, Steven.

Pretty boy like you’s got nothing to worry about

Go get your damsel, white knight!

You’re an idiot, Steve Harrington

I messed up! I-I messed up!

Run away! Just like you always do! That’s right, Harrington run away!

Steven, honestly, how hard is it for you to keep a proper smile on your face?

You’re pretending like everything’s okay and we’re--we’re in love!

But if you tell anyone I said that your ass is grass, ok, Henderson?

Ti amo, il mio angelo.

Try, Steve, just try for God’s sake once in your life, son.

I just…I wanna help.

RUN!

Billy jolted upright almost hitting himself in the face when saw that thing lunge towards him, seven feet tall with a face that opened up, a gruesome flower with rows of sharp teeth. Steve’s pale and green, Billy can feel the grip on his wrists slacken. The boy above him looked faint.

“No…” Billy breathed. He got all of Steve's memories in sharp fragments and horrible pieces. This is why he should've stayed away, Billy thought, lying on the cold ground. He already had Steve Harrington in his head figuratively, the last thing he wanted was for it to ever be literal.

Steve rolled off of him gracelessly, sweat matted down the front of his dark brown hair making it even darker. “Are you okay…now?” Steve pulled himself up to lean back on his haunches. Steve got back up on all fours, his limbs were shaking too. Whatever hit him, whatever that was it took a bite out of all his energy.

Billy's eyes burned through his straight into the back of his skull. It made the hairs on the back of
his neck stand up. Steve backed away. “I hate you,” he said weakly, it didn’t sound much like
Billy. Steve watched him roll over onto his side and try to stand from there. He only accomplished
in falling over onto his back. Billy curled up groaning with his fingers twisted tightly in his golden
locks of hair. “Fuck, it hurts ;” he mumbled hoarsely.

“Hurts?” Steve battled his own shaking legs to get to Billy. “What hurts?” His eyes searched over
him scrapes and injuries, other than the stray scraps on his cheek and brow he seemed fine. “Billy,;
he tried again, “what hurts?”

“Everything,;” he said, and then he was crying. Steve could see his tears, catching moonlight,
mingleing with the lines of sweat on his face. “Fuck you, you dense piece of shit. I hate you. Don’t
want you,” he babbled. His sun-kissed skin paled all over again and he groaned. “It hurts ;” his
body shuddered, the fingers in his hair curled tighter--threatening to rip out blonde strands.

God, he can feel Steve in his bones.

He can’t even describe the hurt, who knew it would come from Steve Princess of All that is Good
Harrington--the perfect golden boy himself? Billy certainly didn’t. It’s deep within him, made Billy
hate himself more than he already does, made him want to beg for that bitch Nancy Wheeler to
come wrap her arms around him, made him hate these woods and the demodogs that might be in
them.

Billy knew what a demodog was. He knew where he was that night with little Maxine.

He could smell the stench of those rotting tunnels deep in his nose, it made him think he might
vomit. “I hate you so much. So so so so much.” He gasped for breath, trying to get the spinning to
stop. “I can’t live with you in my head,” he hiccupped. “I can’t, I can’t.” The cries were almost
animalistic, they made Steve want to cover his ears.

He realized then Billy probably needs to go to a hospital, maybe even a mental one. His brain feels
sapped like the moment he touched Billy it’d been sucked clean like he’s a human leech. Steve
forced himself to his feet, still feeling weak and drained. He prepared himself for one unfortunately
long and unpleasant ride to the county hospital with a sobbing, seemingly fine Billy Hargrove in
tow. Maybe they’d pump his stomach or something, hopefully, they could fix whatever happened to
him. “Billy, you can’t stay in the woods,” he pulled him up by the underarms and forced him
against the tree for balance.

He sighed, “c’mon, you’re okay.”

“Just shut up,” he sounded pleading, he wasn’t proud of it. "Shut the hell up."

Billy’s eyes were bright red from crying, like an ocean burning up in the summer heat. Steve stared
at him for a moment, he’s physically okay at least. Mentally, has always been up in the air. “I’m
gonna give you a minute to get yourself together, and then I’m taking you to a hospital.” Steve
needed a minute to think--forty million years would be preferable but a few minutes is all he has.

“N-no,” he said in a weak voice. Steve looked at him again, he looks so much younger now,
hugging himself and crying. Billy’s always looked at least 20, but now...Steve didn't know what to
think of him. He looked lost and hurt, and most importantly scared-- scared out of his mind.

Steve sighed, maybe he's been through enough tonight. If he'd just been forcibly drugged and
humiliated he wouldn't want to go to a hospital either, where it'd probably happen all over again,
he'd want to go home. "What do you want me to do then? I can't just leave you here."
“C-call...Hop.”

“Hop?”

“Chief Hopper.”

He saw the Chief in his head. He knew if his dad caught him coming home with Steve Harrington they’d both be dead meat. Joyce would work too, but Billy’s not sure he wants to meet her. The warmth that radiates from her frightened him...maybe it frightened Steve too. It’s hard to tell. Billy forced himself to form a coherent sentence, “you want me out of your hair?” He tried for commanding or threatening, it just fell flat. "Call Hopper."

Something in Steve settled and he nodded--thankfully without being a nuisance about it. “Will you stay put this time?”

Billy sunk down the bark of the tree back onto the ground as his answer, he’s not going anywhere.

“You’re welcome,” Steve said, sounding like a nuisance.

“I hate you,” Billy spat.
“You look like you’ve had a rough night, kid,” Chief Hopper said as he stepped out of his Chevrolet Blazer. Steve thought he looked better than usual which probably makes sense, the town’s been real quiet for the last few months.

At least quiet in all the ways that mattered.

He eyed the mud on Steve’s clothes and the leaves in his hair. He wasn’t bruising up which, thank the Lord, means that kid didn’t try to get in another fight. Hopper had questions--plenty, but only one got past his mouth. “You wanna fill in some more details other than ‘this asshole needs help’?”

Steve glowered at the man, he can’t help it. He’s tired, he feels sick, he’s sweaty down to point that his clothes feel drenched and right now he almost wishes he left Billy Hargrove in that stupid lawn chair. He wished he didn’t show up to Lori’s stupid party altogether.

“Yeah, I’ll explain,” Steve said tightly. He tried not to snap at the man that’s technically doing him a huge favor. He told him everything about the party, the prank, Billy, all of it. All Hopper responded with was: ‘sounds like someone’s had a rougher night than you then’.

Steve glared at him again.

Billy was, as he said he would be, sitting against the tree. A few errant tears still slid down his face that he wiped at as soon as he noticed them. Hopper shined his flashlight just shy of Billy’s face enough to give him light to see. "He doesn’t want anyone touching him,” Steve informed him before Billy could fully open his mouth.

Hopper gave Steve an odd look at that but didn’t say anything. “You good to stand, kid?”

He was right, if Steve looked like he’s had it rough, Billy looked like he’s been through hell. Little red scrapes and scratches line his cheek and his temple, bleeding sluggishly, he’s covered in twice as much mud as Steve and has at least a dozen more leaves in his hair. He wobbled standing up like he’s never walked a day in his life and leaned heavily on the tree.

“I wanna go home,” he forced out. “Take me home.” Billy never thought he’d say those words, but he also thought this would never happen again. Hopper sighed, he cast Steve a look before turning back to Billy. “I should be taking you –”

“Home, you’re taking me home.” Even weak and scared the glare Billy settled Hopper with looked deadly. “My dad can handle it,” he snarled. “Just take me home.”
Hopper sighed and Steve thinks maybe he understands why he was so snippy before. Billy Hargrove is impossible. “Yeah, alright kid, since you asked so nicely,” Hopper scowled. He took a step towards him and Billy instinctively stepped back until his back hit the tree again.

“Don’t--”

“I know,” he said gruffly. “I’m not going to touch you.”

He nodded. “Don’t.”

“I’m not,” Hopper insisted.

Billy’s steps toward him were measured, calculated but not like stalking more like he was ready to bolt in the other direction again if he needed to. Steve sighed.

He walked back up with them. He had a million questions to ask, one of them was if Billy’s okay. He looked at him, tears still rolled slowly down the slope of his cheeks from a very haunted looking pair of staunch eyes, he switched over to shivering like it’s twenty below.

Hopper stopped outside of the car again and turned to Steve, “do you need a ride too or are you alright?”

“No,” he doesn’t need a ride home and he isn’t alright either. Steve sighed, exhausted. “I’m fine, I’m just gonna head home and sleep this off.”

He clapped on him on the back. “Try to, okay?” It felt more fatherly than anything he’s felt in years. “You did good today, Steve. I’ll make sure the Hargrove kid gets home. Sends some boys to shut the party down too.”

Steve nodded once. He watched as Hopper settled into the driver seat, Billy on the passenger side with eyes wide and his shoulders up to his ears. It was still a weird sight, seeing him spooked and looking like a turtle trying to hide on its shell.

He thought he already saw Billy Hargrove at his worst: losing his goddamn mind in a fit of fury before Steve’s world turned to black.

This was somehow worse.

~oo0oo~

Billy couldn’t stop looking at Hopper, Jim, Chief Hopper. Eleven’s new dad. Steve didn’t have all the details, he knew about little Jane Hopper though. A science experiment from Hawkins Lab, he thought he was the only one who could do...things. He got the sense that if he opened his mouth about her he’d be dead. Billy wanted to, he thought he was alone.

He might be faulty, especially in comparison to what El can do, but they're both different. She came from Hawkins Lab, Billy doesn’t know where he came from or why he’s like this.

He never knew.
To be honest he always thought it’d be better not to ask.

*It is what it is, sweetheart,* his mother used to tell him and that’d be that.

What he does know is that his father tries to keep it under wraps, has his entire life, and now he messed up again. They’ll have to move somewhere else, Billy can’t even pretend to blame this one on Max. Or, he’ll graduate in June, his birthday is in July and he could just kick him out.

Then he could have the perfect family he always dreamed of.

“You got something to say, Hargrove?” Jim said slowly, “I hope you’re not sweet on me or something.” Billy’s scowl deepened. If he weren’t driving him and he wasn’t so shaky and so debilitatingly aware of what Hopper’s capable of he’d tell him to ‘fuck off.’ “Listen, kid,” he sighed. “You had a rough night, I don’t know all the details on your end, but it looks like you’re going to be having rough nights for a while, so if you need anything let me know.”

Billy swallowed thickly. “I’m fine.” His voice is hoarse from all the screaming he did before and he’s pretty sure it’ll be gone by the time he wakes up tomorrow.

“Take it or leave it,” he shrugged like he didn’t care either way.

Steve kind of admires him, like he wants to follow him around for a day and see what it’s like being Chief of Police. Steve almost wants to be a deputy, but it’s not quite right. Like what he wants to do with his life is on the tip of his tongue, but he can’t quite figure it out. He’s going to work for his dad anyway so what’s the--

Billy stiffened with a sharp intake of breath. *No.* He’s not digging around. Steve in his head is bad enough, committing to this new knowledge is even worse. If it’s not this El’s shit, he doesn’t want it. He barely wants that. Another wave of nausea hit him, and he prayed he doesn’t vomit in his own lap in front of the freaking Chief of Police.

They pull up into the driveway a minute later and Billy practically leaped out the stuffy car just happy to be in the cool March air. Hopper lumbered out slower and walked around to his side, he stopped to look at him, the only reason why Billy knows that it’s concern on the man's face is that Steve’s seen it. “Let’s just get you inside, alright kid?” His tone suggested Billy looked worse than he felt, which is saying something.

Billy nodded and followed far behind him for a number of reasons. One, he doesn’t want to get too close still, although he’s pretty sure his powers have worn off. Two, the feeling of being marched home by a police officer is too familiar. And three, his dad’s already at the door waiting for him like he knew tonight would be the night something went wrong.

Knowing him and his eagle eyes he probably somehow did.

“Good evening, Mr. Hargrove,” Hopper said as they made their way up the front stairs.

He would like to say he’s not hiding behind Jim’s lumbering form like a fucking pansy, but...like he said, he’s had a rough night and Steve is all over him and in his veins. Steve would want to hide from his dad and with good reason.

Mr. Harrington doesn’t hit him or anything, but damn does the guy know how to cut with his word. He’d verbally rip Steve a new--

*Stop. It.*
Billy’s eyes met his father’s icy blue ones and looked away. “Good evening, officer. What did my son do?” His voice is gruff, it’s not intended for Hopper.

“Chief,” Hopper corrects with a slight eyebrow raise. He assumes Billy’s a handful as far as children go, but one look at the kid’s face tonight and anyone would be able to tell he’s not the problem this time. “And he didn’t do anything wrong.”

Neil snorts disbelieving, he’s actually surprised to hear it. “Really?” It’s not pleasant on his face, because he’s not proud. Hopper could walk up to this door and tell him he stopped an armed robbery and he’d still have done something wrong.

“Unless you call going out to have fun something wrong, the kid’s in the clear,” Hopper said.

“Then what’s the problem, Chief?”

Billy flinched under his father’s gaze when Hopper starts to retell what he knew. His father’s gaze kept getting colder and harder. Maybe he should’ve asked to go to Joyce’s house, she seems so nice and warm.

Something in him suddenly aches for her and the hugs she gives out. Billy knows them just as well as Steve does. It makes him feel cold all over again, he wanted to ruefully flip off the feeling that is, in turn, sticking it’s sad little tongue back out at him.

It’s barely been an hour yet and he already can’t stand Steve Harrington

Neil’s jaw is worked so hard he could practically hear the bones creaking. “I see,” he said through clenched teeth. “Thank you for bringing him home safely to me.”

He knew it was the time for him to walk over to his father and stand by him, but he wanted Hopper to stay. He can’t help but trust the man despite his burly muscles and the uniform he has to wear.

He wanted to go to Joyce’s and listen to her angrily smack their faulty microwave and for fuck's sake, he wanted Nancy Wheeler--Steve wanted Nancy--Billy wanted Nancy out his head. Billy felt Steve’s tears starting to prickle in his eyes and he hated it, hated Steve for doing this to him.

This isn’t him, nothing about him right now is Billy Hargrove.

He wanted to scream.

He thanked Hopper without looking at him and let his father usher him inside. He’s pretty sure Hopper said something about getting into contact with him once he’s alright, but they both know Neil won’t.

Susan was in the kitchen which was just fucking perfect, he was pretty sure her and his dad were watching a movie in the other room. “Neil…?” Her lips quiver in the shape of a question, her eyes went to Billy. Again, he must look pretty bad because her bottom lip started wobbling like a worried toddler. “I’ll….I’ll let you two talk. Susan bolted out the kitchen and down the hall to their bedroom, like she was running a race and first prize gets a million dollars and a one-way ticket out of the ‘my new husband beats his son’ show.

He felt himself being shoved into one of the chairs at the table, Neil sat down at the one in front of him. His eyes slid from the ugly orange creme colored half curtain over the sink to his father's face. As much as he’s sure he deserves this bullshit, exhaustion is so heavy in his bones he can barely focus on the man’s cold gaze.
“Billy,” Neil started. Billy’s stomach sunk to the floor. “I’m going to talk to you slowly, because I’m not sure how much you understand, right now.”

*Steven, you’re not a dunce. Don’t make me talk to you this way.*

“Very little,” he said like the goddamn dumbass he can be.

The first backhand stung, it was so sharp he let out a choked cry. That was anger and frustration that his fuck up of a son got himself in such a stupid situation. He just can’t act right, good boys like Steve don’t get drugged at parties.

He vaguely remembered hearing Chad yell that he deserved it.

Billy couldn’t help but agree or maybe Steve just thought that he should agree. Steve hates himself so why shouldn’t Billy think he deserved it? Steve hates Billy too so why shouldn't *really* deserve it.

But Steve stood up for him so he must not hate him so much?

Billy realized the smack to face might've been to wake him up a little. It didn't work, he felt sick and sluggish; his eyelids are impossibly heavy too.

Neil got up from the chair and started pacing. His dad yanked at his short hair a little before rounding on him again, “did you touch anyone?”

“No,” Billy spat out. “I got away, I didn't touch anyone.”

He doesn’t even know how to control his power or use it, it just... *happens*, well, he knew it happened sometimes with an accelerant. The coke at Freddy Mileston’s party had been a mistake and he learned his lesson quickly.

He eyed him carefully.

“I hid in the woods,” he said. "I didn't touch anyone."

He doesn’t want to move anymore, doesn’t want to get kicked out either. If he's leaving it'd be on his own goddamn terms and he’d be in a much better position to punch his asshole of a father in the fucking face. Fuck he wanted to go to sleep. He wanted to stay in bed until Steve starts to fade like all the others do eventually.

“Are you sure?”

Billy scowled up at the man, “I’d know if it happened, I’d feel it.” *Dumbass.* The intended ending isn’t lost on his father and he backhands him again. This time Billy saw it coming, he was better prepared.

“What about that boy, Steve Harrington?” *Oh, gee dad! What about him?! I know everything!*

Neil's scowled twisted deeper, he leaned in when he spoke. “Why is he involved?”

Billy briefly wondered which side was going to take over this one, the one that wants Billy’s powers to stay a secret or the one that hates how faggy his son is. He’s hit the holy grail of ticking off both of his dad’s boxes. “He felt bad and called the cops.”

“He was alone in the woods with you, why?”

The bigoted asshole it is.
“He tried to get me to calm down, stay in one place I guess. He’s one of those goody-two-shoes types.” His dad didn’t look satisfied, apparently just being a good Samaritan isn’t enough of a reason to ever want to help his son. “He drives Max’s friends around sometimes, he told me he couldn’t let anything happen to her step-brother. It wouldn’t sit right with him.”

He accepted that because little ol’ Maxine is involved now and if Max is involved then everything is fine.

“You didn’t touch him?” He repeated.

“No, sir.”

He touched me.

Billy knows he’s getting by the skin of teeth when his dad sighs heavily. “I’m glad you stayed safe,” he said, but he doesn’t turn to look at Billy. “Take a shower and go to bed.” He nodded and rose from his chair. A blanket of exhaustion seeped into his bones just at the mention of the word bed and for once he agreed with his old man. “And Billy?”

Fuck!

He stopped. “Yes, sir?”

“I hope you don’t intend on attending any more parties?”

There wasn’t a question there, he’ll make sure he never goes out again. Billy shook his head, too tired for defiance. “No, sir.”

His dad didn’t look pleased, but he didn’t look angry either. “Then good night.”

With that, Billy knew he was being dismissed. He trudged off to the shower, peeled off his clothes, took the leaves and twigs in his hair out, inspected the scraps on his face, it all goes by in an empty blur.

Nothing felt real until Billy crashed down on his bed, his skin sensitive from rubbing himself raw. He should know better than to try to cleanse the person out of him, but he can’t help himself. He can’t help the feeling he’s got the wrong body or the wrong mind.

Billy drifted off to sleep with Steve’s nightmares on his mind.

~oo0oo~

Billy bolted up in his bed a scream caught in his lungs. The tunnels, Dustin that would’ve died way too soon and has too much to live for, and those things--demodogs, running right towards him all flash behind his barely opened eyes.

Uselessness washes over him like a wave and something else, something he’s a lot more familiar with these days: nausea. He sprinted out of bed, somewhere between his room and the bathroom he’s pretty sure he shoved Max to the ground or out of the way in the race against his own stomach.

It’s all acid and it hurts, but what else is new?

He’s only been awake for a few minutes and today is fucking awful. The day after always is, his nose bleeds randomly and he can’t ever keep anything down. His cigarettes are in his room and his
legs are shaking too badly to get them.

He leaned up against the wall and closed his eyes. Steve’s so fucking hung up on those tunnels, on demodogs and Nancy, it’s all that runs through his head. There are a lot of soft thrums of other things, like the sunlight peeking through the clouds only reaching bits of a field. Mrs. Henderson’s peanut butter cookies and El’s knowing smile, ease the pain in his chest a little; but Billy’s pretty sure that if he’s having a bad day that means he’ll only think bad things.

Steve’s the type to wallow in his own misery and then dig his own grave deeper so Billy will too until the most of it is out of his system.

Clearly, whether he likes it or not. No matter how much he fights it. He’s not sure how Harrington lives like this, but Billy already knew he couldn’t.

I hate him so much.

Billy heard the sound of stomping bare feet slapping against the wooden floor. Max stormed in red hair frayed in all its unruly glory. “What the fuck, asshole!” She yelled. She then deflated, a little less a red and ugly. Billy could see her putting the connection between his pale face and the toilet. “You’re sick,” her lips curled. The ‘if you’re contagious, I’m ditching you’ is evident in her voice.

“It’s called a hangover, piece of shit.” His voice is hoarse at best and nearly non-existent at worst. Great. Max glared down at him, her lips pursed, and arms crossed over her chest. “Are you gonna keep standing there looking like shit on fire or what? It might just be you that’s making me vomit.”

Max scoffed, “I was going to ask if you’re okay, but never mind, I don’t care.”

Something squirmed in him he knew for sure wasn’t him, an overwhelming urge to be nice to Max. “Hey!” He grabbed her arm before she started to leave. “I...I’m sorry, I’m sick. You don’t look like shit on fire, I’m just saying that because my head hurts. Shit can’t even tell what’s actually up, my head’s spinning.” He can’t, everything’s just...upside down. “I’m scared, okay? I’m sorry.”

Fuck.

Billy hates Steve Harrington. The asshole has a bad fucking habit of dumping all his emotional trauma into a well and if all this emotional stability is anything to go by that well is overflowing, and quite honestly, it’s going to drown them both. Billy's not sure what pissed him off more, that he can feel it bonding and pouring out into his own, or that if Steve thinks it’ll help someone else, he’ll spill everything that hurts.

Fuck!

She stared at him, her frosted blue eyes widened. Sometimes he thinks she and Neil have the same eye color, but hers are gentler. They’re blue like cotton candy, Neil’s are hardened and cold like the frost that sat on his the windshield of his car every morning. “

You don’t...apologize to me.” She laughed, but it’s strained. Her face turned red like the jacket she has one. “You...you never apologized to me for anything.”

“I just did, deal with it.” He already knows he’s going to have to and it Sucks--with a capital 'S'.

Max’s eyes went even wider if at all possible, they might as well burst out of her skull. She's such a freak to look at sometimes. “Are you dying?” She asked, like the dumb little kid she is.

Honestly, I hope so.
“It’s a hangover, not a death sentence, fuckhead.” Max still eyed him like she might call 9-1-1. “Where’s my dad?”

“At church with my mom,” she said.

Thank God, Neil would recognize the signs immediately. “Don’t tell him about this, alright? As far as he knows, I’m fine.”

Max’s head canted to the side a little, all dumb and curious and annoying. Having a little sister is the absolute worst even if she’s just a step one. “Are you sure you’re not dying?” She said like she might actually care if his heart stopped beating right now.

“I’m fine.”

She stared at him, “You don’t look fine.” Like he didn’t already know that. "Your nose is bleeding.”

*Christ. Already?*

He put his finger under his nose and pulled away, surely enough his finger was stained crimson. “Fuck,” he groaned and grabbed a wad of toilet paper and pressed it to his nose. “You didn’t say you won’t tell my dad,” he stood up to tower over her, even if he has to grip the sink to do so. She needed to get this through her thick ginger skull. “If you tell him, your ass is grass, ok, Mayfield?”

Max nodded up at him. “I get it.” She left the bathroom and retreated into her room, probably to go talk to those nerd friends over their walkies--they gossip almost as much as the old hens in Susan’s book club.

But Jesus, Steve loves those kids like a brother, if all of them didn’t already have pretty okay moms than like a mother. He’d do anything for those snots. When he stormed in that night in November, Steve would’ve have fought him to death. Wouldn’t have wanted to do it, but he would’ve.

They almost did.

His legs carried him into the kitchen and his hands started pouring himself a bowl of cereal. He tried shoving dry *Lucky Charms* into his mouth, but everything tastes like cardboard and he felt sick again. He’s sick with himself and for once he doesn’t mean his ‘inner-Steve’ is sick with himself. He means Billy Hargrove is sick with Billy Hargrove, at least that feeling is familiar.

At least it’s his own feeling.

Billy forced more *Lucky Charms* into his mouth and half a glass of orange juice before laying down on the couch, *exhausted.* He turned on the TV, Max must’ve had cartoons on, they’re still on now.

He fell back asleep just as Velma started searching for glasses, the gag made him laugh.

He woke up again, less nauseous, but his head still pounded against his skull. The front door closed, and he heard his dad and Susan coming back from church. A coppery taste filled Billy’s mouth and he groaned.

*Now is not the time.*

His nose was bleeding again. He started to think Steve Harrington was actually trying to melt his brain. He should be thinking about the fact that if his dad walks in with his nose bleeding, curled
up on the couch like he’s exhausted he’s done for.

For the second time today, he raced to the bathroom. He was smart enough to lock the door this time. “Fuck,” he croaked out--sleep did nothing for his voice. He wiped at his face and washed away the residual red stain it left on his upper lip.

He wasn’t sure if it was him or Steve that’s making him feel like his life is unraveling. Jesus, his life always feels like it’s unraveling, but in various degrees. This feels like a loose thread caught in an escalator and it just keeps pulling until he has nothing left.

He heard sharp rapping on the door. It’s him. Billy checked his face one more time for any signs of red before opening the door. “Yes, sir?”

His dad did exactly as Billy expected him to, inspect him meticulously for any signs he’d been lying to him. It would be the first time, actually. He’s never tried to hide when it happens before, maybe because even the people he absorbed are afraid of his father in one way or another. “You’re pale.” He pointed out, he said nothing about his missing voice.

Well, there’s nothing I can do about that.

“I still...had a rough night,” his hand went into his hair, which was definitely a bird’s nest at this point. Between him and Max, he was entirely sure he was the one that looked like shit on fire.

He grimaced, but saved the ‘respect yourself, you piece of shit’ speech and moved on to why he was really talking to him. “I’m driving Maxine around today, I want you to stay in the house.”

Billy was pretty sure his car was still over at Lori’s so leaving wasn’t really an option. “Okay,” he agreed easily. In a weird way, his dad’s nicer to him when this happens--as rare as it is. Whenever they have a ‘power scare,’ he’s almost fatherly with him. He always wants him safe inside the house, he doesn’t yell at him, he doesn’t hit him. Everything is nice for a solid day or two before he goes back to being a bigoted, slap-happy asshole. “I’ll be picking your car up later as well,” he said. “Don’t expect your keys back.”

Fuck!

“What?”

It wasn't like he hadn’t taken them away before. “You going to that party started all of this in the first place,” he reasoned. “I obviously haven’t been keeping a close enough eye on your whereabouts.”

He could practically feel the leash tightening around his neck, “what about getting to school?”

“You can have them to take yourself and Max to and back, when I get home you give them back over to me or Susan, and if I hear anything about you raising a problem with her...” Billy didn't need him to finish that sentence, he knew what was at the end of it. “Do I make myself clear?” Billy glowered at him, his father took a step closer and for one startling moment, he couldn’t believe he wasn’t being shoved up against the bathroom door. “I said, do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal, sir” he forced the snarl out of his tone.

“Good,” he didn’t smile. “Behavior yourself, son, last night could’ve ended much worse than it had.”

I hate to say it asshat, but it did.
There we go chapter two is up! Chapter three the boys are back together again, nothing goes as planned and is...is Steve Harrington going to actually defend Billy Hargrove?
Well, there have been... 'Stranger Things'
Thanks for reading! See you next Saturday!
Chapter Summary

“Is this how you say ‘thank you’?” Steve scowled at him. “Can’t really say that I’m appreciating it.”
Something cold settles over his skin and heat rises under his eyes. “Thank you…?”
Billy forced the lump that's growing large in his throat. “Are you…I’m not thanking you for anything. You messed up so bad and you don't even know it,” he hissed.

What can I say? Billy and Steve have been reunited after the weekend and nothing goes as either of them planned.

Chapter Notes

**WARNING!! I didn’t add this in the tags because as far as I know, this is the first and only instance of this (if it shows up again in later chapters I'll officially tag it). At some point in this chapter there’s bullying because of mental illness and if that really burns your biscuits I’d tread carefully. I don’t want to hurt anyone.

Monday slammed into him like a freight train. Of course, it would, he was dreading Monday. Life isn’t fair and Billy knew it never was, it especially isn’t fair when Steve Harrington is screaming in his skull that it's not.

And they both fucking hate Mondays.

Billy got out of bed and went to the bathroom. His mouth was sandpaper dry, his palms were sweating, and he was pretty sure it was all Steve Harrington’s fault.

On a morning like this one, his royal highness would throw a mental temper tantrum. Harrington would stomp all over the house on a shit morning like today. His dad wasn't around, but he couldn’t imagine Susan would appreciate her step-son stomping around like a toddler, so Billy forced himself to take deliberately gentle steps. Harrington has other ways of being a bitch. Quick to snap at people, real fucking dramatic until Nancy could look at him with her big gross owl eyes and then everything would be okay. go serene and tranquil. A little acknowledgment, a tender look, and Harrington would be back on Earth--grounded. Except Billy can’t stand Nancy Wheeler, so he has no one to bring him down.

Not like Harrington has Nancy either, anyway.

That crashed and burned like the fucking Hindenburg.

Billy doesn’t know what the fuck things will to look like when he gets to school. Half the populace already thinks he’s a bit of psychopath after what he did to Harrington’s face. The other half are the ones that matter, the ones that don’t give a shit about any of it…
And then he got tangled in a lawn chair.

A fucking lawn chair.

On a day like today, he would dress especially cool. He would make an armor out tight jeans, put a big red symbol on his back that says ‘fuck with me and see what happens’ in the form of a half-open button down. ‘Feel like the worst, look like the best’ is his motto. Harrington’s used to be the same. These days it’s more like: ‘feel like the worst? Make sure to fucking look like it because nothing matters anymore and I’m in pain and no one cares, so why should I?’

Yeah, so why should Billy Hargrove look like tough shit when he isn't? He got tangled in a lawn chair. He cried in front of everyone.

He’s not a man.

He’s got no spine.

Neil’s always been right about him.

He's a freak of nature.

Fuck!

His grip around the faucet handle tightened, reeling with all of the noise he hears in his head and the feeling of Steve Harrington dragging him down. His fingers are going to break before the metal does.

This is bullshit.

Yeah, it is.

Billy had willfully built up somewhat of an ignorance to how little he liked about himself, no matter how much he lashes out because of it. The wall of ignorance he keeps purchase on wasn’t going to go to shit just because of one night.

Not if he had anything to say about it.

He freshened up, brushed his teeth, forced himself to do something with his hair. He couldn’t force himself into those tight jeans, he couldn’t force himself into a barely buttoned shirt. After three minutes he caved, he pulled on looser jeans and a big, black sweatshirt with a Metallica t-shirt underneath.

Fuck, Steve Harrington and his self-pitying bullshit.

The kitchen was empty. His keys sat on the kitchen table where he usually sits. His dad must’ve gone to work early, it doesn’t mean he won’t be asking for them the moment he comes home. Billy knows this song and dance. He threw them into his pocket and grabbed the toast off his plate.

They leave in seven minutes.

He spends that time just trying to keep himself calm. He’s not used to so much sadness and anxiety, at least not without feeling angry. His hands haven’t shaken like this in years.

He hasn't been this much of a nervous piece of shit in years.
Fucking Harrington.

He took away Billy’s greatest weapon, Billy’s real superpower since the one actually has is shit. The ability to take his panic and hammer it down, to turn a useless lump of anxiety into bright hot, rage that could keep him steaming and unafraid. Harrington stripped him of that.

Billy has never been fond of what was underneath.

He felt damp and cold, like Harrington submerged all his fire under water, all he can do is keep throwing bucket after bucket into an overflowing well just to get to it.

“Um...let’s go,” Max said with all the carefulness of a person trapped with a hungry mountain lion.

Billy looked as stupid as he felt, so stupid, real stupid. He wanted to put a paper bag over his fucking head and pretend he didn't exist. He wanted to skip school and stay in bed, and if he did that Neil would have his fucking head.

Christ almighty he’s pouting. Billy rolled his jutted lip back into his face, he is not a pouting baby like Harrington.

He jammed his hands into the pocket at the front of his sweatshirt. “Yeah, whatever.”

Max nodded.

She stared for a long time, long enough that his eye twitched. “Just get in the fucking car, Maxine,” Billy grumbled.

She gave him an incredibly wide berth, abnormally large even for her, when she went around him to the door. Maybe she’s not so used to it. He followed after her. Steve likes to ride to school in silence, he only puts music on when he’s trying to impress someone.

He cranked it all the way up until Max’s lips pursed in attempt to keep her own temper in check. Even Billy’s in pain at this point, but it doesn’t matter. It’s his own goddamn decision.

When Billy dropped off Max she almost ran out of the Camaro, he still managed to grab her arm and bring her close. Still grasping at straws for some form of control, it made him feel more pathetic than anything else.

“Look you piece of shit,” Billy growled lowly. “I’m gonna be saying sorry for a lot of things in the next few weeks, take it as you fucking want, but it’ll end. Do you understand me?”

Max didn’t try to pull her arm away, unlike Billy, she’s a quick study in these things. “Alright,” she spoke like he’s just inconveniencing her, the same way she responds when he gets on her about being late. “I gotta go, let go of me or we’ll both be late.” This time she did pull away and Billy let her go.

Her little nerd friends are waiting for her when she dashed out the car. A bunch of fucked up looking little freaks, it’s no mystery to him why they're all friends. Billy watched them all stare at him before the Camaro roared to life again.
The first bell rang when he pulled into a parking spot, but his legs didn’t move. He gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white and tried to will his heart to get back into his chest where it belongs.

When he pulled his hands away from the steering wheel they were shaking. He’s never felt this out of control in his life, which is saying something. Even when he’s so angry he’s blacked out. At least he knows he blacked out, he can’t even put this into words.

He couldn’t fucking breathe. Even the Camaro started to shrink, and only then did he grab his bag and bolt out of the car. He didn’t get very far before the world swallowed him up whole, he sank to the asphalt with shaking legs.

*God-fucking-dammit.*

When he closed his eyes to concentrate, to try to get a hold of himself, he saw the fucking Demogorgon and the twinkling lights at the Byers house. He could hear the squelching sound of the nails digging into bat.

He was having a fucking panic attack. The cherry on top of his awful morning sundae.

He hasn’t had one in over a year. Now he can’t breathe, and the world feels so fucking large because there’s two of them apparently, and he’s on his fucking own in both of them. Somewhere distantly the sound of the late bell rang out.

*Even better.*

Now he wished he managed to bring a thermos of coffee with him, at least he could dump out it out and put the contents of a flask in the thermos instead.

The first thing Billy intended to do was grab it from his locker and take a long, heady pull instead a note fluttered out at his feet.

‘PSYCHO’

His own fists slammed into the locker with a loud sound that rang out into the hallway, it hurt but right now he really didn’t give a shit. In fact, it surprised him someone didn’t come out to check on the raucous. The teachers’ in this hallway probably know it’s just Billy Hargrove throwing another fit. A whole lot anger they’re not paid enough to deal with and Billy doesn’t want them anywhere near. He crumbled up the note and threw it in the trash-can. When he came back he gathered his things and went to World Studies like nothing ever happened.

Mr. Cooper side eyed him, the guy seems to like him more than most teachers, actually. He didn’t say anything about his late entrance, for which Billy was thankful. He’s the type to let tardies slide too, especially when a student looks the way Billy does. Especially when everyone and their grandmothers knew what happened at Lori’s party. Especially when the whole fucking classroom and their thirty-something sets of fugly hick eyes looked at him as he took his seat in the back corner of the room.

*Fuck!*

Mr. Cooper cleared his throat, gathering everyone’s attention and carried on with his lesson. He offered Billy a condoling smile dripping with pity. He scowled back at him.

He made it through math alright even if every second of it sucked the marrow from his life. It’s the same thing, another set of eyes, a low hum of jittery voices, and the distinct feeling that Billy he
was being intently watched.

English is his favorite, but they’re discussing Shakespeare and honestly if it isn’t Hamlet or King Lear he doesn’t care. He fell asleep halfway through the class, which would have been fine except...his own fist was coming hurling toward him. Billy bolted upright in his chair with a broken off noise, more Harrington’s habit than Billy’s. He had a nightmare about kicking the shit out of himself. Well, Harrington has had nightmares about Billy kicking the shit out of him and going after the kids next.

The class snickered.

“Mr. Hargrove,” Mrs. Mince started lowly, but it changed. She paled a little and her bottom lip quivered. “I would appreciate it if you went to the nurse for that.”

Billy already knew what he was talking about, a drop of blood fell from his face onto the desk in front of him.

“Got it,” Billy mumbled, he ran his sleeve across his face, probably smearing blood like an animal. He shouldered his backpack and left. He’d take a kick to the crotch before going to the nurse. His mother raised him to be wary of them and besides doctors have always rubbed him the wrong way.

Billy grabbed a handful of toilet paper and went back to observing himself in the bathroom mirror. His skin somehow looked dimmer and there were dark circles around his eyes faded blue eyes, he looked like Steve the day he told him to ‘draw a charge.’

He looked so miserable then, but of course, that was around the time when all his ‘Nancy wounds’ were still fresh.

The little shit needed to hear it anyway, he about saved his goddamn life with it.

When he finished clearing up all the blood, he pulled away and leaned up against the sink. Billy decided to skip the rest of English.

He exited the bathroom at the bell and collided with the fucking Troll King himself. If Steve was The King, Billy is the California King. Tommy has to be the Troll King. Yeah, Tommy ‘I have shit for brains’ Hall as the fucking Troll King sounds pretty accurate.

“Woah!” He laughed looking up at Billy, a proud look in his nearly black eyes. “Someone’s having a rough day, huh, Hargrove?” The smaller boy and the two that flank him, Andrew Kaminsky and Logan Jacobson, crowd Billy back into the sturdy metal door. “Don’t worry, we won’t touch you,” he snorted with a little grin.

Something squirms sick in his stomach remembering his own fear, heightened by the drugs. A well of anger that felt thankfully familiar and not entirely his filled him. Harrington was angry for him that night too, Billy didn’t dwell on it.

“Thank God, I don’t want whatever fucking disease that red-headed cow probably gave you,” Billy growled back.

Low blow but Tommy’s always had a soft spot for Carol, they deserve each other.

His face screwed up tight, “you know what?” He sneered. “You’re allowed to say that, and you wanna know why? It’s because you’re fucking schizoid.” He took a step closer. “You just can’t help yourself.”
His breaths were coming out sharp through flared nostrils, his hands curled into fists at his side. He eyed the crowd of people that was gathering, and for once Billy didn’t want to have all eyes on him.

Damned if he does something, damned if he doesn’t.

“So what?” Tommy kept saying. “You don’t have anything to say to that? You’re just gonna roll over now, nutcase?”

*He probably had the same look when he killed his brother, right?*

“At least I don’t suck my fucking thumb,” Billy blurted out like he knew this secret and he’s been saving it for this one moment. Billy had no clue Tommy sucks his thumb (even if it’s hilarious), but *Steve* does. Steve’s known it since their first sleepover. Billy shoved him back while he was still sputtering. “oh, what?” Billy smirked down at the boy, “you didn’t know I knew?”

God bless Steve Harrington, *for once.*

The anger feels too good and Mary, mother of God does it feel familiar.

He took him by the front of his ugly blue Polo and held him up against the locker. “You don’t know shit about me,” he growled, lip twitching with rage. “Get that through your thick skull.” He shoved him hard for good measure, a satisfying *clang!* of Tommy’s too thick skull hitting the locker rung out.

Billy let go of his shirt, letting him slide down into the heap of shit that he is.

The crowd that gathered expecting an impending fight, parted like the Red Sea. Billy being their incredibly awful Moses. He picked up his stuff and left the hicks behind to lift the puddle of Tommy Hall off the floor.

He wiped his bloody nose with the back of his sleeve.

Billy was ready to ditch the entire school and come back to pick up Max at the end of the day. He tried trooping through the day like a good little boy and it’s only kicked his ass six ways ‘til Sunday.

His keys jangled in his pocket, he had full intent to just walk out and leave everyone behind until he saw Steve Harrington.

---

Steve dug around his locker for his lunch. Mrs. Henderson was appalled when she found he gave away most of his lunch. She insisted on making him a lunch he wouldn’t want to give, a growing boy like him (Steve rolled his eyes at that) needs all the food he can get. Now when he picks up Dustin, she insists he takes one of her bag lunches. He honestly wished he could say no but the sandwiches are *so good* and on Fridays, she puts in peanut butter cookies and a smiley face note.

He’d never had a smiley face in his lunch until he met Mrs. Henderson.

Dustin can keep his pudding cups, he has no clue what he’s missing.
He felt the hairs stand up on his neck before anything, striking and icy, too similar to the seconds before a demodog leaps from the fog. A rough hand gripped his neck and the collar of his shirt. It’s a little sad from the smell of smoke, cheap cologne and sweat alone he knows it’s Billy.

Steve figured the blonde asshole would seek him out in one way or another. He was just surprised there wasn’t a crowd.

“I will snap your fucking neck right now don’t tempt me, Harrington,” Billy growled.

He believes it.

Billy slammed him against the cement. They’re in the back corner by the janitor’s closet and book storage. The only sound other than Billy’s rough breathing is the lunch that falls from Steve’s hand.

“I. Hate. You.” Billy didn't have more eloquent words for the older boy. How much he hated him had stayed a constant record all weekend.

This is all his fault.

Steve looked up into Billy’s burning eyes. To say Steve was certain he's going to die in the dusty go-between the janitors’ closet and book storage would be an understatement. “You...dense piece of shit, I fucking hate you. So much,” he growled.

Billy looked into dark brown eyes, flecked with gold.

A big fucking mistake, honestly. His hands started to tremble.

Knowing that Steve has never been afraid of him, pissed off Billy more than he can put into words. He avoided him like everyone with a goddamn brain, but afraid?

Not Harrington.

No. Not this thin, Bambi eyed thorn in his mother fucking side.

The only reason Steve, with all his low self-esteem bullshit, can keep eye contact with him is because he’s not afraid of Billy. He lets him see it in the way his lips curl into a gross sneer. “Did you have to drag me into a corner just to tell me that?” He hissed. Steve shoved against him in an attempt to get free. Billy forced back against the wall again, this time he gripped his collar tighter.

"Is this how you say ‘thank you’?” He scowled at him. “Can’t really say that I’m appreciating it.”

I try my hardest to attend to every one of your needs and this is how you say ‘thank you’? Your mother always says you’re a bit too spoiled for your own good and I’m starting to think she’s right.

Something cold settles over his skin and heat rises under his eyes. “Thank you…?” Billy forced the lump that's growing large in his throat. “Are you fucking…I’m not thanking you for shit. You fucked up so bad and you don't even know it.”

"Pretty sure I know," he said. "You're holding me up against a wall telling me about it."

Looking into Harrington's eyes became impossible for the same reason he usually has such shitty eye contact, he can see everything. They say the eyes are the windows to the soul and all that shit, and Harrington has a very sad soul.

The fire in him went out and he lowered the slightly taller boy back to the ground. “God, you're
such a piece of shit.” His vision turned watery with tears and he’ll be damned if he cries in front of Steve Harrington for the second time in less than a week.

“Billy--Fuck! Ow!” The heel of the younger boy’s booted foot swiftly kicked him in the shin. He let go of Steve’s shirt and bolted down the hall while he was distracted.

Steve rubbed his leg tenderly where Billy kicked him. He’s pretty sure Billy Hargrove just teared up in front of him.

He knew for sure he just kicked him like an unruly toddler.

“What the hell…”

He gathered up his lunch. He’s a little glad now he’s been ordered to eat lunch with Nancy and Jonathan. Nancy will probably resist the urge to march over to wherever Billy’s situated himself today and give him a piece of her mind. He can’t imagine Jonathan will care at all about this new dramatic bullshit going on between him and Billy Hargrove.

“You’re surprised?” Nancy the killer queen asked. He felt a little guilty about calling her one of Billy’s nicknames, but it’s accurate. She’s a killer (of Demogorgon and chemistry tests) and an absolute queen.

She brought the slice of pizza up to her mouth and bit in, Steve was the one that finally got her to stop cutting it up into neat little squares, it’s so... square. Unlike their relationship, the habit stuck.

“No…” Steve tried to keep the question out of his voice.

“Steve, he’s always had it out for you,” she said.

After finding out about Saturday’s party she asked him to sit with her and Jonathan which Steve really did appreciate, truly.

Nancy’s being protective of him like she can get sometimes and it’s sweet.

Okay, it’s not sweet. He hates it, a lot.

“I’m aware,” Steve bit back. The whole conversation hasn’t done shit for his mood and his morning started off pretty okay. “But you didn’t see him.” He wishes he had someone that could see what he saw, like a little tape recorder in his brain that he could pull out and show her.

Nancy blinked. “Are you defending him?”

“What?” Fuck. “No!” Steve shook his head definitively. “It’s just…he really hates me…more than usual.”

“Let it happen,” Jonathan said suddenly and very much so from behind his book like he can read and talk at the same time. “If he wants to be a weeping mess, it’s not our problem.”

Steve’s lips pulled into a scowl at the other boy, the one time he wanted Jonathan to shut his mouth and mind his own business he suddenly can’t. “It’s not our problem, it’s my problem.”

How come Will and Joyce are so great and then there’s just... him.

Jonathan remained more or less unaffected by Steve’s snide comment or the withering look he sent
him, “I’m just saying you don’t have any ties to him, just let it go.”

Nancy sighed. Steve already knows what she’s going to say, he’s right.

“He has a point. It was nice of you to make sure he got home safe which is more than he would do for you,” she grimaced. “Don’t think you have to make him your responsibility just because of some crocodile tears.”

Despite what Nancy might think Steve does hear her, loud and clear. She’s right, but he was drugged and humiliated—nobody deserves that—and it seems to be hurting him more than anyone anticipated. The pain in his eyes was so startlingly evident that split second before he turned away from him that it sent an aching chill through Steve’s body. He narrowly misses his own sorrowful look in the reflection more often than not.

But it’s still Billy Hargrove.

“I know, it was just weird seeing him cry. I—” Steve shifted on the lunch bench the words ‘I’m going to try and find him’ trembled in his mouth, maybe he’d just leave lunch a little early. If he runs into him he does and if not then that’s fine too. “He keeps saying he hates me.”

“Hmm,” Jonathan mumbled, “you almost make it sound like he didn’t before.” Steve resisted the urge to kick the boy’s shin under the lunch table. Maybe Billy was on to something with it.

“He’s been gunning for you since the Halloween party,” Nancy said like she was sober enough to remember any of it. She scoffed, “you’d think he’s had enough of you by now.”

Yeah, but that was different, Steve thought. In a few days he’s become more than Billy’s dead plaything. He doesn’t hate him, Billy probably despises him, probably thinks he’s trash, probably can’t stand him for whatever his reasons are, but Billy doesn’t hate him. At least, it never felt like unabashed hate and it certainly doesn’t now. “Okay, but I helped him out and now he hates me worse? That doesn’t make any sense.” Steve said. “Can you at least admit that it’s weird?”

“There’ve been stranger things,” Jonathan said inconsequentially.

“It’s weird,” Nancy conceded, there’s a ‘but’ that’s going to come along with that. “But, it’s just stupid high school crap. it’ll blow over as soon as the next big break up happens,” she said. like she isn’t a junior in high school.

This would be where he would remind her she is in high school and that she needs to live a little. Steve nodded and took a large bite of the sandwich Mrs. Henderson made him. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Nancy didn’t want to hear that and Steve’s already made up his mind.

Billy shoved a cigarette between his lips and smoked between angry bites of his apple.

“Smooth, Hargrove,” Billy muttered to himself, “like fucking sand paper.”

Then again, he went in half-cocked anyway, what was he supposed to say? Hi, you’re stuck in my fucking head? How’s your day been? By the way Mary Mother of God, you’re one of the saddest sacks of shit I’ve ever met? What’s up Harrington? You’re stuck in my head and your unchecked emotions are slowly killing me, what the fuck do I do?
Because all of those would go over award-winningly well.

He sat crossed leg on the hood of his car, which was the only thing that seemed serene so far today. The weather wasn’t bitingly cold, the sky was cloudless and robin egg blue and the field dividing the high school and the middle school was starting to look greener, spotted with tiny white and yellow flowers.

Billy watched everything with an absent mind and chewed slowly.

“I thought I’d...uh...I figured you were probably out here,” Harrington said. “It’s quiet.”

It was quiet.

He sighed until it turned into more of a groan in agony. God won’t even let him watch the grass grow without sticking a pointed spear up his ass. Billy didn’t turn around, he could hear Steve’s shoes crackling along the gravel until he was standing just out of his peripheral vision.

“Come back to finish what we started, Harrington?” Billy flicked ash onto the ground. “I’m on lunch break, pretty boy, you’re gonna have to wait.”

He heard him snort, “Jesus.” Steve wondered why he even bothered. “I was gonna ask if you’re okay.”


“You don’t seem it,” Steve said, sounding like the annoying voice in Billy’s head.

“You know what? You’re right,” he chuckled sourly. “I’d love to sit down and have a pow-wow and talk about my feelings, Harrington. Sounds lovely, my place or yours? We can invite the whole school.”

There was a beat of silence, while Billy bit into his sandwich. Harrington must be in a good mood, Billy noticed while having him up against a wall he didn’t look like shit. He’s definitely not in a good mood anymore. “So, if I take a step closer, what’s the likelihood you’re gonna punch me?”

“High,” Billy threatened.

“Okay,” he could practically hear the shrug in Steve’s voice, “then I’ll just stand here, at least you don’t have a plate.”

A breath of smoke came out with his small laugh. It figures there’s no overwhelming urge to get down on his hands and knees and apologize to Steve because God forbid he do anything nice for himself. “Lucky for you.”

He heard the shifting of gravel behind him again, Steve’s feet wiggling around again, he’s probably got his arms wrapped around himself—a habit Billy’s adopted now too. “This isn’t awkward at all.”

“No one told you to come out here.”

“Well, no--”

“But you just want to help,” Billy cut him off, sneering. “Because that’s what King Steve does,” he said coolly. Steve watched the other boy’s shoulders drop slightly. “Look, I’ve got it handled. So take your ‘I just wanna help’ and shove it up your ass, okay?” Unfortunately, Billy already knows
how much of a stubborn, persistent motherfucker Steve can be when he wants to. He thinks Nancy’s hardheaded? He’s been throwing stones in a glass house.

Steve bit the inside of his cheek while he thought. He looked around the empty parking lot, in hindsight, if Billy did leap off his car and beat the shit out of him no one would be around to stop him. Nancy and Jonathan will call him an idiot for this--if they find out. “I’m not going to try to help you, I don’t owe you anything, but you owe me answers,” he decided to say.

“I don’t owe you shit,” he hissed back, smoke came out of his nostrils like a dragon.

“Yeah, no, I think you do,” Steve said, all bitchy. It made Billy chuckle a little, he’s just like his mom. “You’re acting like I murdered your dog. Fuck, man, what happened that I don’t get?”

Some real science fiction shit Harrington, some real Arthur C. Clarke shit, but you’re probably already used to that.

If he told Steve, the sad part is, he knew he’d believe him with the right bit of evidence.

Billy sighed. “I got it handled. You can clear your precious conscious, white knight. You’ve been absolved.” That’s a lie, he won’t ever be able to look at him the same. He knew too much.

Something in Billy’s chest stutters, whenever he thinks about all he knows now.

“I don’t think I have been,” Steve said seriously, his eyes darkened. He could hear his feet traveling over the gravel until he was standing in front of him. “Otherwise you’d look at me.”

Right, because Steve Harrington can barely read a pamphlet without getting distracted, but holy hell can he read people. Billy glared at the grass, a little surprised the whole field hasn’t combusted from his intense gaze. “And here I was starting to think you could go on without me, you jonesing for my attention this bad?”

“You’re not looking at me,” he said firmly.

Billy smirk, it curled sick and cruel on his face. “Yeah, I know how being ignored gets you all worked up.”

He saw Steve start to object. He could practically feel the resounding ‘fuck you’ coming of him.

Saved by the bell. The end of lunch rung out from inside the school. Billy rocked off the front of the car. He shoved Steve hard onto the asphalt and kept a foot on his chest. From the way he landed he probably busted his elbow on the rocks.

Serves him right, honestly.

“I know you’re pretty good at pretending everything’s fine, so do us both a favor and leave me alone,” he spat down at him, each word sounded like it’s own special curse.

Billy stepped off of him and went back to the school, very much so like nothing at all had happened between them. Steve sat up and watched Billy trudge away, he was right it did bother him.

A lot.

Too much.

As far as their encounters go he shouldn’t have expected anything but this, it always ends this way;
feet sliding over gravel, his back to the ground, words that chill him to the bone hanging over him, and a sick feeling in his stomach.

Chapter End Notes

Lol these two! Poor Steve honestly, but what could he have expected? In the original copy of this, they weren't supposed to talk to each other after the party until chapter six! SIX! But I moved it up because I thought it was more important for them to reunite than for the subplot (because hoo boy there's a subplot) begin. I hope you enjoyed it and thanks for tuning in to this fresh nonsense!
IV. Part 1

Chapter Summary

Max and Billy 'bond.' The Party is pretty sure an old enemy is back in town and Billy looks around in Steve's memories a little more.

Chapter Notes

This one is a long one like...as you can see it's a two-parter because a lot of important things happen. I tried reworking it (and reworking it and reworking it and reworking it), we'll see if it's any better or if I completely destroyed this chapter beyond repair. I'm pretty happy with it even after I let it sit for...two weeks (final exams are a bitch). Part 2 will be up later today since this all counts as one long chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“As promised, sir,” Billy sneered when they got home. He placed them in his dad’s open palm. “How long’s this supposed to last anyway?” He asked.

Max watched her step-father do that little jaw jiggle he does when he’s upset with Billy and honestly, he’s always upset with Billy for one thing or another. “If you’re going to take that tone with me I think until Easter should work.”

Max winced.

“That’s all of spring break!”

He seemed unaffected by the news or worse like he knew. Her step-father’s eyes shifted to her for a moment, both children know what the man is about to say: “I think we’ll have this discussion later.”

For Max, it always means when she’s not around, she’s smart enough to know that now. He always tells her she doesn’t need to be around for the discussions that go on between him and his son, but Max can hear the yelling through the walls--usually Billy. Things get quiet after that and stay quiet for the rest of the night and the morning too. The only thing not quiet is the crackling electricity that hangs around her step-brother.

She rolled her eyes when Neil’s gaze left her, she stalked over the refrigerator and fixed herself a handful of baby carrots in a small cup. Billy can’t stand when his father starts playing enforcer. She thinks it probably sucks a ton, his punishments really do suck, but he’s such an asshole he deserves everything he gets.

Max took her carrots and bit down on one loudly, leaving the kitchen behind her entirely.

Billy’s jaw screwed tight. “Yes, sir.”
Neil flipped the newspaper over and continued reading which was clearly a dismissal in both of their eyes.

Billy tried not to slam door to him room. He gripped his hair, yanking on it. A sliver of fear curled itself in his gut and kept pulling, begging to be acknowledged like an unruly child. Today’s been shit and it crashed over him as soon as he closed door, he hurled the closest thing he could grab--a book--across the room. It hit the wall with a heavy thunk and fell to the floor unsatisfyingly and half open.

He paced the small length of his room thinking so hard his brain started throbbing in his head, a headache has been building with tension, ebbing and flowing throughout the day like the tide.

It’s a very Steve Harrington related headache, full of unchecked emotions and anxiety and now accompanied with the desperate itch to jump out of his own skin.

His breaths came out in short bursts, pacing picking up speed. His room in California was so much bigger, he could actually pace.

He took one step...

Two

Three

Four

Five.

And then he turned around.

Hell, it’s not like they’re rich or anything but at least his old room in California could normally accommodate a seventeen year old. This room isn't even a real bedroom, it’s an office with a closet. It's a cage. Billy squeezed his eyes shut and kept thinking--couldn't shut his mind off. Steve can’t control his own panic, never could, it always takes something-- someone --to snap him out of it.

But Billy didn’t have Nancy, not that he wanted her.

He was alone in this like he's alone in almost everything else.

But does have a toad up step-sister that would always be his ticket out of the house. As much as Maxine’s a brat, she's his golden ticket and always will be. He rubbed his damp hands onto his jeans and stuffed them in his pocket to hide the shaking.

Max was lying on her stomach with the comic book Will let her borrow unfurled in front of her. Those punks were really starting to turn her into a grade-A geek. “Hey dipshit, you want to go to the arcade,” Billy said. He wasn’t asking her, he was telling her, whether she liked it or not she was getting him out of this house. “You forgot, you want to go to the arcade and your little nerd friends are meeting you there,” he hissed.

She blinked owlishly. “What?”

“You want to go to the arcade,” he insisted.

Max usually catches on quick, this time, she kept blinking up at him like a dumb red haired cow.
For the first time in a while, Billy thought she looked like Susan—she’s slowly like this most of the time.

“No, I don’t,” she said finally.

_For Christ’s sake._

“Yeah, you do.” His patience has thinned to the width of a spider’s web, which might as well be nothing. The strand dangling desperately keeping him together is some mix between Harrington and his own shattered pride. “I need to get out of here. Alright?” He caved. It felt like if he stayed in the house any longer he’d fucking crumble to pieces. “I’ll take you out wherever the fuck you wanna go as long as I get out of here.”

Okay, maybe not _wherever._

Max blinked again like that’s all she can do. She stared up at her step-brother if the person in front of her even is Billy. He barely even looks like him. She swallowed, “I...I want to go to the arcade?” She scoffed. “What are you even saying? You’re grounded so now you want to use me as your ticket out, is that it?”

She’s pretty sure he’s cracking up if he actually thinks she’ll help him; he must be cracking up to be this desperate to ask. He’s never done this before and he gets his keys taken away all the time.

“Go away, Billy,” she turned back to her comic book, dismissing him.

“That’s what I’m tryna do, in case you haven’t noticed.” Billy knew he was pleading, his prided shriveled up and died when Steve Harrington took control. Steve Harrington can’t stand the inside of his house for long on a bad day like today.

And Billy did have a very bad day.

Max stared at him, it, whatever this thing in front of her is. Even if she hated Billy, it’s not like she could pass up the opportunity of a free ride anywhere. She knew not to look a gift horse entirely in the mouth. “Okay,” she nodded. “You can take me out.”

She could see the relief wash over him.

_Weird._

“Jesus, it’s not like it’s life or death,” she shut the comic book.

“Shut up,” Billy hissed like it was.

Max pushed off her bed. She stuffed a small number of things namely her walkie into her backpack and grabbed her skateboard. It’s new after Billy broke her old one, even Neil agreed it’s dangerous for her to be riding around on a broken board. For Christmas they shelled out enough for a new one.

“What’s that for?” Billy asked.

She answered honestly, “just in case I want to get away from you, you’re annoying.” Max didn’t wait for him to answer, she marched back into the kitchen and stopped in front of Neil. He works odd hours, something Max noticed and Billy seems to hate. Sometimes he’s gone for weekends, other times he’s home all day and leaves at night or vice versa. For now, Max assumed he’s working nights and staying home during the day for however long.
“I’m supposed to go over the Wheeler’s,” she said. The arcade wasn’t a good enough excuse to be so sudden, let alone forgotten.

Neil looked up at her from the day’s newspaper, “again?” He asked like it wasn’t normal for children to go over another another child's house to hang out.

Max nodded. “We’ve been working on our project for AV Club.”

He snorted. Neither he or her mother are too happy she’s in AV Club, even though they don’t know what audiovisual club is. They just know it doesn’t sound like something a girl her age should be a part of, her mom suggested she try out for junior cheer or chorus instead.

To this day Max still gags a little.

She didn’t know why she hadn’t thought that Neil would just take her himself, but evidently, he can’t be bothered, or he’s going to work soon. As Billy emerged around the corner like a shadow, he produced the keys from his pocket and handed them to his pale, quite obviously not okay son without a second glance.

Max wrinkled her nose, even she noted something is clearly wrong with him. When Susan is around, she notices everything, Max could be a slight ‘off-shade’ and she’d pick up on it.

Neil glowered at him. “I want you both home in time for dinner,” he said, a punishment in his tone, although Max is aware the threat it isn’t meant for her.

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

Billy followed Max out of the house and into the Camaro. The afternoon chilled the day while the sky had turned a bit gray and looked to be growing darker. There was just the rumbling sound of air and Metallica thrumming angrily at an unreasonable volume.

She reached forward turning the music down, which might be the most dangerous thing she’s ever done. “Do that again and I snap your fucking wrist,” he growled.

Max sucked the front of her teeth, still shocked she was alive to be doing so in front of him, still shocked her arm wasn’t twisted at some awful angle. Billy doesn’t usually add a ‘do that again’ to his threats.

“ Weird. “

“I wanna talk to you,” she said when Billy glared daggers at her. It never occurred to her until now to ask what he was doing in the woods anyway and that was worth asking about. It’s not exactly like Billy’s been known to enjoy nature or anything. “I’m doing you a favor so…” she said like she could reason with Billy ‘the Neanderthal’ Hargrove. “You could at least…” she trailed off realizing how likely it was, Billy was going to snap at her. He’d probably go on about how much gas money she owes him, and how much of a fucking cow she is; so she just stopped altogether.

“Don’t feel like talking,” that goes to Maxine and Steve Harrington who she seemed to be emulating quite well on this gross, misty, shit of a day. Billy turned the radio back up, even higher, which Max didn’t think was possible.

“What happened to you?” She yelled.

Billy offered her his middle finger as a response
Max pursed her lip. Whoever told her having a sibling would be cool can choke on a thousand toads, honestly. They were a liar and when she finds them she will light their pants on fire with a smile.

“You’re acting weird!” She tried again.

This time he did turn the volume down. He scowled, “don’t know what the fuck you mean, twerp.”

“You’re different.”

The only reason Billy even decided to deign the little gremlin with a response was because of her big fat fucking mouth. The last thing he needed was for her to go running around the house screaming about how he hasn’t been feeling well and that he’s acting all weird and not himself. Neil would fucking love that.

“Let’s not do this Maxine, you sound real fucking stupid acting like you care or some shit,” his voice is cool, the first time he’s sounded like himself all day to her. “You’re gonna have to wise up real fucking soon, can’t be a dumb cow forever.”

Which is the fucking truth because the world is a cruel hunk of shit in case she hasn’t noticed. One of the reasons they’re stuck together in a shit state like Indiana is because the world is a cruel hunk of dirt.

Max’s cheeks flushed. He said the same thing to her that month in California, against his warning she did get her hopes up that things would get back and she would have a really cool older step-brother. She’s not falling for it this time. “I said you’re different, that doesn’t mean I care.”

“Shit,” he drawled. “You are catching on, small fucking miracles.”

She slouched in her seat, glaring out the windshield. “I don’t want to go to the arcade,” she huffed with her pissy princess face on and her arms crossed.

*For the love of God…*

He honestly didn’t care as long as she didn’t say back home. “Fine, Maxine, where the hell do wanna go?” Billy said. The Hawkins air was sweet and cloying with precipitation, it still smells like cowshit. He’s disgusted by the fact that he’s starting to get used to it or maybe it’s just Steve Harrington who’s been inhaling this shit all his life.

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” he emphasized, somewhere along the lines he knew for sure Max had stopped comprehending words like a normal human being. “Where the fuck you wanna go? I’m not driving around in circles,” he said.

He would as long as he didn’t have to go home.

“Twin Kiss, the ice cream place,” she said.

Billy lamented his whole goddamn life that he got a bitch for a little step sister. “You really trying to ruin your appetite on purpose?” he groused. He looked at the cloudy sky, irritated by the misting it was producing. Not enough to turn on his wipers, just enough to be a nuisance. “It ain’t even ice cream weather.”
Weather and eating don't have a relationship,” she insisted.

Yeah, but I don’t see you eating soup in the summer,” he said hotly. “Or popsicles in the winter.”

Max frowned, her lips pouted even further if possible, she was back to imitating Harrington again.

“Yeah, but...that’s...that’s different.”

He snorted, having out-smarted her, “sure it is, fuckhead.”

What a new fucking development in this relationship. He can’t remember the last time Maxine allowed herself to show disappointment or even frustration on her face. Maybe sometime before November, maybe even longer.

They’re bonding. Isn’t that what this is?

Billy eyed her suspiciously, could practically see some plan churning in her wind-tangled orange hair. “I’m taking you to get your ice cream and you’re gonna shut your mouth, got it?”

He’s not bonding with this little shit.

No fucking way.

~oo0oo~

He’s more than pissed off that he knew what Max wanted to order without asking her and honestly, he didn’t want shit. It’s too goddamn ugly outside for ice cream, or smiling, or, like, living.

Billy hated Steve Harrington and his dramatic bullshit.

She was outside, because she’s fucking weird, using some quarters she had stashed in her pocket to talk to God knows who on the payphone outside. Billy got her her stupid orange cream float and sat down at one of the little square tables. He watched the ugly orange mixture fizzle and melt in its white paper cup, it looks like Max--orange and ghastly pale.

The jingle of the bell above the door announced Max’s entrance. She eyed the cup with her nose wrinkling a little.

“This the shit you eat, right?” He already knew it was. He didn’t miss the miffed look the pissy blonde behind the cash register sent him. Max eased herself down into the chair. Her hair was damp from the misting and Billy suspected her clothes probably were too. There’s no fucking way he’s letting her get into his car like that.

“Yeah,” she said slowly. “How’d you know?”

“I got you your ice cream,” Billy said. “Time to shut the fuck up and eat it.”

“Yeah but--Hey!”

Billy snatched the cup back and held it away from her. “Can’t have your ice cream and eat it too, Maxine,” his grin was wolfish and cruel.

“Fine,” she huffed. “Can you take me to Mike’s house? I actually have to go over there now.”

Something told him that’s probably why she was on the phone, fucking idiot, he shouldn’t have let her wander off.

“Why?” His lips curled.
“We’re planning a birthday party for Will,” Max said. “You know...Will Byers.”

Max expected some sort of agitated look from Billy and she got one, but not the exasperated ‘my step sister is spoiled brat’ look. “So what? I get you ice cream and you lie to me?”

Unfortunately, Billy knew too much of Will Byers as of late thanks to Steve. Fortunately, he knew the kid’s birthday was March 22nd and they’d already had a party and Steve had way too much cake. That asshole’s gonna rot his motherfucking teeth for sure either that or get type two diabetes by the time he’s twenty-five.

“I--” Max looked away from him, she blew a big chunk of her hair out of her face.

He was tempted to ask her if it was the Upside Down just to see her eyes bug out of her head, but that’s just as dangerous as knowing about it. Billy kept his mouth twisted in an expectant scowl. “Well?”

“Fine,” she huffed. “We’re just playing D&D, I didn’t want you to make fun of me. It’s annoying.”

Which is technically true, they were, but that wasn’t why she called Lucas.

There was nothing about the person in front of her that she trusted. Sure, Billy was being nicer to her than he’s been in months, but where she used to think he was turning a new leaf, he was right, she needed to grow up and catch on.

It’s terrifying seeing him without his anger, but it won’t last.

Billy snorted. “Too late you fucking dork,” he sniffed. He looked down at his watch, they had a while before dinner, “yeah, I can take you over there.” Billy knew he wasn’t going to stick around. He had too much on his mind and with his car keys that meant he could go wherever he wanted.

“I’m done now,” Max sounded all bitchy and pissed off with her lips pursed. “Can I have my melted ice cream?”

“Sure,” Billy grinned lazy and reassured that he was in charge of his annoying toad of a step-sister. “Course you can,” he said. The cup slid back to Max at the other end of the surprisingly small table. If Billy was entirely in control of himself he would send it right over the lip of the table into her lap, but Harrington says ‘no’ and that’s a waste of cash anyway. “Eat up, troll.” Apparently, 'cow’ was too mean.

Her lip curled.

Billy laughed cruelly, head tilted back like a TV show villain.

Fuck!

Maybe this is still bonding.

He couldn’t help it, Harrington made him want to do it.

He dropped her off at the Wheeler’s when she was satisfied with the amount of sugar she’d had pumping through her system which included another orange cream float. He knew Susan would tut at dessert before dinner, a young lady shouldn’t eat so much anyway is what she insisted, but Billy didn’t care. He owed the toadstool and she knew well enough to keep her mouth shut about pre-dinner desserts.
“Listen,” he said just as she got out of the car, “get Harrington to take you home, I got places to go.”

He needed to clear his goddamn head of the day and the last twenty minutes and if possible find some sort peace between him and the wet noodle named Steve Harrington hanging to his brain.

A little divot formed between her eyebrows, “where are you going?”

He missed the days when she wouldn’t ask questions. She used to storm out of his Camaro with a huff, an ‘okay’ and the choice use of her middle finger. Billy missed those days, really, he really completely did.

However, Steve Harrington says otherwise. Because Harrington knows better than Billy and Harrington knows there’s a part of him that’s pleased that someone cares what the fuck he does no matter how much of a nuisance it’ll be for him later.

A smile, Cheshire cat in its nature, pulled across Billy’s face completely involuntarily. “Ask no questions and I tell no lies, Mad Max,” he said, like a complete and total dork.

*Stupid goddamn dork of all trades Steve Harrington.*

Max blinked at Billy’s rather civil response. If he could he would punch Harrington in the fucking face, he would. He tried to summon up all the sense of self he had left. “Get the fuck outta my car and go play your piece of shit nerd game.”

She flipped him off.

Billy peeled out Loch Nora as loud as possible, his tire squealed fast against the pavement and he was gone.

“Hey!” Lucas’s head popped out the Wheeler’s door. He looked after Billy’s car warily. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Max watched the spout of the street where her step-brother disappeared into the wooded roads of Indiana. She’ll always be more afraid of him than what’s in there. “Yeah,” her lips pressed into a thin smile. “I’ll tell you guys about it later.”

She shouldered her bag and trudged inside to Wheeler’s home.

~oo0oo~

“He’s just acting weird,” Max shook her head and put another Oreo in her mouth. “He apologized to me on Sunday and then he was all weird today too. He took me out for ice cream just before I got here. He called me Mad Max”

“Billy took you out for ice cream?” Dustin gawked. “That’s so not fair!”

“You guys make it sound like he isn’t smart enough for an ulterior motive,” Will said. “Why would he get you ice cream?”

He’d never personally met Max’s step-brother, but he knew he had a list of rules. Run if you see a blue Camaro, run of if you hear heavy metal coming from a car, don’t engage with him at all under any circumstance--it could be life or death. Billy is a mean meatheaded Neanderthal worse than Troy and he decimated Steve’s face ‘like the Death Star to Alderon’ so Dustin says.
“He just...I don’t know, something’s wrong with him. He was really shaky,” she said softly, to say it scared her would be too honest even for the Party. “Max gnawed on her lip until it felt raw and rubbed a hand along her arm, “he’s just being weird. I think...I heard his dad tell my mom he was out in the woods and something happened to him on Saturday.”

Dustin’s eyes widened, “do think it was the Gate? Do you think something got him?”

“I don’t know,” Max’s face scrunched up. She barely knows anything about the Gate, she’s not El or Will. Besides, everyone said the gate was closed. “Look, he’s just not angry anymore, and he’s weirder than usual,” she said.

That’s what scared her the most, Billy isn’t angry.

Defensive, yes.

A dick, always.

But her step-brother isn’t angry, he’s more protective of himself than she’s ever seen. She never realized how cracked up and spilling out he was until he shut it all down. “He’s not himself, he’s not...Billy.”

“That sounds like a good thing to me,” Lucas said.

"Yeah, I thought so too." Max scoffed at herself, shook her head. She was just being stupid then. "But what if something got to him?"

“Does he like the cold?”

“I don’t know...it’s...I don’t know,” All she knew was that every last thing about being around Billy felt wrong, and not like it usually does. “When I talk to him it feels like I’m talking to him, but not always. Sometimes it’s like...like someone else is there too. I don’t know maybe something else.”

“Let’s just keep tabs on him...from a distance,” Lucas suggested, based on Max’s pinched eyebrows and pale face she needed something grounding like answers or a plan.

“Will,” Mike turned to him, “what do you think?”

Will had gone especially quiet, he’d gone a little pale like Max too. Ever since November, they tried to keep things as normal as possible, but even they knew it wouldn’t last forever. Still, it’s all been baby steps. Max wondered if she should’ve brought it up after he left, but Will wouldn’t like that either and Mike would probably let her knew about it in an instant. “I think we should stay wary and if...if it’s really something we tell El and Hopper.”

“For now, we keep it between us,” Mike added with an affirmed nod. “Until we’re absolutely sure.”

They nodded in agreement.

“*No one else,*” Lucas said eyeing Dustin.

Dustin looked affronted, he sputtered for a minute. “Wha--? Why’re you looking at *me* like that.”

Lucas scoffed. “Because you can’t keep a secret to save your life! You tell Steve *everything*!”

Dustin looked like he was about to object. “He knows about your Emma Frost obsession, dude,
Steve Harrington might as well be your human diary."

Dustin started to object, his mouth even opened. It shut for a second and opened again. “Son of a bitch, you’re right!”

“So, are we settled? No one knows about this until we’re sure something Upside Down related is going on,” Mike insisted. “Not my sister, not Jonathan or Mrs. Byers, not Steve. We have to be absolutely sure.” They nodded in agreement again. “Max, keep track of anything weird if something super weird happens walkie us, if not we’ll go over a plan asap.”

Lucas snorted, “why does she have to?”

“Because she lives with him, dingus!” Mike shouted. He shook his head in disbelief, “What sort of question is that?”

“He’s dangerous!” He insisted. “He’s a psychopath!”

Max rolled her eyes, “I can take care of myself and besides he’s...sick or something. It’s not just him acting weird, he’s really pale and...gross,” her nose wrinkled. “He said it himself, he’s in pain and really scared or something. He’s, like, weak.”

Will looked at her with a haunted look in his eyes, something unsettled sat in her stomach when he turned to her. “Like the Mind Flayer would be right now,” he said. “It...it was hurt when it left, it was scared of El.”

“Tell us everything you notice,” Dustin said, darkly. “This is serious.”

“If he starts to forget who people are,” Mike added. “Run, just run.”

Max nodded. As if Billy wasn’t awful enough as is, now he could be infected with some creature from the Upside Down.

Great.

Chapter End Notes

Like I said I really struggled with this whole big chapter, but I think it turned out okay enough for me to be happy with it. Thanks for reading!! I hope you enjoyed it :)
Chapter Summary

Part 2 as promised!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the midst of everything, she forgot Billy told her she needed to ask Steve for a ride home. He never says no anyway, it just seems odd in light of everything.

Dustin and Max slid into the back of Steve’s car making him do a little bit of a double-take.

“I need a ride home,” Max supplied for Steve. “I was supposed to ask you earlier, but you weren’t here.” When Steve gave her an odd look, Max averted her eyes to the window.

“Okay,” he turned back to the front. So is your step-brother still a crying mess? Steve’s pretty sure that’s not an appropriate question to ask. “How’d the troll ass kicking go?”

Dustin sighed, “I already told you, Steve that’s not how Dungeons and Dragons works. We didn't even play Dungeons and Dragons for that long.”

“Well, what’d you do then?” Steve asked.

Max would’ve elbowed Dustin for being so stupid if it didn’t look so obvious. They had a perfectly good cover. “We worked on AV club stuff, we've got a project, we spent most of the day brainstorming.” Max lied. It’s better than the ‘Mormons’ lie, which she still can write down as the worst lie she’s ever told.

“Yeah, our brains were really storming,” Dustin added encouragingly.

Idiot.

Steve didn’t look to be any the wiser, “if you need any help with it, let me know. I mean, I don’t know what I could help with, but still...the offer is there.” A very Steve answer.

“We have it covered,” Max said. “Thanks.”

“It’s what I do,” he said with a shrug. “Old Cherry Lane right?”

She nodded.

Steve was grateful when Dustin and Max started talking about Dig Dug. Their houses are in opposite direction, he wasn’t going to enjoy being alone in the car with Max, not with that look on her face whenever the talking died down.

When they reached Dustin’s house all the way back in the woods, Mrs. Henderson was waiting, holding Mews II in her arms, looking pleased. She waved from the door and ushered him inside.

Steve’s pretty sure the wariness has to do with what happened at Lori’s party, what with Billy only
resurfacing today. It’s eerily familiar to the town and it put everyone on edge.

At least he knows that Hopper got Billy home, what happened after that is still up in the air.

Max got into the passenger seat and reached forward 20 seconds into driving and turned on the radio. “Nice to control the radio for once, huh?” Steve tried his best to sound friendly. To put on a pleasant air of charm for a little while longer until his curiosity becomes unbearable.

Her lips pursed, “as long as my ears aren’t ringing.” The music actually never bothered her, it’s how loud it is. Billy can damage his ears all he wants. “I still want to be able to hear when I’m fifty.”

It was Steve’s turn to snort a little. Billy thinks short term. Which is honestly the most poetic thing he’s ever thought regarding Billy Hargrove. “Life’s short, or at least that’s what all the old people without hearing say.” Steve’s throat worked, Max looked far off in thought and he wondered where her brain was taking her. The headlights of passing cars flashed against her pale blue eyes. “So speaking of short lives…” he started. “How’s your step-brother?”

She whipped around so quickly to look at him he’s surprised she didn’t give herself whiplash, her red hair went flying. “W-what?”

It occurred to Steve then that maybe he shouldn't have mentioned 'short lives,' considering it's Billy and how odd he's been recently. Or maybe Max didn't know anything. It’d be one thing for her not to care, but they got home late, and presumably, she and Billy avoid each other like the plague. “We were at the same party, on uh...Saturday--”

Max blinked. Steve knows something. “You were with him the whole time?”

Steve looked back at her, she’s eyeing him with appraisal like she’s trying to gauge something. “I mean...not the whole time--”

“Were you with him in the woods?”

“Yeah, but--”

“Did anything weird happen?”

“What do you mean ‘did anything weird happen’? What are you trying to figure out?”

Her shoulders hiked up to her ears, slackened and she slouched back in the chair. “Nothing,” she pouted. “Just wondering, he’s been weird all day. I was wondering if...I dunno something happened?”

Oh yeah, a lot happened, for one he could not stop crying.

“No really,” Steve lied. Even if he hadn’t seen Billy a crying, sobbing mess, he’d hate to explain getting forcibly drugged and all that that entails and implies to a thirteen year old. “I was with him most of the time in the woods, I sort of lost him in the beginning.”

She seemed to be taking this in, he could see the cogs in her little redhead churning. “For how long?”

“How long?” Steve’s lips puttered. Weird question. “I guess a couple minutes, maybe a handful. I wasn’t keeping track.”
She nodded, her brain still chugging away. “Okay.”

“So is he alright? He was kind of weird at school today,” Steve asked. He never thought he’d ever ask if Billy Hargrove, jerk of all trades, is doing okay.

“He’s tired,” Max wasn’t sure what to say. “I think he’s catching something.”

_Tired and sick._ Steve knew it was a lie, but it’s not exactly like he could call bullshit on Max. He was trying to make it seem like Billy Hargrove’s health wasn’t a big deal to him.

Billy Hargrove’s health _is not_ a big deal

Okay, I was just asking because he was pretty...pretty worse for wear today,” Steve said, he drummed absently on the steering wheel. “Skins kind of need him.”

“What?”

Steve shook his head, “nothing, basketball.”

Max eyed him, just for a moment she looked amused. Steve was glad it was dark because his cheeks felt warm.

They pulled up to the Hargroves. It’s not an ugly home, it’s small with a warm look to it. He was a little envious of the smallness, it just seemed homier than his own.

“Thanks, Steve,” Max said.

“No problem.” He had more questions about Billy, but it’s unlikely Max could answer them. It’s even less likely he could ask them without looking like a total creep. “Stay safe.”

She nodded, “you too.”

**MEANWHILE**

He breathed in the shitty Hawkins air and hated it, with every fiber of his being. He favored the cigarette now pressed between his lips as he started walking away from the Camaro. As glad as he was to have the keys to his car back at least temporarily, he needed to walk. His mind was in too many places to drive. he knew better than to let himself wander onto Steve’s end of town. He walked deep into the woods where he knows Jim Hopper’s cabin is lurking somewhere. The man seems fatherly despite it being only him and El, it’a gruff type but Steve likes it and honestly Billy does too.

_So if you need anything, let me know._

For a minute he thought about taking the man up on his offer, but he wouldn’t know where to start. Besides, he probably won’t like the idea of another person knowing about El, let alone someone like himself.

The hill’s a damn good place to watch the shitty looking sunset still slightly smothered by rain.

Hawkins lab, a chill settled in him for reasons he can’t explain with words. Maybe he came from a place like that. He knows that Steve only associates the place with fear, hatred, and death. Billy eyed the ominous building, rising high into the pink and orange sky. Even he understands there’s nothing good about that building and all his knowledge about it is stolen. He knows that’s where
hell’s beasts are made and children are transformed into weapons. Billy sat down on the grass with his legs drawn out and his hands keeping him up from behind.

He didn’t think on it.

He tried not to think about it, but he wanted to remember as far back as he could.

His first, Maria Pasqua, a girl in his second grade class, has faded into something like the faintest outer circle of a ripple. He can’t even remember any of her memories anymore, all long forgotten when he was barely old enough to remember things about himself. He still gets echoes of her softly, a little bit of the Spanish she knew still comes in handy.

That’s the thing Billy always keeps after the personality and their thoughts cease to exist, he holds on to everything he can learn from them.

After Maria Pasqua came the doctor that squeezed his shoulder sympathetically, the one that told him his mother’s brain dead. His name was Dr. James Connors. It’d be great if Billy wanted to be a doctor, he could practically skip medical school because of him. He helps Billy treat all the wounds he has from his dad, to keep the physical scars to a minimum.

There was the guy he made out when he was fifteen, a fucking overload of knowledge on drugs, sex, rock, and roll all the good stuff he keeps with him now. He knows how to pierce ears and charm his way into and out of anything, he can thank Michael for that.

Then there was Daniel fucking Mayfield who threw a wrench into everything. Billy felt the signs that day, the buzzing under his skin that makes him feel like every last one of his cells is a livewire. He took everything in one shove, the asshole just wouldn't shut his goddamn mouth. He saw Max, Susan, all of it, in the man’s memories. That was the last straw for Neil and they moved to Hawkins, Indiana where they could start over or more aptly, where Billy could start over. Susan agreed because Daniel Mayfield was a shitstorm of emotionally absentee bullshit, and it be better for Max to stay away from the man that’s going to self-destruct.

So, Max blames the move to Hawkins on him for losing his temper and Billy blames it on her because he’s supposed to oppose Max.

They don't belong on the same side, Neil made it that way and Billy fanned the flames.

Daniel faded by time they got to Hawkins, Billy was free to say whatever he wanted to Max. He’s not half bad with computers, telephones and all that tech shit now and he’s got more than enough knowledge on fixing up cars. He really, truly thought something like this would never happen again. Then there just had to be Steve fucking Harrington, and let’s face it, Billy knew he was on a collision course with the guy from the first day he laid eyes on him and kept laying eyes on him. Poor Steve didn’t even know what hit him, he really didn't.

*That guy’s definitely not wearing underwear, what the fuck.*

Billy chuckled, oblivious from day one, how quickly he would change from just being ‘that guy’.

He decided to dig around since Steve made it impossible for him to do homework with any real success. All of his thoughts towards Billy are decidedly negative or curious, but he can live with that.

*Alright, this asshole’s staring at me and I’m not a mind reader so he better fucking speak or I’m*
done. Shut the fuck up Tommy, do I look like care if he’s the new Keg King?

Why the fuck should I care? Okay fine, fuck, forty-four seconds is pretty impressive.

Dear God, please I have too much going on right now to deal with this douchebag.

Yeah, no. No one with blonde freaking hair has eyelashes that dark. Do people in California dye their eyelashes?

Billy laughed again. Steve wondered about his fucking eyelashes? He really is a dork. A dork that thinks he has nice eyes.

If I bump into this motherfucker one more time, I’m grabbing him by his ratty hair and throwing him to the fucking ground.

Only girls pull each other by the hair like that, he used to see it all the time in California. Steve turned bitch long before they met, Billy surmised. He might keep it together, but on the inside, his brain is full of snide comments and jeers that would make him a great feature on a reality TV show. He snorted, and his hair definitely isn’t ratty.

Listening to his voice might actually give me cancer, like, it has to be toxic, right?

Billy Hargrove? You mean a literal disciple of Satan?

SHUT UP FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!

If he kills me thank God at least he can’t follow me to the afterlife.

Yeah, it’s all mean, there’s nothing good about him, but it’s all funny to him now knowing what was running through Steve’s mind at exact moments and even sometimes when he wasn’t around. And yeah, he would follow him to the afterlife just the fuck with him some more.

Did he just call me ‘pretty boy’?

For all intents and purposes, Steve convinced himself that he misheard Billy and that even if it did happen there’s no use to dwell on anything he says. Except he dwelled on it for... a while. He huffed on his bed about the whole afternoon, it was a distraction from Nancy.

Face it, Harrington, you’re officially Billy Hargrove’s play thing so just roll over, play dead and maybe he’ll let you go.

That one was recent. A week ago, when Billy shoved him down in the hall, not that anyone’s amused by it anymore except himself. It’s weird looking up at himself through Steve’s eyes. Steve thinks it’s hate in eyes and to some extent it is, the other thing, Billy not going to admit even in his own head. He loves getting a reaction out of him.

He's not proud of himself. At all.

It was like a jolt of lightening, an addict’s first hit in years. He doesn't remember what it's like to have happy memories. All the ones he has are washed with grief, his mom is a memory and all
those good things hurt now too. But with Steve all the good is gold and it glitters. He knows the
guy sleeps with a nightlight, his favorite food is fried chicken, and the color orange repulses him
for a reason that’s so old in his memory he doesn’t even know why.

He loves Duran Duran and tries to pretend he doesn't like the Thompson Twins. Tommy Hall’s
mom used to take them to Steve's then favorite place--the zoo--all the time. He loved summer
camp and fireflies. He doesn't understand football and soccer is ridiculously boring.

Billy doesn't get that jolt of bliss from anything when he looks at his own memories. He just
remembers the mom he lost and the home that's gone. He found kinship in Steve's darkest moment
too. The worst night of his life has nothing to do with the tunnels or the night Nancy left his heart
shattered in some rando’s bathroom, it’s the night he was sleepwalking.

Steve was ten and half, it was May and his birthday is in September. He thinks he was
sleepwalking when he went right over the edge of the stairs and the ground came rushing up to
meet his sleep idled body. He could feel his own arm snap under his weight, his tooth bit a gash
into his lip and he skinned his elbows, hands and knees on the tumble down.

Billy can’t process how long he laid there crying because Steve himself isn’t sure how long he laid
there, but it felt like hours stuck in a messy heap at the bottom of his stairs.

He’s never felt smaller and more forgotten than at the bottom of those stairs in his own house.
Eventually he pulled himself up and he’s so scared to move his arm, that’s all he keeps telling
himself because little Steve thinks if he moves it the bone will jut out of his skin and back then he
was so squeamish.

He was so scared of pain, physical or otherwise.

His parents left a number on the fridge of the hotel they were staying at in New York. He loves
New York and even then, he was a little mad at them they wouldn’t let him come along. He knows
they’re leaving him home more and more the older he gets.

Maria, his mother, picks up and from there it’s all tears because the pain hits him completely and
he realizes how big and scary his house is. Billy knows that feeling when it all hits you at once that
you’re all alone and in a lot of pain.

He knows that feeling all too well.

Things didn’t go as he hoped and holy hell did little Steve hope. He prayed that his parents would
stop their trip and come home, that his mother would practically scream finding out her dearest
baby broke his arm.

They didn’t.

She sighed. His father wasn’t on the phone at all, maybe he wasn’t in the know about that night.
Everything his mother said was laden with pet names and telling him ‘everything’s going to be
okay, mio caro,’ but ultimately, they weren’t coming home for another week still. She told him to
walk over to neighbors, broken arm, bloody lip and all and have them take him to the hospital.

Billy could feel Steve’s world ice over. He was never the same after that.

He never forgave them for abandoning him, Billy’s pretty sure he never will, and Mr. and Mrs.
Harrington are none the wiser how badly they hurt their son.

If Billy didn’t actually not hate him, if all his awful memories didn’t force him to feel everything
he feels, if Billy found a way to be a shittier person; he could ruin people’s lives with what he knows, he could ruin Steve’s life.

Except he doesn’t want to.

A coppery taste from the blood that seeped into his mouth and he felt a little sick to his stomach again. This time he’s pretty sure it has nothing to do with using his powers. He wiped the blood away on the back of sleeve and stood.

It would be getting dark soon and the last thing he wanted was to be stuck with Steve Harrington in his brain while alone in the woods.

~oo0oo~

By time he reached Old Cherry Lane again, the sky was black with stars. He remembered Max asking about so many helicopters like a fucking dumbass when they arrived that very first night. Billy already knew the bright twinkling balls of gas in space are just that, millions of light years away and not travelling helicopters and airplanes barely overhead.

He blew the last bit of smoke out into the sky and flicked his cigarette back onto the earth. He missed dinner, and he was definitely going to be in for it.

Neil ignored him when he came in, mostly because he was in the basement where his office resides. As much as he wished his footsteps sounded like Susan’s or Max’s, his father knew his and it would only be a matter of time. A matter of time that could be hours or minutes depending on how engrossed his father is with whatever he keeps downstairs with him.

He shrugged off Maxine to Harrington, neither respectful nor responsible brotherly behavior in anyone’s eyes. But it’s what he wanted. He wanted to clear his goddamn head for once, Billy always had a jealousy for the normalcy of other people’s lives that he could never obtain.

Being Billy Hargrove meant even going for a walk is dangerous.

He jammed his pockets with a bunch of Max’s snacks for lunch, it’s a shit dinner, but he knew his was already in the trash and the food he keeps behind his vanity is all out, anyway. Billy also checked on her, just to make sure the kids hadn’t cajoled Harrington into monster hunting or some other bullshit.

Knowing she was ever ten feet from a demodog was worse than not knowing jack shit.

Billy peered into the living room, relief washed over him. Not because Max was safe or anything, if she didn’t come home he’d be in even more trouble and that’s all it was. She was home and safe, watching TV past hours like the rule breaking gremlin she is. If Susan wasn’t further in the house doing God knows what and Neil wasn’t in the basement she’d get scolded for it. Her leg was thrown over the arm of the couch--also a no-no, with a big smile on her face while she laughed at Too Close for Comfort --technically, also, a no-no.

No smiles in this house.

Max looked up during the commercial, Billy glared at her.

“What?” They snapped in unison.

“Why’re you staring at me?” Max scowled.
Billy snorted. “Every once in a while I like to look at zoo animals. Take your leg off the arm of the couch, toad.”

“If you like looking at zoo animals so much take a look in the mirror,” she said, all snotty as usual. She took her leg off the couch, the smile from her face dropped, and that’s all Billy really cared about.

“Go to bed, Maxine,” Billy said, already leaving.

Which is code for ‘fuck you, Maxine.’

“I hope you sleep well, Billy,” she said tightly.

Which is code for ‘I hope you die in a hole, Billy.’

~oo0oo~

Somewhere between 11:15 and and 11:30 Billy’s door opened. He only really hears half of what the man is saying to him, about being a bad influence on Max’s young impressionable mind and that he's ungrateful. Harrington is supremely good at selective hearing and Billy hopes he gets to keep that.

Anger steamed out of him, boiling the well that’s been holding him back for days, it feels good and awful all at once. It feels more like getting put back together in some jagged horrible way than being pulled apart. “You’re bad on my young, impressionable mind,” Billy said, cutting his dad off, which was a bad thing he would normally never do. For all intents and purposes Billy knew he was looking for a fight, but only a mad Harrington would do something like that. A mad Harrington with enough power that they could evade a fist for cutting someone off.

Billy didn’t have that. He has nothing.

“What was that, boy?”

Fuck!

“I--”

His hand wrapped around his neck and squeezed tight enough that he could breathe. A thin finger pointed inches from Billy’s face, right between his eyes, so much so that he dizzyingly saw two of them.

“I don’t know who you think you are, son,” Neil seethed. “Don’t you dare mouth off to me after all you’ve done this week, do you understand?”

Billy stilled, eyes dark and dulled from all the burning and fuming--smoke filling his insides. Maybe the dizziness he’s actually feeling is the lack of air getting to his head.

Neil’s eyes burned with anger, the only time they ever have some resemblance his is in when that ice melts. The back of his hand connect with the curve of his cheek and it felt like his eye was about explode. His ring dug up a short chunk of skin with it, small blood droplets flew. Using the same grip he had on his neck he threw him to floor, Billy landed on the palms of his hands and his knees knocked against the wood with a thunk!

For a moment his brain catches on ten year old Steve at the bottom of the stairs again and thinks that this has nothing to do with being abandoned and forgotten by his parents. His dad hates him,
and his mother is long gone.

The air rushing into his lungs made him light headed all over again. “If you were stronger you wouldn’t feel the need to say that,” Billy felt a boot digging into his spine. “Weak men like you have no backbone.” He leaned over, pressing his heel into his back, to grab his son by his long blonde tresses. Billy’s jaw clenched to keep a sound from escaping. The pressure on his back released. “Get up.”

He more like pulled him up by a grip of hair and the collar of his shirt. His father hauled him up until he was sitting on his bed again and they were face to face.

Billy hated this more than just getting hit.

He hated this part so much more.

His father smoothed his rumpled shirt out and sighed. Billy watched numbly aware, he wanted to stuff his ears with cotton and scream. “Billy, I didn’t want to tell you this Saturday,” he said, cold and measured. He would have to listen. “If we have anymore incidents, I will handle you myself.”

He nodded, even if he didn’t know what ‘handle’ means. He just wanted to run away, he didn’t want to listen to this anymore. “It won’t happen again.”

Neil didn’t nod, wrong response. “I sure hope it won’t,” he said. “For your sake.”

Billy hated this part too. The gentle gaze his father would send him and something pulled in his chest that made him think he cares somewhere in there. “When your mother left us, I wanted us to have a happy family—a normal family, and your mother wanted that too. You have no idea how badly she wanted that for you and I think she’d be happy about our second chance.”

Billy blinked hard and slow. If the apocalypse happened now he’d thank God, he didn’t want to hear what his mother had wanted for him or what she would think of him or anything that had to do with her and him now.

He would disappoint her, his father’s always been right about that part.

“I know,” Billy said. “I’m sorry,” and he is. He’s sorry he would disappoint her.

“You should’ve been more careful,” he said. “I want us to be a normal family. I don’t want the Chief of Police showing up on our doorstep, I don’t want to hear your name or Maxine’s around town, I want to make your mother happy, Billy.”

*I should’ve been more careful.*

“It wasn’t my—” He saw Neil’s fist clench and shut his mouth. “I’ll be more careful.” His father gave him that approving look so Billy went on. “I’ll make sure Chief Hopper won’t have to come here again, I’ll make sure Max is good, I’ll keep it under control.”

He can’t promise any of those things and frustrated tears burn behind his eyes.

“That’s good to hear, son,” Neil continued to use that approving voice he craves. “I don’t want to have handle this myself, Billy,” he said. “Don’t make me lie to her that way.”

Billy sucked in a sharp breath, he shook his head. “I won’t,” the words come out of him instantly. Billy knew he couldn’t hold them back if he tried, he’d do anything for her and they both know it. “I won’t make you lie to her, sir.”
He can’t cause his mom any more hurt than he already did.

Neil smoothed his hand over his shoulder again, Billy tried not to flinch. “I’m glad we both still remember her,” he said. “Clean yourself up and go to bed, it’s late.”

He heard the door shut somewhere above and to the left of him. Billy collapsed forward with his elbows digging into his knees and his burning palms pressed into his eyes. Fresh tears pricked them and he’s still surprised he has any left, he’s always surprised.

After several minutes Billy did as he was told, he lifted himself up from his bed and pulled out the mirror on his makeshift vanity. He made quick work of the cut bleeding sluggishly atop his swelling bruise, the cherry on his ‘my dad sucks’ sundae.

He kept his mind as far from Harrington as possible while he patched himself up, not on the extra guest bedroom he has because his family is filthy fucking rich or how warm the whole thing looked, he especially ignored how useful his ginormous first aid kit would come in handy at a time like this.

His shaking fingers already a nuisance just for being larger and less nimble than they used to be worked deftly until he had a good sized bandage on his cheek. He stripped out of his clothes into a pair of loose gray sweatpants and curled into bed with his back protesting every action accept laying flat on his stomach.

Exhaustion washed over him again, a symptom of his powers acting up and the day. Sleep was riding on a rave of frustration and longing that he couldn’t control, his emotions were too much and coiled too tight in him.

As he laid the band uncoiled slowly. He tried not to think about tomorrow or Steve Harrington or even Neil. Instead, Billy hummed the song his mother used to sing to him with big loving blue eyes and a smile on her face.

_I just had a sort of feeling this morning_

_Something good was gonna happen today_

_Now there comes a sound without any warning_

_I just know it's good luck …_

Chapter End Notes

The song that’s featured is ‘Who’s that Knocking On my Door?” by Anette Hanshaw and it does tie into the rest of the story :}
V. Billy Hargrove and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

Chapter Summary

Billy suffers (like that hasn't happened enough already). Max feels bad for her step-brother. Steve makes another misguided attempt at cracking Billy's shell.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so apparently two-part chapters are just my thing because I'm doing it again (hahahahahahahaha kill me plz). It'll be the same as with Chapter 4 where I'll update with part 2 of Chapter 5 at some point later in the day. Thanks so much and happy reading!

My baby.

Oh my God.

My beautiful baby.

Billy, only two or three years old, blinked up with impossibly big eyes. It felt like something shattered deep and fervent from the inside the person looking down at him, at how beautiful he was.

He’s real.

My baby is real.

My baby is alive.

“I found him walking around on the highway,” Billy turned his gaze from the little Billy to a woman in a striped dress...he recognized her although she was about ten years younger than the last time he’d seen her. Ms. June was one of his mom’s closest friend, she stopped coming around after she left. Her eyes were still world weary and dark brown, the wild tornado of coffee colored, almost black hair that whipped around in her face like a nest of curls hadn’t changed much. She smiled softly, “he had this address on his birth certificate, I figured I’d drive over here just in case before taking him to the police. I’m glad I did.”

“You...you just found him,” his mother’s voice quivered. That’s the sound of his mother’s voice. He hasn’t heard it years.

“Poor thing was just walking around in the middle of the road when I pulled up,” Ms. June said. “Looking at the purty clouds is what he told me.”

Billy wanted to look down at himself, but that wasn’t possible. He’s just a watcher trapped inside his mother, forced to feel everything she feels.
His mother looked back down at little Billy. She sniffled, swallowing was so hard with the massive lump that built in her throat. “Pretty clouds,” she echoed, tears fell from her eyes wet and cold from the spring breeze that blew into the house. Billy felt them too. “Of course he would, of course, he likes the sky.”

And she painted his room full of clouds when he was little, he remembered.

She looked down at his halo of curls and immediately fell in love all over again. “My angel,” she said, putting a hand in them. The little threads of gold were soft and bounced between her fingers. She wanted to touch his face and his kiss his head, just to make sure this wasn’t a dream.

But Billy knew this had to be a dream, not a vivid memory. No matter how real it felt standing in the middle of the kitchen in his old Los Angeles home.

He wanted out of this.

Out of this goddamn dream. He didn’t want to see any more of whatever this is.

She felt like...like a box buckling at the clasps with one last lock holding it all together, she felt it right in the middle of her chest. It felt like hope and joy and so much love, as much as it didn’t feel foreign to his mom it felt foreign inside Billy.

When his mom looked down at him he understood what it felt like ‘to be bursting with’ love and joy like people say. He never really understood it.

Proof.

She needed proof.

*Proof that this is my Billy.*

She spun him around and rucked up the back of his shirt to his neck until she could see the little birthmark on his left shoulder.

It was there, dark and round, and proof. This was proof that beyond a shadow of a doubt the little boy in front of her is her baby. Her long lost baby boy, hat everyone told her was dead. That even she believed was dead, and here he is warm and alive.

“Oh my God!” She shrieked. Little Billy jolted away from her, and she turned him around to look at him in his scared wide eyes. “Oh no, baby, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” she pushed the blonde from his face and kissed his forehead. He smelled faintly like cinnamon with the overpowering scent of antiseptic, and that terrified her. Her boy smells more like a hospital than anything else like he never left and he’s been waiting there for her all this time.

All 2 years, 9 months and 11 days.

1,016 days she counted and she would have kept counting all the way until she died; until she could see him again.

Billy wanted this nightmare to be over.

No more of whatever the hell he’s being put through.

It’s been too long since he felt anything like that, and since anyone’s felt that way about him. And she’s been gone for so long, so long he stopped wanting her to come back to him. It’s easier that
Oh angel,” she squeezed him close to her and pressed another kiss to his crown. Little Billy didn’t wrap his arms around her, but she didn’t care because he’s still here with her and she can feel his little chest fall and rise into hers. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I won’t do that ever again, okay?” And Billy knew she meant it, she’d never yelled around him once—not even when he misbehaved. Not even when Neil got in her face, if he was in earshot she never raised her voice. The heel of hand came up to her eyes and brushed away the tears from her ocean blue eyes, they have the same eyes. “I won’t do that anymore okay, baby?”

“I’m sorry, I...” Ms. June took a step forward, his mother's hand instinctively took hold of little Billy’s shoulder and pulled him closer. She frowned a little, “I understand.” Tears welled in her own eyes, she had on that tough smile Billy recognized more and more as he got older. “I’m just happy I could bring him home to you.”

The world rushed forward until his eyes were buried deep in dark curls that smelled like Billy, like cinnamon and antiseptic. “Thank you, oh my God June. Thank you, oh my God,” tears seeped into the cotton of her dress. Her hand clawed into her clothes and shoulders and held her so tight Billy didn’t even know his mom had strength like that.

“Ms. June?” Little Billy said. He had his bottom lip between his teeth. He wrung the bottom of his red t-shirt between his teeth, looking nervous. It looked like he was about to cry.

Ms. June kneeled down in front of him when her mother let go. “Poor thing,” she said, “been a long day for you, hasn’t it? You’re sleepy.”

The little Billy nodded.

“William, that’s your name right sweetheart?” Billy felt ice fall over his skin, over his mother’s skin, the way little Billy looked at her like he didn’t know the answer to that question. His mom choked back a sob. Mrs. June nodded, “it is, that’s what it says on that paper you had with you.”

His mother kneeled down beside Ms. June, “we call you Billy, alright?” Her breath stuttered. “That’s what we call you, Billy, okay?”

“Billy?” He repeated.

They both nodded. His mother had her hands clasped together so tight he could feel the fingers in her lap creaking.

“That’s right. Now, Billy, I told you, I’d take you home. I found you and I told you I’d take you home right away,” she said. The freckles that dotted her warm brown face shifted with lines of anguish. “This is your home and this is your mama, alright sweetheart? I took you home, just like I told you I would.”

Little Billy looked around, his button nose wrinkled and his lips pursed like he didn’t completely understand. “Home?” He asked. He blinked up at his mom.

His mother breathed in deep, block mascara burned in her eyes and created dark tracks on her cheeks. “Yes--

Thud!

Thud!
“Billy!” Max yelled through his bedroom door. “It’s 7:00! We’re gonna be late! Wake up douchebag!”

Seven what the hell does seven have to do with anything? He blinked feeling his brain pulse, threatening combustion behind his eyelids.

His mom was there.

He sat up and his whole world tilted dangerously. He blinked at the off-white walls of his room, not blue like they used to be and no clouds. It wasn’t just his brain threatening a massive explosion. His eyes wept in submission to the burning slats of morning sun filtering through the blinds.

He heard her voice.

His ears were ringing now like he’d just spent three hours by the speakers at a rock concert, but he could hear her voice for the first time in years. Billy hadn’t even realized how much of her he’d forgotten.

He swallowed the lump and bile crawling up through his throat.

He rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes to stop the tears, his cheek stung in retaliation to pressure and when he pulled his palm away there was blood.

“Billy!” Max pounded on the door.

Who cares that it’s 7 AM and he’s gotta be out the door in 20 minutes?

His mom was there.

“BILLY!”

Max cares, and probably Susan and if the news goes all the way back Neil will definitely care. No responsible, respectful brother makes his little sister late for her geometry class. That’s who cares.

“SHUT UP!” He yelled through the door, which sufficed in letting her know he's awake. Wide-fucking-awake. “Jesus, Max is the house on fire?”

Nothing.

Billy fell back onto his bed, he hissed at the bruise on his back and stared up at the ceiling. He tried to find her behind his eyelids again, tried to find himself and Ms. June in that strange little dream. It had to have been a dream.

“Can I come in?”

“No,” Billy intoned.

“I brought coffee,” Max said through the door.
He didn’t think much about Max bringing him coffee like they’re close or some shit. Billy groaned at the idea of ingesting anything. Harrington who had been lounging around like dead weight in his throbbing skull awoke with a vengeance, he didn’t like the idea of coffee either. He only drinks the fancy Italian cappuccino shit his mom makes when his parents are home.

“I don’t want your coffee, Max.”

She didn’t bother him again after that.

Billy looked at his watch 7:07, they gotta be out in 13 minutes if they wanna have walking around time. He has 23 minutes just to miss the late bell. Even his skin felt sore and angry like he was all one big open wound.

With a grunt, he was up.

He could get himself together in 23 minutes.

Billy’s keys are sitting at his spot at the table. He sat down and shoved the dry toast smother with peanut butter into his mouth. Billy opted for orange juice like he has much of a choice considering Harrington’s coffee preferences and jammed dry toast and peanut butter into mouth just so he wouldn’t starve later in the day.

“Let’s go,” he tugged on his shoes, standing by the door. “You’re the one that was all uppity about getting to school on time.”

“What happened to your face?” Max asked, her face still all scrunched up making her look like the usual trash-fire she is.

“Funny,” Billy sneered. “I was thinking about asking you the same thing.”

Max glared at him. She eyed his empty glass that beaded with cool, wet condensation next to him. Billy always drinks black coffee in the morning, that much she knew and it’s always piping hot. She watched a drop roll down the glass.

Does he like the cold?

Someone possessed by the Mind Flayer would avoid hot coffee.

“I said let’s go ,” Billy barked. “Up my ass about school and stands at the door for twenty fucking minutes,” he grumbled under his breath on his way out the door.

Max sucked the front of her teeth. What a bitch.

Max flopped down into the passenger seat, she blew a large chunk of her red hair from her face and crossed her arms. It was her turn to look over at Billy expectantly when he hadn’t pulled out the driveway yet.

She looked at her step-brother, honestly, he looked worse off than yesterday and she barely thought that was possible. His bloodshot eyes and sagging shoulders only made him look worse off.

Max nibbled on her lip and looked at him, how someone could manage to look like a wet, neglected puppy while still being dry as a bone (and also being her dickhead step-brother) was beyond her, and yet Billy managed to nail the look perfectly. "Are we going?" Which has never
been code for 'are you okay?' but today it is.

He rubbed a hand over his face and winced at the band-aid covered bruise on his cheek. “Just...d’you mind not asking about my face?” Billy ran his hand through his hair, Max can already tell this is the start of another apology. “It’s nothing you gotta worry about and your face isn’t fucked up. I’m not a morning person, just chalk it up to that, alright?”

Now he pulled out of the driveway like that was what the big hold up was. “Whatever, Billy,” Max said because she wasn’t sure how else to respond to Billy's second genuine apology so far.

“I’m serious.”

It’s a little jarring the Mind Flayer is actually nicer than her step-brother. Maybe it thinks Billy was a good step-brother before becoming its host, maybe it’s surprised after someone like Will that some people really are monsters. That seemed a little ridiculous, but it’s her only explanation for why a possessed Billy would be nicer than her actual step-brother. “Okay, apology accepted or whatever,” she said, just to get rid of the awkward air hanging between them.

She didn’t know what to do with these apologies or weird step-brother and his increasing number of maladies. Truthfully, she was waiting for her mom to notice and mother hen the hell out of him like she does when she gets sick.

Billy didn’t say anything else, he didn’t have music on either and that scared the hell out of Max.

"I’m skating home,” Max threw out, gathering her things to get out of the Camaro as soon as they pulled into a parking spot.

“Whatever.” Billy didn’t look at her, and truthfully that was preferable.

Max left awkward silence of the car for the rumble of teenagers and hormones outside. The bell was going to ring soon and the boys were still outside like all the other middle schoolers who didn’t care.

“So, did he do anything weird?” Lucas probed carefully.

"He hasn't tried to kill anyone yet, right?” Dustin asked.

Max wanted to roll her eyes. She's pretty sure Billy couldn't smack a fly with paralysis in the state he's in. “He didn’t drink his coffee and he's still apologizing to me,” Max shoved through the boys. “I’ve gotta go see Mrs. Robinson.” And she did...technically, but she was already too late to do anything about it.

She not sure why she’s protecting Mind Flayer Billy, she could spill more about just how weird he’s becoming. All the signs are leading up to it being nothing but that, it just doesn’t add up right. The gate was closed, El told them herself, and who’s to be surer than El?

Max shook her head, leave it to Billy to give her a headache and put her in a terrible mood. At least normal Billy and Mind Flayer Billy have something in common besides being monsters.
Chapter Summary

Remember how I said Billy was gonna suffer? Yeah well, he suffers some more but at least there's someone there if even for a little bit this time. Unfortunately, that person isn't Steve. No...this is Steve's second attempt at getting through to Billy and just might do it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Billy let out a little sigh, just barely a breath from his lips. It felt like half of Hawkins High was prime and ready to take him out back and take turns in a communal stabbing by time he got through the creaky metal doors that have obviously seen better days.

There’s a storm coming. There’s a soreness in his bones like the air pressure’s suddenly changed. The mood in the hall changed the moment Billy took a step inside.

The hall held its breath for the first big clap of thunder, that first strike of lightning to hit the earth and set everything ablaze. He can’t tell whether he’s the lightning or the earth in this situation, but something tells him it won’t matter. Whatever it is, it’ll still suck.

Billy stared at his own locker for a beat. In this case, he’s the earth getting split in half by one bolt of lightning. For a moment, etched so deep into the muddy peach colored paint, the word flashed silver, the color of the metal underneath. ‘

SCHIZOID.’

He blinked at it once and he swore he forgot how to read.

Schizoid doesn't even look like a word.

Something cool blanketed his body, burning with rage. His cheeks ruptured vermillion with embarrassment and maybe it’s partially Steve that’s making him feel that way. He should’ve seen it from a mile away. Steve came to school with his face battered to hell and Billy with matching knuckles. Steve never said it was him and Billy never exactly denied that was, it was a coupling made for rumors to spark.

He fucked up blacking out on Steve, that much is obvious. It started small, the smart girls being a little more wary of him, the quick scramble to get out of his way on the basketball court. Billy Hargrove is a psychopath. The new kid from California is off his rocker. He’s dangerous.

Steve makes him sure they’re right.

He is dangerous.

Billy grabbed some kid that happened to be walking by him just too close. “Who did this?” He gritted, so low it sounded more like a growl, he probably looks crazy judging by the way the kid is about to piss himself.
“I don’t know,” he quivered. “But you took out Tommy for it anyway, didn’t you?” Confusion stung him bad enough that Billy let go of his t-shirt.

“What?”

“They say it was like six guys,” the small blonde, probably a sophomore straightened his shirt like just by his touch he’d soiled it forever. “But if you could to that to Harrington’s face you could do it to Tommy’s,” he spat.

And judging by the way everyone turned to look at them in the hall, everyone else believed it too. He swallowed thickly, a mixture of Steve’s panic and his own bubbled up his throat the size of a bowling ball. “As much as I’d love to put the freckled fuckhead in the hospital, that wasn’t me,” he drawled, a poor man’s impression of calm.

Because little ol’ me was too busy taking a depression walk for Steve Harrington’s sake and getting the shit kicked out of me by my old man.

The blonde punk, impish in his features, with an ugly bowl haircut, snorted. “You really are crazy if you think anyone’s going to believe anything you have to say,” he hissed. In a very Nancy Wheeler sort of way, he hugged his books to his chest and stalked off.

For a flicker of a moment, all he could see is Nancy’s bubblegum pink lips contorting between anger, confusion, and fear as she tries to find the words 'I love you.'

Billy rubbed a hand over his face to will away the burning in his cheeks and eyes. When he looked up again, half the hallway was staring at him and the other half were pretending they weren’t. “What the fuck are you staring at! Piss off!” That jump-started everyone’s day again, like a switch being flicked and the hallway sparked back to life. A conveyor belt of students continuing their day with a soft hum. At least in some way, he's still in charge.

He opened his freshly branded locker and grabbed his books stuffing them into the burlap sack of messenger bag he gets to call a backpack. If someone told him he'd be excited about spring break in Hawkins, Indiana, he’d tell them they lost their goddamn mind.

He can't wait for it.

You've lost your goddamn mind.

Billy doesn’t exactly disagree with the distant echo in the back of his head. Now he and Steve have something in common, they’re both pretty sure they’re going insane.

His mind is going to be absolutely wrecked when Harrington’s gone.

He didn’t want to think about when Harrington’s gone, he might actually miss the memories. Like always, they’re better than Billy’s anyway. He found a use in them, his mother was long gone except in a faint dream, but he had Steve’s memories. And for a moment he looked in them and the world in front of him faded away, it got him through World History, all at the cost of keeping his sleeve pressed to his nose and a crackling pain at the side of his head.

The bell rang and Billy grabbed his bag and headed out the door. He had scribbled some notes about the Byzantine Empire, as good as a teacher Mr. Cooper is, the guy teaches from the textbook more than most.

“Billy,” Mr. Cooper said in the midst of his trying to bolt from the World Studies class, “a word, please?”
Fuck.

“I can’t, I--”

He guessed Mr. Cooper had to be in his late thirties and if he really wanted to stretch it, his early forties. The glasses and slicked back hair makes him look older, but nonetheless like a happy labrador. However, had such an intensity in his black eyes it made Billy think he might be older and less of a happy-go-lucky fool than he looks. From day one, Billy spotted the guy as some sort of loon; he’s a chipper man, and even sadder he’s happy to be teaching history to a bunch of high schoolers. That’s a pathetic loser if he’d ever seen one.

“If you need me to write you a late pass, I will,” he said. “I don’t want you getting slapped with a tardy.”

Billy was waiting for this man to drop his nice act already.

He trudged back in front of him, gathering a few weird glances from the students leaving staggeringly slow. Mr. Cooper waved them out with the same chipper smile as always if not with a slightly rushed wave. They both watched the last student close the door behind her.

He turned the same smile he had on the girl to Billy, “well, good news first, you’re not in any trouble.” He knew he wasn’t already, for once he hasn’t done anything wrong.

“Yes? So what do you want?” Billy scowled.

He smiled with an amused twinkle in his eyes that put Billy on edge. “You’re an odd kid, Billy.”

“You’re an odd teacher,” Billy snapped. “You smile too much.” Letting out a barb like that should get him a detention slip.

Mr. Cooper shrugged. “It’s not always a bad thing. There are lots of people in the world who do smile, just like there are lots of people in the world that don’t,’ he said. “And there are lots of people in the world who are odd, that doesn’t make them a mistake.”

That would imply Billy thinks he's a mistake and he doesn't think he's a mistake. And he doesn't need Mr. Cooper to look him in the eyes and tell him he's not.

Not at all.

He's too stupid for that and Mr. Cooper is too much of a happy, optimist; still, Billy didn’t meet his eyes.

“I won’t ramble, we could go into all that another time,” he waved his hand flippantly. Billy hoped they wouldn’t have any more conversations like this, ever. “I want to make sure you’re okay.”

Billy tried to keep his eyes from rolling out of his skull.

He quirked an eyebrow with a rogueish sort of grin that made Billy almost think Mr. Cooper was some kind of rebel in his teenage years. “Suddenly your next class is preferable,” he said. He expected him to say something snide, Mr. Cooper usually doesn't but every teacher has their limits and Billy’s been known to reach all of theirs in one way or another.

He leaned back on the desk he had seated himself on in order to grab something from behind. “I want to talk to you about this, Billy.”
He pulled up their weekend homework an essay about multiculturalism, it wasn’t hard, in fact, he barely remembers doing it it was so easy. Mr. Cooper handed him the sheet looking a little worried.

Billy took it from him and looked.

_Shit._

The sheet was a mess of frantic scribbles of an obviously scattered mind, all of it in Billy’s handwriting. Where an essay should’ve been what featured most prominently was the face of the demogorgon opening wide, a row of sharp white teeth and the blue ink of his pen.

He stared down at the sheet, hands shaking.

_Fuck!_

He used to black out and make origami cranes like Maria, but this is different. This is all over his homework, someone knows about this. “I…” _don’t remember doing this_. He swallowed.

“Billy,” he said with some sort of soft sternness. “I think you should--”

“It won’t happen again,” Billy cut him off. “It’s nothing.”

Mr. Cooper, being the inexplicably wise man that he is, just sighed. “This,” he gestured to the ‘MAKE IT GO AWAY’ featured at the bottom of the worksheet. “Doesn’t look like nothing.”

“Well, it is,” Billy scowled at him. “It's just a drawing, I didn't threaten to blow up the whole school. I was just...”

Except Billy didn’t know what to say.

His mother used to always say he’s an awful liar.

Mr. Cooper eyed him with another soft sigh, “I hope you talk to someone about this, if not me than someone else you trust.” He reached back again and pulled out the same assignment but blank this time. “I’m not going to fail you, just drop it off here or in my mailbox before break starts.”

Billy nodded. Mr. Cooper had actually moved to Hawkins only a month before he did, it’s fucking awful having his world studies teacher living two houses down from him, but he tried not to think about it too much. Mr. Cooper is a nice guy and he minds his own business like a teacher-neighbor would. He nodded his thanks and took the paper from him.

Mr. Cooper kept eyeing him like there were a million more things he wanted to say to him. His almost black eyes stayed trained for as long as possible. “Billy, I want to be honest with you, if anything like this happens again, I won’t be able to keep my mouth shut about it. I’m worried about you.”

They always say that and they do keep their mouths shut, again and again, and again. “Okay,” he nodded to keep him happy. “It won’t happen again.”

“I hope not,” he smiled tightly. “Try to have a good day, alright? Spring break is on the horizon,” he smiled genuinely this time.

_Kind of impossible at this point._

“You too, Mr. Cooper.”
He wrote him up a pass just in case to keep him out of any trouble, Billy stuffed all the papers in his backpack and he was on his way to a class his mind was much too numb for.

Steve’s not sure why he knows Billy Hargrove’s locker. Technically their lockers should be right next to each other which would be literal hell, but he moved in in the middle of the year so they put him at the closest available locker to the rest of the ‘H’s.

Steve chalked up his knowledge to the wariness he has around anything having to do with Billy and pretends it has nothing to do with a sick form of curiosity he has surrounding him since Saturday...and maybe even a little before that. They’re down and across the hall from each other, in fact, for Steve to be able to see it from his he’d have to turn around and look up the hall.

He’s sure the locker that’s sporting new vandalism ‘SCHIZOID’ is his. Steve stared at it on the way to his own. “Yeesh,” he breathed. He could make out faint silver words from where he stood.

Nancy’s for certain he beat Tommy to holy hell, it’s not like he hasn’t done it before and Steve sort of agrees--it’s not like he hasn’t done it before. His own elbow ached tenderly just remembering yesterday.

But he knows Tommy the best, he knows the long list of people that would love to get their hands on the guy and their large booted feet up his ass. He remembered how often he and Tommy used to handle those assholes together because holy shit the list was long. It could really be any guy in town between the ages of 16-24 and the Clemson brothers have had it out for him for a while.

He shook his head, and none of it is my problem.

He’s so jammed and tight, that it feels like he can’t bear another weight on his back especially not anymore Tommy related guilt, he’s got enough with Billy as is. He dug around his own locker looking for the lunch Mrs. Henderson lovingly packed for him again. One of these days he’ll have to do something nice for the woman, and that’s what he focused on instead.

Maybe give her a nice scarf.

Or mittens for Tews.

Or a good book, her and Dustin both read a lot.

Steve rummaged around his locker looking for the brown paper bag. Knowing him he probably left in the car, Dustin was on something about Max and their AV project when he got into the car this morning.

He grabbed his car keys and kept them swinging around his fingers as he left the building, honestly, it’s too easy to just come in and go around Hawkins High. No one watches the hallways, most of the doors are unlocked, it makes skipping incredibly easy and irresistibly tempting sometimes.

The weather in Hawkins is improving, they had an absolutely brutal winter. The type of weather that made his mother blanch and run for the safety of Firenze for three weeks. It made way for a very green spring, that he couldn’t help appreciate. His keys swung around his finger, hit his palm and then repeat.

Swing.

Hit.
Repeat.

Maybe he could convince Nancy and Jonathan to eat outside today, the weather might help improve her mood. He got to his car and stopped.

*Oh, for F**K’S sake.*

Across the parking lot, none other than Billy Hargrove, the school’s new headcase, was sitting on the hood of his Camaro brooding and looking especially miserable in the weak, yellow sun that shone his weak, pale skin. Steve was going to get his lunch and turn around, as God as his witness. Sure he’s guilty about whatever the hell Billy’s problem is, but what is he gonna do?

He’s never helped anyone with these sort of things.

Except... *I already know you’re pretty good at pretending everything’s fine so do us both a favor and leave me alone.*

He worked hard to get that out of his head, including countless hours of TV and nap that just made him groggy and angry. Steve chewed on his cheek, bag lunch in hand. What does he know? He and Billy aren’t close and Tommy has the emotional range of a wilted flower, it’s not like he’d tell him all his deep shit. Billy doesn’t know him well enough to whip out a barb like that.

His elbow smarted as he walked over like it sensed the danger before the rest of him does. Screaming *hey asshole! Remember yesterday!* Steve does remember yesterday and honestly, he’s still surprised he’s not in the room next to Tommy H.

“Eventually people are going to catch on that this is your hiding spot,” Steve probed cautiously.

He watched Billy's head drop into his folded arms, folding into himself like the rolly-pollies Steve used to poke at as a child. He raised his head looking up at the sky, “are you stalking me now, Harrington?” He said in a tone so similar to that night at the Byers he might as well have asked if he were dreaming.

Steve held up the bag lunch although Billy couldn’t see it, “don’t flatter yourself, I forgot my lunch.” Also sounding as flat as that night months ago.

“Sounds like a stalker to me pretty boy,” he said. Billy didn’t hear the shuffling of gravel which means Steve’s probably still standing there. “So? What do you want?”

“What did you mean by what you said yesterday?” He cradled his injured elbow tenderly at the memory, “about how I keep pretending everything is fine?”

“Did that one stick, your highness?” He sneered. “Did I really hurt your feelings that time?”

Steve didn't want to admit that he did.

His cheeks flushed and he’s glad Billy’s back is turned on him. “It just seemed a little poignant for you.”

Billy chuckled, “using big words won’t get your ex back, especially if you learned them from her current boyfriend.” He enjoyed Steve’s little affronted noise, that another thing Billy say this morning. Steve pouring over a dictionary and trying to understand half of Jonathan’s sentence.

He snickered under his breath in class.
He’s not putting Harrington in any real pain, Billy knows he can’t inflict real pain on Steve—not
when he can’t decide if he wants really wants to bash his skull in anymore or if that other side he
doesn’t want to name is winning out.

He has his memories and maybe he shouldn’t thank him for that for how much they’ve wreaked
havoc on him, but not today when it helped a little to zone out and think of nothing but him.

“I…” Steve started. “You know it’s not that hard to find a dictionary.”

Billy laughed, it didn’t sound cruel to Steve, just amused. “Sure, whatever, Harrington.”

Steve’s stomach growled achingly, and he remembered it’s the lunch period. If he’s going to try to
get to Billy Hargrove during his lunch period, he might as well eat too. He sat down with his back
against the front wheel of the Camaro.

“I saw that shit on your locker, man. It looked rough,” Steve said as he bit into his sandwich. “I
know you didn’t do it. He pissed off the Clemson brothers a few weeks ago.”

Billy heard about that too. He almost turned around to look at Steve and his soft brown eyes, his
tone is less biting and more gentle and friendly.

“We’re not having this conversation, Harrington,” Billy warned. “You tried this shit yesterday and
I told you to get bent, remember?”

Steve swallowed, “I just said it looked rough. Jesus, Hargrove, why’re you so touchy?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Billy snapped. “You’re worse than I am.”

“Oh yeah because you're the master of calm,” he said, getting all bitchy again.

Billy bit into his apple, having finally decided to eat his own lunch. He’s acutely aware that he’s
outside having lunch with Steve Harrington and somehow that’s the worst and best thing that’s
happened to him all day. He ignored the flutter of something Billy won’t name against the walls of
his stomach.

“I mean this as a serious yes or no question,” Steve said. “I won’t ask anything about feelings.”
Because God forbid anyone ever mention those, he thought. “Just...are you okay?”

“I already told you--”

Steve cut him off, “it’s yes or no, don’t get your briefs in a bunch.”

“Briefs in a bunch?” Billy snorted. “Seriously, Harrington, what are you? Five?”

“Yes or no, Hargrove,” he said, stubborn and eyes trained on his back. “I'm not worried or
anything, I just don't get it, really I don’t.”

“And you think asking if I'm okay is gonna make you understand?” Billy looked up at the sky and
scowled, only Harrington would. Only Harrington with his ‘everything’s my fault’ bullshit, would
start with stupid shit like this.

And yet Billy knew the dickhead was trying to set it right.

Not a lot of people try setting it right with Billy Hargrove the denim clad napalm bomb.

“Well,” Steve talked with his mouth all full. “It’s a start I guess, you’ve been acting weird so it
feels like a good question.”

Billy snorted. “A start?” He really wanted to turn and look at him. “To what? What do you want with me?”

Steve didn’t say anything.

What do I want with Billy Hargrove?

What scared the shit out of him was that his immediate answer wasn’t ‘absolutely nothing!’ He swallowed, “I don’t know.” And what he meant by that was, ‘I absolutely don’t want to know.’ “I guess for now I’d just want to know if you’re okay.”

Billy would deck him if he had the strength too. If he could stop seeing that fucking demogorgon and feeling like such a goddamn freak of nature and a lunatic, he would round on Steve and pick him up just to throw him back down.

“Are you okay?” Billy spat back like an accusation.

Steve blinked.

Only with Billy Hargrove could something so genuine and caring turn into an allegation. “Seriously,” he nearly growled, “because I could make a fucking guess about you, Harrington. I could make a real good fucking guess that you’re so lonely and abandoned and ignored that you just can’t help but make everyone’s business your business just for a little bit of attention,” he hissed. The air was silent as if even nature sat in stunned silence. “Don’t use me to fill your fucking void.”

The fire in him doesn’t even feel good in it’s familiarity it just feels toxic, it makes Billy sick to his own stomach. “I fucking hate you,” he spat into the silence. It tasted like ash in his mouth.

Fuck!

“You asked if I’m okay,” he sneered, suffocating on the wet lump in his throat, “there’s your answer.”

He curled in himself feeling hot tears press against the sleeve of his arm. Why can’t he just be a human being about these things? Harrington wasn’t trying to fuck with him which is a first considering how the last four days have been going on. He felt an ache in his chest he hadn’t felt since this morning.

When he looked up again, Steve was gone.

“Fuck,” he muttered just under the sound of the wind.

How did his world become just him and Steve fucking Harrington?

Chapter End Notes

I'm posting this chapter early because today's my birthday and this is one of my favorite chapters (and I love this fic and all y'all 'cuz you guys are amazing!). I also have a busy day Saturday and I'm not sure if I'll be able to upload the chapter. So, from me to you, Happy Reading :) 

Billy felt like a goddamn freak.

He’s a goddamn freak of fucking nature and the smart thing for him to do would be to go back into school and continue his freak of nature day, but he didn’t. He ducked into his car and just sat watching the robin egg blue sky and chain smoked.

There’s something about fire he likes, and heat and the repetitive nature of lighting a cigarette smoking, smoking, stubbing it out and starting over again. Humans are creatures of habit or so he’s read.

That’s why he punched Daniel Mayfield in the fucking face. He tried to tell him that’s why he’s so fucking unstable, he’s got no stability at home or some shit, and then neither would Maxine.

And then he decked him in the face because that really pissed him off.

And then he got all his goddamn memories.

And then they moved to goddamn Hawkins, Indiana.

Billy lit another cigarette and smoked, he’s such a freak. He can’t ever just respond to things normally like everyone else does. Can’t respond to one comment that might have been about him, made to fucking Susan and not him, and maybe wasn’t even about him. He’ll never know for sure now. Can’t even just chill out for five seconds and try not to be a goddamn freak. But then again neither could his mom, something or other was wrong with her and he was too young to have a clinical name for it.

She was nervous and wary of people; she was downright paranoid most of the time, especially when he was old enough to start going to school. Billy vaguely remembered her crying so hard someone else’s mom had to take her home.

The town knew she was a bit of a loon and took her nervous breakdowns in the grocery store or in the church parking lot with a grain of salt. ‘It’s just Lilly having another one of her moments, it’ll pass. Sit her down somewhere in the shade, get her some water, she’ll be alright.’ Billy thought of how most people took his violent outbursts with a grain of salt too, even Harrington for the most of it.

They say crazy’s genetic anyway.

Being such a total fuck up, he’s not so sure about. He’s pretty sure he did that one all by himself.
“You have the look of a man who’s tasted the sour fruit of regret,” Mr. Cooper said. Billy saw him coming he just wasn’t exactly sure what to do about it, he’s clearly skipping class. Mr. Cooper says a lot of weird shit. There’s a rumor around he’s the one that comes up with all the sayings they put on fortune cookies, Billy’s pretty sure they’re right about that one. The most normal conversation they’ve had--not that they have many--was about his homework this morning. “I could see you from my classroom window,” he explained.

Billy flicked the lighter shut. He looked up, he could see Mr. Cooper’s window from his car, another one of his fuck ups. The man’ll march him to the front office, they’ll call Neil and then he’ll be in for it again.

Mr. Cooper crossed his arms and leaned against the car across from Billy, a ketchup red 1979 Toyota Celica. “I don’t really see a point in taking you to the front office,” he said. “That won’t get you back in class where you belong will it?”

Billy knew the answer to that, ‘no, no it won’t.’ He’ll sit there for a while, he’ll go back to class or if it’s late enough in the day they’ll just send him straight to detention. That wasn’t the point Mr. Cooper was making with him though, it was that he isn’t taking him to the front office.

“So?” Billy finally decided to ask. “What do you want with me?” What does everyone want with him these days? Max is on his case, Steve’s in his face, his goddamn World Studies teacher is interrogating him.

And for what?

He smiled down at him like Billy’s the most amusing student he’s ever had. He probably is. “What kept you out here? A math test you didn’t study for?”

Billy snorted. “Nah, it’s the Indiana weather. Absolutely nothing like,” he said bitterly. Even if today’s a nice ass day it's too cold for Spring, everybody’s complaining. The wind is harsh against the skin of his face.

Mr. Cooper chuckled, “of course. A clear sky leads way to a clear head.”

Billy couldn’t help look up at him, he’s such a fucking weirdo. Maybe he’s secretly some kind of perv that likes high school boys. He didn’t look like one, but you never really know with those types they can look like anyone. “I still don’t know what you want with me?”

Mr. Cooper grimaced, it was quick flash across his face, Billy’s never seen him frown before--he just realized it. “I don’t think a person should be left alone to boil in their own proverbial stew,” he said.

“You know if I wanted a sermon, I would be at a church,” Billy said lowly, his eyes burned. His skin felt hot from all the embarrassment and helplessness he’s been feeling all day. “You’re a teacher.”

He’s just fucking tired.

That’s all.

Mr. Cooper didn’t say anything, he looked like he was considering Billy’s words for a moment. “I think teachers are supposed to do more than teach,” he said rather seriously, but he was still smiling. He chewed on his tongue and watched a blue jay whizz by--Billy did too.

Billy flicked the lighter again, he figured Mr. Cooper wouldn’t let him reach for another cigarette
or it’d be rude or something. “I think you’re in the wrong profession then.”

“I probably am, most adults are,” Mr. Cooper said amicably. “I saw you had an argument with your friend.”

Billy almost spat ‘you’re fucking perv’ at the man, looking out his window and spying on him like...like...well, a fucking pervert. He swallowed that thought like he swallowed the sick twist of embarrassment in his stomach. Maybe he thought he should try to respond like a normal goddamn person. If it goes to shit he’ll end up in the front office, like he’ll probably end up there either way.

“We’re not friends,” Billy grumbled.

Mr. Cooper nodded his understanding. “It doesn’t feel good hurting a person who doesn’t deserve it. At least not in the long run, I suppose.” Mr. Cooper looked down at the litter of cigarette butts at Billy’s feet pointedly like he knew he’d been sitting here chain smoking all his frustration and helplessness out until he felt like an old chimney.

Actually, he probably saw it.

Billy flicked the lighter again, he’s such a goddamn freak.

“We’re not friends,” Billy repeated, and he’s not sure why he’s telling his World Studies teacher this. Normally he’d blame it all on Harrington just for being dumb enough to come up to him, but Harrington in his head doesn’t blame things on other people.

Everything is my fault, my fault, my fault with Harrington.

“He’s a dickhead that won’t leave me alone because he’s worried about me or whatever. Which would be fine if he wasn’t beating himself up over it, ‘cause this particular dickhead beats himself up over everything, all the time.”

Mr. Cooper chuckled, “it sounds like you two would get along.” Billy glared at him, and almost forgot Mr. Cooper is a teacher and he certainly can’t tell the man to go fuck himself. “I’m sorry,” he held up his hands in surrender, “I’m sure you don’t find that funny.”

Billy glared at him and then he eyed him and then he felt weird knowing the man was just joking with him. He was being honest, it was a little sickening to see the sincere apology in the coal black eyes resting behind his glasses.

“You’d prefer for him to stop beating himself up over things,” Mr. Cooper surmised. “And you only gave him more fodder to do so.”

Billy hated this whole talking thing, and he got his own stupid ass in this situation opening his goddamn mouth. What’s he gonna do next? Tell him his old man wallops on him? Tell him he hates the fucking town and his home life is shit? Except he didn’t feel like a massive freak right now, he just felt stupid and vulnerable...and tired. He curled the sleeve of his sweatshirt around his index and thumb and pulled until his fingers felt tight, he repeated it again while he thought.

“I guess so.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Well, I think you either have to lie in your bed or get up and make it over,” he suggested. “If he’s really worried about you, he’ll probably listen to you and you’ll have a chance to try again.”

“He might not,” Billy said and then he wound his fingers around the sleeve of his sweatshirt again.
He shouldn’t have said that. “I don’t care, he’s real dramatic about everything.”

Mr. Cooper laughed through his nose and eyed the cigarette butts again. Billy knew what he was saying without really saying. “He sounds like someone you shouldn’t dismiss so quickly if he’s worried about you.”

Billy’s lip jutted out, he’ll dismiss whoever the fuck he wants. “Don’t you have a class?”

Mr. Cooper looked down at his watch, some non-descriptive thing that looked fancy and industrial, like something out of a spy movie. “Not for another seven minutes,” he said.

“Yeah, well, maybe you should get there early,” he grumbled.

Mr. Cooper’s face didn't pinch up like maybe Billy expected. “It’d be in my best interest to,” he said calmly. He looked back at the school with a placid smile. “Don’t be too hard on yourself, Billy, and don’t be too hard on him. You both sound like you're in need of a friend.”

Billy scowled up at the man and figured it was probably too late to tell him to mind his own goddamn business. He scoffed anyway, “whatever.”

Mr. Cooper offered him a thumbs up and a smile so bright and sunny it might well be on a billboard ad on the side of a Midwestern road and a cornfield. “Have a good day, Billy,” he said. “I hope you go back to class, however, it’s never wise to underestimate the importance of a rest day.”

With that Mr. Cooper looked down at his watch again and offered him a little salute, “it was excellent talking with you.” Then the man was walking off across the asphalt just a chipper as ever, like talking to Billy hadn’t thrown a wrench in his entire day. No one walks away from him smiling, or at least no one has in a really long time.

Billy flicked his lighter again.

He felt a little less like a goddamn freak.

Jonathan wondered if a person could have Stockholm Syndrome without ever being kidnapped.

“You know, I’m only telling you this because if Nance knows she’ll kill me,” Steve said. Jonathan wanted to roll his eyes, he should be smart enough to know that one way or another all information will find its way back to Nancy. It always does. “I just...need someone’s opinion.” The darkroom is good for privacy, plus Jonathan was already in there.

Jonathan wondered when he and Steve had become whatever this is.

He was red in the face like he had been crying or on the edge of crying, something about the red around his eyes told him the flush had nothing to do with the red light coming from overhead.

“Someone--”

“You mean Billy,” Jonathan interrupted while he took the film out of his camera. His not-sorta-friend that’s also his girlfriend’s ex-boyfriend has a look on his face now whenever Billy’s mentioned. Who else could he be so worked up over?

Steve’s face flushed a dark red, creeping into his cheeks and the tips of his ears. “How come you
automatically think it’s—” Jonathan fixed him with a look, just as pragmatic as usual while simultaneously telling him ‘shut the fuck up, Steve. You’re an idiot.’ “Okay, whatever.” Steve regretted even asking him, still, it’s not like he could go to Dustin with this. I talked to Billy again during lunch and...” Steve looked away from him, this really was a bad idea.

Don’t use me to fill your fucking void.

“It didn’t go over well,” Jonathan provided for him, the ‘no shit, sherlock’ dripped icily in his tone. Steve’s fingers drummed across his lips nervously, the look would make Nancy blanche and probably march up to the blonde demanding an apology. “What did he say to you?”

Steve ran his hand through his hair, still not looking at him. His mouth worked trying to find words that wouldn’t make him sound the way Billy did, how painfully accurate he was. “It’s like...I don’t know man, the guy’s just really in my head.” He pulled away. “He knows stuff about me he shouldn’t.”

“Like what?”

Steve’s lip sputtered, it feels like too much. “Stuff no one knows.” Jonathan looked up from his camera for only a second. “I don’t know how he knows this stuff about me, it’s stuff I don’t tell people.”

He seemed to understand then, it’s the type of stuff only close people get to hear if they’re lucky. Jonathan understood that a little too well, there’s stuff he could tell Nancy, but it’s still all too close to his chest. It’s information that’s earned through years of trust and love. “So...how does he know it?”

“I don’t know,” He ran his hand through his hair again. “Oh yeah and on top of knowing all this information every time I’m within five feet of him he starts crying and telling me he hates me.”

“Did he cry today?” Jonathan asked. He’s still disbelieving that someone like Billy Hargrove even has the physical capabilities to cry, Billy's got the emotional faculties brick.

Steve nodded. “I think. I left after...after he shut up. When I looked back he had his face hidden.” He thinks maybe if he keeps pushing he’ll get an answer. “Everyday he, like, drops these hints and I’m not smart enough to figure it out.”

“You’re saying you’re not smart enough for Billy Hargrove,” Jonathan pointed out. “Listen to yourself.”

Jesus.

Hearing it said back to him it sounds even worse. “I don’t mean it like that,” Steve lied. “Yesterday I told him he should be grateful I helped him, you know? Because he was being a dick about it and kept telling me how much he hates me.”

Jon snorted. “Shocker.”

Steve ignored him. “But then he starts tearing up, and says ‘are you fucking kidding...I’m not thanking you for shit,’ like I did something.”

“Again, he’s a dick, tears or not,” he said flippantly. “Now he’s ungrateful and a dick.”

‘Yeah, but I know this asshole,’ Steve wanted to argue. At the very least he expected Billy to brush all this off with something like ‘what a knight, Harrington. Nancy doesn’t know what she’s
missing with the freak.’ He’s a little disgusted with himself he can accurately impersonate Billy. The guy would chalk it up to a bad night, remain the Cali King with a little chink in his armor and nothing would really change. “I tried asking him if he’s okay today,” Steve’s voice turned strained. “He told me not to use him to fill my void.”

Nancy might blink and ask ‘what void? What does that even mean, Steve?’ and he thinks maybe it would’ve been better to talk to her about because at least he could walk away unscathed. The look on Jonathan’s face is too understanding too quick. Several lines fill the older Byers’ forehead, slightly shaded by his hair.

“Shit, he really is an asshole,” Jonathan just said. It’s the most emotion Steve’s gotten out of him other than a few stray laughs since their fight over a year ago. “Nancy would kill him.”

Steve nodded. It still doesn’t answer how he knows this. It still doesn’t tell him anything and he’s starting to think it all only leads back in one circle. Steve tries to get an answer, Billy offers him a question in the form of a few too accurate burns, and then it all repeats.

“Are you going to track him down again?” Jonathan said, knowing better while also keeping the ‘please don’t’ to a minimum when he looked at him. Steve’s finger rubbed over his lip absently, which is just as much of an answer as it isn’t. “Don’t kill yourself over this asshole, he’s not worth it.”

“You would’ve said the same thing about me a year ago,” Steve said, shocking even himself. Nancy was right, he’s officially defending Billy Hargrove, may hell freeze over.

“Yeah, but--” Jonathan stopped. “You’re not everybody, some people don’t change.”

“He already is,” Steve couldn’t believe he was saying this, he’s even gladder they’re alone in the darkroom. “He’s...I dunno...different? He’s cracking up I think.”

Jonathan looked confused, “so duck and cover. Don’t lay yourself right over the mine.”

But you just want to help, because that’s what King Steve does.

“If you haven’t noticed, I’m pretty good at that,” Steve said with a dark laugh.

Jonathan stared at him for a moment before going back to his camera. “You don’t have to do this,” he mumbled.

“Probably not,” Steve picked up the bag with his gym clothes in them. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Jon,” he said lamely with finger guns and started to leave.

“See ya later, Steve.”

Steve left the darkroom, he didn’t really get far. He didn’t get far at all, in fact, less than five feet away from the darkroom he was being yanked by the back of his neck into another one of the school’s tight crannies.

“Hey, Harrington,” Billy crooned. He spun him around so they were face to face in the narrow cubicle of cement blocks and gunmetal blue paint.

Steve fixed him with a glare. “Is dragging me into tight corridors going to be a thing for you now, Hargrove?” He said, “cause I’d like a schedule.”

Billy hummed like he was really considering making a schedule for him. “How about whenever I
feel like doing it? Does that work for you, King Steve?"

“Nah,” he squinted, voice sounding bitter. “I don’t think so.” Billy had his hand curled into the front of Steve’s shirt again, drawing him in close. Steve waited for Billy to hit him, isn’t that how this always ends? “Look, man, it’s been a long day, can you just punch me and move on already?” Steve said with all the jadedness of a twice-divorced mother of five.

“I knew you were a bit of a masochist, but I didn’t think you’d actually beg me to hit you, Harrington.” The hand in his shirt unfurled. Steve stared at the wrinkled fabric a little in disbelief that Billy hadn’t done something else. In some sort of role reversal, Billy was pressing Steve back with the tips of his two fingers until he had his own cement wall and Billy had his.

Steve swallowed hard, so hard his throat hurt. His tongue licked out across his bottom lip and his arms found their way around his waist, the old band-aid crinkled loudly. “Why else would you drag me into a corner?”

Billy could think of another reason he would have him in this tight secluded cranny between the darkroom and bunch of lockers after school. His bottom lip slid between his teeth, rolled out wet and shining. “Heard what you told Byers in there. Can’t say it’s smart to spill your guts to your ex’s new boyfriend, but whatever. Didn’t know you thought so highly of me.”

“I don’t! I don’t think highly of you.” Steve shook his head, flustered. It’s a cute look on him. “You were listening?”

“Well, I’m not gonna keep on walking when I hear my name,” Billy said like he was stupid. “Never know when someone’s secretly plotting my death.” And Steve would call him ridiculous, but he was drugged once so he’s got a right to be paranoid even if he can tell he’s not being serious.

“So why am I here then?”

Billy looked at the two moles just below his eyes.

Maybe he’s here because he felt like he owed Steve something and maybe that something was an apology. Maybe he’s here because Billy wanted him to be. Maybe he’s here and it’s even better he hasn’t left yet.

But he’s not a little bitch so those are ‘maybes’ that don’t mean jack shit.

“You know me, Harrington,” Billy grinned, in this tight little corridor, he was close enough that he could smell him. His stomach did a little flutter. Steve watched Billy pull out a slip of paper, he pressed the flat of it against his chest. “Sometimes I like ruffling your feathers.” Billy stepped past him out of the corridor with a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Have a good one.”

When Billy was gone, Steve looked at the sheet. He could still feel the warmth on his chest where Billy’s hand lingered on the skin. His fingers deftly pulled the paper open. His body iced over.

As clear as the night at the Byers, it was the opening face of the Demogorgon.

Everything was accurate down to the shading of twinkling Christmas lights against its slimy skin. It was as if Billy had been there himself.

‘MAKE IT GO AWAY.’

Steve drew this. He watched the sheet burn hoping it would give him some sort of closure. He
recognized the frantic scribbling of all the times he’s screamed ‘NO!’ in his sleep. All the begging and pleading for his life, for the kids’, for Nancy’s swirled around the picture like a dark abyss, but it’s not in his handwriting.

It’s Billy Hargrove.

The same handwriting at the top of the sheet is the same that’s colliding and exploding all over the page of World Studies homework just barely visible underneath. Steve held the sheet in his shaking hands, felt sick to his stomach--thought he might vomit. Cold sweat started beading across his forehead long ago and stays firmly stuck to his skin like the ice in his bones.

Steve flipped the sheet over.

*Come and get me. Old Cherry Lane.*

- *B.H.*

Billy Hargrove knows about the Upside Down.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really curious what you guys think of Mr. Cooper? Is he good? Is he bad? Do you not care because he's just some World Studies teacher and Steve knowing that Billy knows about the Upside Down is way more important (Which is totally fair)? Anyway, if you have an opinion on him I'd love to hear it! Thanks for reading as always! :)

Also one more gift! Two Playlists (if you're interested in music!)

50s-80s Music:
https://open.spotify.com/user/z5vmt4i0eg0dw3emz1tcernkt/playlist/509pXJDoWakscbb7ayO1z0?si=PFUHoaa77RTSArX50isBOwA

Modern Music:
https://open.spotify.com/user/z5vmt4i0eg0dw3emz1tcernkt/playlist/2VAweBWWO4D8eVWAQBi si=MbRtPotTSrWeV00a_j1NjA
Max let her foot down on the asphalt, skidded around the corner and halted fully. Across the paving Billy was laying flat on his back. The Old Cherry Lane road sign wasn't far from his feet, he had one hand behind his head, the other lowered a cigarette down to his lips.

Max’s nose wrinkled. It’s not like Billy’s ever enjoyed the weather before. He doesn’t enjoy things, she’s pretty sure. “What’re you doing?”

Billy didn’t move, “you mind fucking off, Maxine.”

“It’s just a question.” The cuffs of her jeans--they’re too long but Susan insists she’ll grow into them-- tickled the grass back as she walked over to him. Max’s face blotted out the sun and blocked Billy’s view of the sky. She leaned over him with his face scrunched up to the nth degree and her lips pursed like an inspector.

They’re going to burn the Mind Flayer out of him soon and she still can’t find a reason not to.

She’s just sure there’s something else going on, but even she knows the boys wouldn’t listen to just a hunch, especially coming from her.

“What?” The cigarette sticking out of his puckered lips, wobbling around the syllable.

“Why are you out here?”

“Dad’s home. He’s pissed.” The school called about his locker, he’s not happy about it, as if he’s ever happy about anything. They said they’ll pay to have it fixed and that’s the only reason he’s not sporting any new damage.

Max didn’t say anything, which means she’s catching on: If Neil’s around, Billy isn’t.
Billy watched her cross her legs and sit down beside him. “Fuck Maxine, since when were we friends?” He watched her pluck at the grass anxiously, “and stop pulling Mother Nature's hair, you don't see her pulling at any of yours.”

His ma used to say that all the time.

She glared at him “We’re not friends, I hate you,” she said, but her hands stilled. “You’re the worst person I know.” The news isn’t news to Billy, he’s the worst person a lot of people know. Max shifted, she pulled at the ripped grass that’d collected on the boot of jeans instead. "Do you ever think about that night?” She asked.

She says ‘that night’ like it’s supposed to mean nothing and everything all at once. It sounded like she's trying to suck out all it's meaning so that 'that night' could literally mean two years ago on a Wednesday and 'that night' could also mean the creation of the whole of existence.

“No, why the hell would I?” Billy lied.

He thinks about it constantly now. His before and after was pain and immediate blackness followed by more pain. Steve’s before and after of that night was so much more than he could ever imagine.

He can't stop thinking about it.

“I don’t know,” Max shrugged. “It’s just a question.”

No, what it is is a loaded question. “Yeah,” he drawled, “whatever.”

“You’re acting like a weirdo,” she said. There’s no extra sting in her tone like there usually is when she starts grumbling.

Billy raised his arm to look up at his watch, if Steve’s as smart as he is pretty, he should be rolling up in a few minutes. He’d like to get away from Maxine, now, he's really not appreciating this new communicative relationship they're building up.

She's not his fucking sister after all.

“Max, you and I both know, I don’t give a shit how you think I act.”

She scoffed. “I know. You don’t care about anything.”

“Then why are you hanging around me like you're waiting for me to?”

“I dunno,” she shrugged, Billy watched her start to raise her arms and then thought better of it. He felt guilty about that. "Because you might do something crazy...something really bad.”

It's plausible for Billy to do something even worse than he's already done, it doesn't take a lot to push him over the edge. People crack up and do awful things--to other people, to themselves--all the time. A man down the hall in her old apartment complex did.

They found him in his room hanging, twirling from the ceiling fan like a limp ballerina. Her mom didn't let her anywhere near all the commotion.

Billy barked out a laugh. “For starters, let’s not pretend you give a shit as long as it has nothing to do with those freaks you call friends.”

"They're not freaks." She stiffened. "And that’s not…” she cut herself off Billy was sure she
couldn't say it all, but it was on the tip of her tongue: 'that's not true.' She didn't move, except to rest her head on her fist. Her other hand toyed with more grass. For a moment he thinks Max by his side resembles a dog sitting patiently.

Maxine would make a fucking ugly dog.

Billy looked at his watch and frowned, Steve drives slow with the attention span of a fly, but he should be here soon. “Hey, shitbird, you gotta scram soon.”

Max’s lips pursed. “Why?”

“The fuck do you mean why? Because I got somewhere to be and I don’t want you around,” he said plainly. “Don’t tell my dad either.”

Max eyed him, “how’re you gonna get ‘somewhere’?” She asked.

“None of your fucking business,” he snarled, getting irritated by her insistence. He briefly wondered if this is what it’s like to have a little sibling for real. They say little siblings are nosey and intrusive, it's annoying. “I said fuck off, Mad Max.”

Max stared at him for a moment, there it was again, Mad Max. She never told him about her little alias at the Palace and God forbid he ever step foot in there. She rolled her eyes and stood, “have fun with your girlfriend or whatever.”

Billy snorted. How fucking funny, she thinks I do girlfriends.

Her new skateboard clattered onto the asphalt, she mounted it giving him one more glance over her shoulder. “Mom’s gonna try to make salmon tonight,” she said.

“I’ll keep the number for poison control out.”

Max snorted. “She’s not that bad,” she lied.

She pushed off down the hill with her middle finger raised. Billy didn’t watch and he didn’t almost laugh at Max’s poor attempt at covering Susan’s ass. She’s not his sister.

Not even close.

Not even a little.

He pulled at Mother Nature’s hair until it gave way under his fingers tip, just like his ma always hated. It made him think of sitting in the backyard with her, pointing out funny looking clouds and bright colored birds. They'd sip lemonade and talk and read and look at clouds until sunset sometimes. Now he’s sitting under a crooked road sign in the bum-fuck middle of nowhere waiting to get picked up by Steve Harrington like he's some kind of three dollar whore.

Billy lamented his entire life; oh, how the world changes on you.

Harrington’s brown BMW rolled to a stop at the street corner. Billy sat up for a moment and let out the last exhale of his cigarette before flicking it onto the cold ground, taking the cherry fire right out of it. If his wiring wasn’t so fucked up and damaged or whatever his dad says, he probably wouldn’t feel his stomach drop out of his ass when he looked at him.

But he does and there’s nothing he can do about it.
The whole whore analogy didn’t feel too off in Billy’s mind as he leaned down into the window, looking into Harrington’s car and right at his face. “I thought only girls were supposed to take this long?” He teased to hide the shaking in his voice.

Steve rolled his eyes. He’s nervous, Billy can tell by the bounce of his leg partially hidden by the steering wheel. His knuckles are white around the steering wheel. “Are you gonna just stand there?”

Billy's tongue rolled across his bottom lip slowly. He grinned, “I guess not.”

The silence was stuffy and unbearable, sitting next to him in his car that felt too cramped despite being enormous compared to the Camaro. It made his skin itch. Steve’s eyes were trying to burn a hole into him. They flitted over him--mostly his face, from the bruise and back to his eyes like he was looking for something. Billy’s jaw tightened. “You know you can drive now, right?”

He made a little noise in the back of his throat like an irritated groan choked off and put the car back in drive.

Billy did look fazed, in his clenched jaw and white knuckled fists, and in the glow, he used to have, he doesn't look calm anywhere except in the face. Steve's almost envious of him, it took him a lot of movie marathons and more alcohol than Nancy would approve of before he could accept 'the Upside Down' and even get to the point of fake calm. He couldn't stop replaying it, back then he wasn't even scared. It was just surreal, it felt like a dream that he needed to hold onto.

It was just so fucking surreal.

“If you keep looking at me instead of the road you’re gonna wreck your car, Harrington,” Billy grumbled. “I know I’m a real knockout and all, but you better not wrap this thing around a telephone pole with me in it.”

Steve pursed his lips, his eyes faced the road. Billy could tell he was thinking a lot.

“Who told you?” He asked. “Max?”

Billy snorted, “you think she tells me shit?” He shook his head. "No, she tells me what she wants for dinner, when she wants to go to the arcade, and to stay the fuck away from her.” Steve cast him a quick withering glance.

“There’s no one else. So who?”

You told me, you tool.

"Saw something," Billy lied.

*The Thompson Twins* played at a hum that sat low between them. If he asked him if he liked the group Steve would flush a pretty red and stutter. He thought about it, just to give him something to do. The air in the car was suffocating and charged, he needed something to break.

“Is that what happened to your face?” Steve asked first.

The large band-aid that covers better most of his cheek twiched with the smirk that pulled apart his face. “Can’t tell unless you kiss it better, Harrington,” Billy said, slow and cheeky.

Steve swallowed at ‘kiss,’ it hissed slowly from Billy’s mouth like that word specifically was supposed to mean something extra. He scoffed after a while. “God that’s gross.” He snorted. "All
the pus that’s probably under that angry looking thing? That's disgusting, I'm not going anywhere near that."

“Didn’t know you were such a germ freak," he teased again, tongue darting out again just to piss him off. He's cuter when he's a little riled up.

Steve's cheeks turned a shade of hot pink. "I'm not, jackass,” he hissed.  

*He kind of is.*

His fingers drummed nervously and offbeat to the music on the radio like he’s in his own little world. He was nervous and jittery from the get-go, but it seems like staying in this car without getting much out of Billy was killing him.

“You know they say patience is a virtue, Harrington,” Billy kept grinning. “Didn’t pining after Wheeler for a century teach you anything?”

“Why do you--?” Steve sucked on the front his teeth, his lips pursed; the look almost made Billy break out laughing. “Look,” he schooled his voice into some semblance of authority, “I’m just trying to figure out what the hell is going on.” Steve’s brain teetered on finishing with ‘you don’t have to make this so difficult,’ but it’s Billy ‘everything has to be difficult’ Hargrove that he’s talking to and shouldn’t be expecting anything but ‘difficult’.

*That would be just too easy.*

“Really? I thought you were gonna get me a milkshake after this?” He drawled. “Since you insist on hanging around me and everything.”

“I’m not hanging around you.”

“The last two lunch periods would say otherwise, but *sure* ,” Billy said slowly. There was something else about that word ‘sure’ that curled like a warm blanket in Steve’s ears.  

*Gross.*

“Because you’re a sobbing mess,” he snapped. That's absolutely positively why. It's not like Lori's party reignited some weird interest he has in Hargrove or anything. It's not like he was using this as some sort of excuse to notice Billy as more than a bully. But Billy is also gross. *G -r-o-s-s. Gross.*  

His jaw set. He wasn’t amused anymore and that amused Steve to no end. “Did that one stick, your highness?” Steve recited, carefully imitating Billy. “Did I really hurt your feelings that time?”

“You really are a bitch, Harrington?” Billy sneered.

“You need to find a new insult, I’m used to that one,” Steve said, it made Billy think of King Steve, the Steve before Nancy and the Upside Down--a confident Steve. “And it doesn’t mean a whole lot coming from you anymore anyway.”

“What the hell's that supposed to mean?”

“You’re in my car only because I want you to be, man.” Steve took another turn on the road, Billy had *no clue* where they were anymore. “Say all the shit you want because right now we’re at a truce, y’know? Like...like those guys in the war on Christmas.”

Billy ignored him. “Where’re you taking me, anyway?” He asked, not looking at him. If he wanted to tap into Steve’s memories he could probably map out the whole town and figure out where the
hell they’re going at the cost of another nosebleed.

“Sattler’s quarry,” Steve said. “No one goes out there anymore--” he cut himself off. Billy already knew he was going to say, no one goes out there after they found not Will Byers’ body out there. Steve even knows that people think a little girl haunts Sattler’s quarry, but they both know that girl is El.

Billy nodded.

The wheels of the BMW crackled over the loose gravel until the whole thing stopped up at the top of some peak. “Forgot how fucking high up it is out here,” he noted warily and mostly to himself.

“You're the one that drove here all the way up here,” Billy said, getting out of the car. He turned around, Harrington’s arms were crossed again, his fingers reached up to drum across his lips while his eyes shifted across the large dust bowl in front of them. Billy raised an eyebrow, “got a problem with heights, Harrington?”

“Fuck off,” he grumbled. His bottom lip slid between his teeth.

Billy sat on the rocks and watched the deep pink of Harrington's lip turn red under the constant pressure of his teeth. “You wanna sit or are you just gonna stand there? You got less of a chance falling sitting, so do yourself a favor, Harrington.”

Only then did Steve move. He stopped pulling and tugging on the soft skin of his lips and sat down next to Billy with a certain amount of cautiousness that showed he didn’t believe a word he said. “Not if the cliff gives way.”

"Then we're both just plain ol' fucked."

Billy pushed a cigarette between his lips and lit it with shaking hands. He's going to have to tell him soon, he has to fucking tell him. He has to tell him. *He has to tell him*. Billy knew reality was painful, he didn’t expect it to physically hurt like this.

Shouldn’t have done this, Billy thought when he looked over at Steve.

They were just shy of being able to look at the turquoise water below, Steve was peering over the edge warily with his eyebrows pulled down over his eyes.

“You just had to sit here,” Steve lamented.

Billy swallowed, his voice shook, “I like the view.”

Fucking with Harrington is much easier than what he has to do, fucking with Steve comes like breathing to him. Billy looked over the edge, he picked up a rock and flung it over. He didn't want to tell shit to Steve Harrington when messing with him was just so much better than anything else.

One one thousand

...Two one thousand

...Three one thousand

“We’d fall for about fifty-six seconds, break a ton of bones and drown, you know the water is practically cement from this high up,” Billy said, “that’s lethal.”

The sound that came from the back of Steve’s throat was everything Billy could ever hope for.
Harrington's teeth went back to abusing his already read lips. "Really wish you hadn't said that."

Billy laughed, it was all shaky, but a laugh anyway.

*That's the point.*

Billy sucked in on his cigarette, he almost thought about offering him one. Steve doesn't smoke anymore, not even for fun really, only when the anxiety is bad enough. It helps when his hands are shaking too hard for him to do his homework. He's not friends with Harrington anyway.

“IT's a lot,” he said finally. He eyed Billy for a moment, the Upside Down affected everyone. Billy's just like he was--falling apart on the inside, cracking and stretched so thin that it shows physically. His skin used to glow gold, he hasn't seen that sort light in a while. “It can do a lot to you...knowing all that stuff,” he paused. “What those people will do to you if you try to say something about it...it’s a lot.”

Steve knew where Jonathan and Nancy went that day when they vanished, he was pissed-- so pissed he wanted to crack them both over the head and scream. He almost slammed Jonathan up against the wall. He heard Jonathan mention the way they set that shit up at the park flawlessly, fucked up their car, and brought them in.

They scared Steve.

They terrified Billy.

“Who said I wanted to tell anyone anything about that fucking hellscape? *I don't care,*" Billy grounded out around his cigarette, just the idea of those fucking goons anywhere near him pissed him off and made his skin crawl. There was a certain amount of validity to his mother’s paranoia about the government that he was never able to shake off. "Do I look like the type that’s gonna try to uncover our great government’s big secrets?"

“Does Nancy?” He paused for a minute.

Billy gave him a withering look.

“Okay, bad example,” Steve sighed. "My mistake. But it's not bullshit," Steve said. He picked up a rock and threw it too. Billy didn't think he was counting, Harrington's lips *always* move when he's counting--even in his head. He watched them anyway, a thin grimace on his face. “If you know what I know about that lab you can't think any of this bullshit."

That, they could agree on, so Billy said nothing. He ashed his cigarette on the hard earth and threw a rock over the edge. Billy wished he knew more about it than what Steve had to offer, he wished he had El levels of knowledge on Hawkins lab when he could've come from a place like that.

“I know it’s not bullshit,” he said. “It makes it even less bullshit that it’s coming from you.”

Steve stared at him for too long.

Now would be a good time to say something, while he’s already got his mouth hanging open a little and Billy's already made himself say something stupid. Harrington's eyes are a little too wide, why not add one more shocker on top of the last?

“You’re different, you know?" Billy said like he’s the one that’s been acting weird the last few days. “What did you say? It can do a lot to you?”
Steve’s throat clicked dryly. “Yeah.”

“I don’t think it’s done shit to me,” Billy said. The idea of the Upside Down doesn’t scare him like it should and neither does the idea of a demodog stalking the night. It’s like any other rabid creature, you grab a shotgun and blast it in its flower face.

Steve eyed him, found his voice again, “clearly, it has.”

“It hasn’t,” he repeated, voice tight. “And I don’t need you worrying about me anymore, alright?”

"Oh my God,” Steve froze, he paled. "Please don’t tell me you brought me up here to watch you die."

Billy choked.

“High cliff, you’re acting weird, you literally just said you don’t need me worrying about you anymore,” Steve counted off. “You know what that sounds like....like a whole lot of bad."

Oh my fucking God.

“If I wasn’t trying to tell you I think I’m a freaky goddamn science experiment, I would punch you in the face, Harrington,” Billy said. “God you’re so...I’m not gonna throw myself off a fucking cliff you fucking idiot. Why the hell would I throw myself off a fucking cliff that I didn't even know you were bringing me to! I didn't even know this was here! You’re a morbid piece of shit,” Billy snarled. "Christ, and really if I was, that's how you would respond?"

"I don't want to see anyone commit suicide, alright!” Steve said in his usual hysterics. "You say shit like that and you think I'm supposed to respond normally? And morbid?” Steve snorted, “you’re the one that--” Billy could see the exact moment Steve's brain got a hold of what he'd said before all of that. “ Wait a minute, you think you're WHAT? WHAT?”

And there it was.

He wondered how you do it? But really how does anyone do anything when it’s big news? You rip the fucking band-aid off and never look back. That’s how everyone in his life has done it, it’s all he really knows. His mother took the old Volkswagen and drove it into the ocean--band-aid ripped off. Your mom is brain dead--band-aid ripped off.

Don’t look back.

Rip the band-aid off.

Billy rubbed a hand over his face and sighed.

This was a really bad idea.

Steve shot up, forgetting completely about the safety of sitting or that he just went through some sort of suicide scare or something, Billy wasn't going to think about it anymore. Steve paced, he went back and forth like the little ball in Pong. He ran his hand through and grabbed at his hair until it was sticking up.

Billy watched him.

Back and forth.

“No, no. That’s...This is crazy. You're nuts, you're actually insane, there's no way.”
Back and forth.

His mouth opened, “Listen, Hargrove, what makes you....”

Back and forth.

“Okay, okay,” he ran his hand through his ruined hair. “What…” he licked his lips, “just...how did you come to that conclusion exactly?”

Back and forth.

Billy snorted at that, ‘conclusion’ he said like it was just a theory.

Harrington can shove any idea that this is just some dumb hunch right up his curved ass.

Billy sent him a withering glare. “You wanna sit down, tiger?”

All the pacing made him more nervous than he wanted to admit. Not that Billy is calm, because he’s not. He’s shaking, the only thing hiding it is his sweatshirt. Another cigarette found its way between his lips.

“Sit?” Steve choked. “Did you just…” Harrington’s face turned vermillion, he looked wild. “Sit? Right fucking now? No, no, no, what the hell do you mean you think you’re a science experiment?”

Steve has no idea how much he sounds like his mother, squawking and shrieking like this and Billy’s almost inclined to tell him.

Almost.

“I’ve got freaky fucking mind powers,” Billy said.

“Like--”

“Like El.”

Steve wanted to roll over and die. He’s going to have gray hairs by the end of the summer. The guy that beat his face in, Billy-fucking-Hargrove disciple of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, all that is evil and rude, has mind powers and knows about the Upside Down.

Tonight he’s drinking himself into a coma.

“What is all this, man?” He needed to know, he was on the edge of panic. The only thing he had to cling into in a sea of questions is the hope he'll get answers.

“A goddamn nightmare.” He shut his eyes and swallowed so hard Steve could see the flex in his throat. “You’re in my fucking head.”

“Okay,” Steve drewled, his eyes didn't leave Billy. “Could you expand on that? What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that’s my fucking power,” he spat. He’s hasn't called it a power since he was a kid and he felt more like an X-Men than a freak. “I touch shit, I get all the information it's got, happens with an object, I can tell you everything about it.” The breath that came out of him was weak and shaky. “Happens with a person it's...it's different. I get all their thoughts, memories, emotions, abilities.”
Steve was finally putting it together looks like.

“That night at the party…” He said, horrified. That feeling that something had snaked into his brain and sucked him dry, that wasn’t just a weird little feeling brought on by cheap beer and anxiety.

That was Billy.

That was Billy in his brain.

“You touched me. I fucking told you not to, but you just wouldn’t fucking listen. You just have to fucking help people, right?” He laughed coldly. “Well, you really fucking helped me.”

“Jesus, God...I... Billy ,” Steve started. “I didn’t know.”

“Bullshit you didn’t know!” He yelled. “I fucking warned you and you just didn’t fucking listen!”

Steve’s mouth felt heavy and dry and his ears started to ring. “You...you were drugged, Billy. I didn’t know what you were saying. You were going to hurt yourself,” Steve said. He could feel Billy’s gaze on him burning through his skin. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. “Jesus, fuck, man, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah?” Billy laughed, “I know how fucking sorry you are, Harrington. You’re always sorry, it’s the only reason I didn’t obliterate that pretty little face of yours.”

“Because you...you can tell,” Steve spoke softly, all quiet and nervous. Billy can see his brain cracking behind his eyes. “You can tell how I’d feel because I’m...I’m in your head.”

“King Steve has officially caught on,” Billy jeered.

Steve sat back with his mouth hanging open, “oh my God I’m going to fucking faint.” He threw his arm over his eyes and collapsed on the rubble. “Just...fucking...oh my God...give me a minute. Jesus,” he breathed. “I’m dying, right now. I’m dying I swear to God I’m dying. My heart is currently shutting down, I swear. Oh my God.” Steve muttered feverishly under his breath like a goddamn dramatic bitch.

He drew his knees up and rested his chin on them. “I’m not rescuitating you,” Billy said finally.

“That’s fine, honestly,” Steve quivered. “I’m fine with death, now.” He sat up again, gray dust in his brown locks which have spiked up from the stress of today. He looked more like a crazed cockatoo than anything else. “Actually, no, you have my fucking memories, is that why you won’t look at me?” He asked. “Don’t give me that look like you’re gonna punch me,” Steve snitted. "Am I right?"

"Hard to look at someone when you know their shit." He looked at Harrington's eyes flecked with gold. They were softer than he thought he deserved and more than he hoped they would be.

"Oh," Steve whispered. "Yeah."

He wouldn't want to look at anyone after that.

"You’re a sad sack of shit," Billy mumbled into his arm.

Steve's lips pursed, "I know."

"Yeah," Billy intoned. “I could ruin your life with all the shit I know about you, but I don’t wanna
do that. You’re screwed up enough on your own, Harrington,” Billy said. “I don’t think you need it anymore.”

Steve blinked. His eyes turned sharp and bright like he’d been startled, “you thought I did before?”

Billy scoffed, “pull your head out of your ass, pretty boy, I didn’t think anything before. I didn’t care what you wanted or needed.”

Half of the time all the picking and jeering didn't even have to do with him, really, it was about what he wanted. To rile him up. To make him feel small. To turn his cheeks that pretty shade of pink that they do when he’s flustered.

Steve’s breath caught in his throat. Didn’t. Didn’t is a past tense word, meaning Billy cares now. For him, that’s a lot to take in. “So, why are you telling me all this?”

Christ.

Billy looked up at the sky. He shut his eyes, for a moment he was pretty sure he saw God and his ma, staring down at him like he’s an idiot. He is an idiot, and this must be downright amusing to them. His ma would get a kick out of him right now, trying to do the right thing when he’s never been good at it. “I want you to leave me alone, alright? Just...stop worrying about me.”

Steve blinked again. He must be dreaming or reading too deeply into the worry lines marring Billy’s face and the hardness of his ocean blue eyes. He could’ve sworn he heard concern in Billy’s voice.

Oh.

Oh.

“You’re worried about me,” Steve said with dim assuredness. “You...Billy...you’re really this torn up about me worrying about you?” When Billy didn’t do anything but glare at him Steve knew for sure. “You’re really stressed about it, aren’t you?”

“You’re stressed so I’m stressed,” he snapped. “Don’t get a bigger head than you’ve already got over it.”

Steve heard him, but that didn’t matter.

Billy cares about him.

Billy is worried about him.

He could believe Billy’s a science experiment, he’s crude and lumbering and he wallops on people like he’s half animal-half man. He couldn’t believe Billy wanted him to stop worrying about him, because he’s worried about him. Steve would honestly have an easier time believing a pig sprouted wings and took off.

Dustin would probably be the one to have made said pig with wings, but whatever.

“Just,” Billy sighed.

“Fuck off,” Steve finished for him. “Because that’s logically what I’m supposed to do right now, after you’ve told me all this, right? Just not do anything at all and pretend it never happened.” Except he’s learned better than to try an fuck off when it comes to things like this. He tried to fuck
off and mind his own business and he ended up taking a nailed bat to a beast from hell, adopting, like, four teenagers, and another non-disclosure agreement. He’s learned it’s better to not just fuck off or he’ll get dragged back in kicking and screaming.

Billy didn’t say anything. He looked like he was craving another cigarette if the shakiness of his left hand was anything to go by, Steve assumed he’s all run out for now. “You’re good at pretending,” Billy said. “So just keep pretending.”

“Well, I don’t wanna anymore, alright?” Steve snapped. “I don’t wanna ‘just fuck off’ either, I’m not doing that anymore, man, I’ve learned my lesson.” Billy turned to look at him, his eyes alight with so much fire and anger, Steve’s surprised he didn’t combust on the spot. “What if we help each other?”

Billy actually laughed with his head tilted back. “Christ, Harrington.” He turned to look, “it’s that loneliness again, isn’t it? You just want somebody around your own goddamn age, even if it’s me.” Billy’s eyes searched his, they moved back and forth almost like he was reading something on his skin. “You willing to put up with it even if it’s me,” Billy amended.

“That’s not--”

“I’m in your head, pretty boy,” Billy said. “You can’t lie to me.”

Steve’s gaze hardened. “Look, I don’t know what your fucking deal is, but I know you’re alone,” he said. “And that’s fine by you because, honestly, you’ve been faking it since you got here,” and maybe that’s proof that he’s spent his fair share of time studying Billy and he’s show off his cards, but it’s true. He can get in Billy’s head too if he wants to. “But if you’re alone in this town for long enough, I know you’re gonna go crazier than you already are.”

If Steve was surprised he didn’t combust before, he’s pretty sure it’s a miracle now. Billy’s face is red, like an alarm, like a stop sign, like a neon danger sign. “This is all your fault,” he spat. “You’re the reason I even have to do this.”

“I know,” Steve said. “I’m sorry.” And he meant it. He wouldn’t wish another person in someone else’s head on anyone, even Billy, ironically enough. He definitely wouldn’t wish himself into another person’s head, Steve can barely handle himself in his head sometimes, let alone two people.

Billy didn’t say anything. No ‘sorry can’t fix this,’ no ‘fuck you,’ not even ‘if you apologize one more time I’ll punch you in the face.’ Steve almost expected him to start swinging instead.

Billy hasn’t had a friend in so long, he wouldn’t even know where to start with being someone’s friend, and Steve Harrington wants to be friends with like they’re in kindergarten. “You’d be better off if you just left me alone,” Billy said. “I nearly turned your face into a crater.”

Steve knew that was an empty threat, Billy’s got that concerned look on his face again. “I’m still gonna worry about you even if you tell me not to. You can't tell me not to worry about something like a switch is gonna flip,” Steve said. “At least if we’re around each other, we can keep an eye on each other. I won’t let you go too crazy, and you won’t let me go too crazy either. That’s all this is...so we don’t worry ourselves to death.”

Billy really didn’t know anything about friendship, but this sounded a lot like. He hasn’t had anyone that’s kept him from going crazy in a really, really long time. He can’t imagine how Harrington who’s already half insane could keep him from going completely insane, he didn’t really want to think about it.
Steve kept thinking how utterly exhausted Billy looked, but facing him head on was a different story, he looked washed out. Steve remember Mike saying El gets tired when she uses her powers, Billy hasn’t recently, but maybe he’s the same. “Just say yes,” Steve said. His eyebrows furrowed, “you should be in bed sleeping, man, just say yes so I can take you back.”

Billy didn’t look at him. He hasn’t even said anything and Steve’s already trying to take care of him. It made his chest clench. “Yeah,” he sighed. “Okay, fine, Harrington. You’ll make sure I don’t go crazy or whatever.”

Steve smiled and he knew it was genuine. Billy stared at it for a moment, feeling all sorts of weird feelings watching it sheepishly cross Harrington’s face. Knowing he put it on there, it's like putting the sun up in the sky.

The air between him and Billy has shifted and he can’t tell what’s in it. All he can tell is that he’s not afraid he’ll get hit. “We’re cool now, right?” Steve asked. He already knew the answer.

“Yeah,” Billy nodded.

This is a bad idea.

This is a probably the worst idea anyone’s ever come up within the history of worst ideas ever made. He hasn’t had a friend in a very, very long time.

Chapter End Notes

Normally I wouldn't say something cheesy like ‘writers love comments and kudos :)’ but today was a really, really bad day (hence why I'm posting this so late, I'm sorry about that) and I really do appreciate them. Like, all of it really puts a smile on my face (which I definitely need right now). So...*long sigh* yeah, this is the one (1) time I'm gonna say something cheesy like that.

On a happier note!: Look! Look! They're friends now! The boys talked about feelings and they're friends now! How cute is that?!

Thanks so much for reading, I really do appreciate it! You all are awesome! :)
VIII. Let it Go

Chapter Notes

Shout out to my friend who actually beta'd this chapter a little, so hopefully no more missed words! I think this one might be a little longer than usual again but like... :/ oh well :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve wanted to pinch his own arm, better yet, Billy could do it for him. He’d probably get a big kick out of it. Nothing has felt right since Saturday and now he knew why his world was just as off kilter as Billy’s in its own way.

Steve stole a glance at Billy sound asleep in the passenger seat. It made Steve think about that time he read that short story in English about a troop in World War I, they all couldn’t sleep the first night. They were in a foreign bed surrounded by strangers while their families were miles away. They didn’t sleep except for from exhaustion until they got comfortable with each other. Steve sort of got it, like, you don’t fall asleep at party unless you want to wake up with a ton of dicks or worse on your face.

He guessed it was more exhausting that brought Billy to sleeping in his car than some weird sense of trust they’ve built up in the last hour and a half. He’s pretty sure he’s about to shatter though.

“Billy,” Steve looked over at him and smacked his arm a few times, “Hey, Billy?

“Don’t touch me,” he slurred. Billy stifled a yawn, “what?”

Steve bit back his laughter, “you fell asleep, man. Did you know you snore?”

“I don’t fucking snore,” Billy growled.

He doesn’t, but he does make a weird little noise, Steve thought. His lips pulled until a small grin watching Billy get his bearings. He really was asleep, he thought again, like out.

“Your music put me to sleep,” he groaned out, stretching. Steve could hear his spine crack and winced. “Either that or it’s these fancy seats.”

Steve sent him an unimpressed look, “shouldn’t have let you recharge your batteries.”

Billy only snorted. His batteries for far from charged, if anything he just feels gross and exhausted. There’s a grimy taste in his mouth that he can’t get rid no matter how much he swallows and his head hurts. He looked out the windshield and frowned. “What are we doing here?”

Beatrice’s was another B-named dinner with more or less B+ diner food replaced Benny’s Burgers and opened about a month ago. They spackled on new paint and faux brick on the outside, added a new red and black sign, but it’s still Benny’s Burgers and everyone knows that.

Steve shrugged with his shoulders almost up to his ears. “Figured you should probably eat something.” He looked nervous again like he thought he might’ve done something wrong and it showed in the slope of his shoulders. “But you’ve probably got dinner at home or something, I
just...yeah, this was stupid.”

Billy turned from Harrington back to Beatrice’s and thought of Susan’s attempt at salmon. “It’s not the worst idea,” he grumbled. “I didn’t really plan on going back until late anyway.”

Out the corner of his eye, he saw Harrington perk up a little. “Oh,” Billy was pretty sure he thought the minor changes had gone unnoticed, he sprung up like a flower at the height of spring. It wasn’t subtle, but Steve’s never been good a being subtle. “Cool, that’s cool. So uh...milkshakes?”

A milkshake sounds amazing, he’s starving actually. Something told him Harrington needed this just as much as Billy could convince himself he did. Billy can convince himself of anything if he tries hard enough. “You know I was joking about that earlier, right?”

“Who said I took your idea into consideration, Hargrove,” Steve said. “Besides, chocolate milkshake, long day, come on.”

“Fine, since you’ve had such a long, hard day and all,” Billy said. Steve sent him the driest look he’s ever seen, except the flush creeping into his cheeks. “Yeah, I really have and who’s fault was that?” He said pointedly.

Billy shrugged easily. “Couldn’t imagine.”

Billy was pretty sure Steve was going to spend a lot of his time convincing him to do things. His tongue ambled across his bottom lip, but he was going to pretend he minded it a lot more than actually did. They're barely friends after all - exactly, barely friends.

He got out of the car and the world tilted fast, fast, fast; too fast if he had any say in it. He grabbed some part of the Beemer to keep from falling over. His head felt like someone had just cracked a frying pan over it.

“Billy!” One of his hands grabbed onto something soft and solid while the other gripped the curls at the side of his head. Steve was standing in front of him with one of his arms curled around his biceps, holding him up. “Billy--”

“I’m fine.” It felt like his hand was the only thing holding his skull together and if he let go his whole head would erupt in a bloody mushroom cloud. He’s pretty sure someone put a mini-napalm in his head and it’s about to go off. “Stood too fast,” his cotton dry mouth worked hard to put together the only sentence he brain could handle. He tried to use his other hand to push him away, Steve grabbed it and slowly pushed him down into the seat.

Steve scoffed. “Yeah, like I’m supposed to believe you have hypertension.”

Billy forced his eyes opened. He didn’t remember the sun being so bright, it’s afternoon and it shouldn’t be this bright. It was like a flash being shone directly into his eyes, it dimmed until Steve came into view, deep worry lines in his face, eyes bright and alert, and too close for comfort. “I’m fine.” Billy swatted at him. He’s way too close. “I’m fine.” The earth stopped spinning like one of those Zero-G rides on the boardwalk and his head stopped pounding. He didn’t need his hand to be a shitty bandage keeping his skull together anymore, Billy kept on holding his head for the same reason you freeze when you feel something icy breathing down your neck.

“Uh-huh,” Steve licked his lips nervously. He thought about that time El was ‘practicing,’ and she got lightheaded and fainted just like this. “Is this normal for you?”

Billy glared at him. “You’re an idiot you know that, Harrington?”
Steve groaned. “For crying out--why do I even bother asking?” He shook his head. “Can you move?” Billy stood up, faster than he should have and the world tilted, Steve’s arm curled around him again. “Jesus, Billy, take it easy.”

“I’m fine.”


Billy shrugged him off. “I am fine, it’s nothing.” He got on the sidewalk and stopped when he realized Steve was still standing by the car. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. He walked up beside him, more like strolled--not only is he pretty sure Steve’s slow, he’s actually slow too. “Nothing…” it’s just really fucking weird being scared to death over you. “You just kind of...uh...scared me.”

Billy snorted. Harrington was giving him that concerned look again that made his stomach do an aerial flip. “Yeah, well, that’s my job,” he said coolly. It might as well be, he scares everyone.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Just get inside, Hargrove.”

“As you wish, your Highness.”

Beatrice’s has the usual, massive breakfasts, gut-busting lunches, bottomless fries, a million different burgers. Steve’s pretty sure the insides bright red booths, retro laminate tables, and old-fashioned feel were all done just to compensate for the fact that Benny Hammond blew his brains out in the diner.

“Strawberry,” Steve’s eyebrows raised. “Really?”

Billy only offered him a middle finger, while taking a long sip from the ‘milkshake.’ The strawberry ‘milkshake’ at Beatrice’s technically counts as a smoothie considering they actually put real strawberries in it, but Hawkins just isn’t forward enough to call it what it is.

He’s living in a town where smoothie is a ‘progressive’ word.

It’s a goddamn tragedy.

“Shut up,” Billy said.

He missed smoothies, the real ones they used to sell in California and these are about as close as he can get. The waitress, Norma--tough old bird, not Billy’s type--even added extra strawberries for him and brought him an Aspirin for his headache. A lady like that is so under appreciated here, he thought.

“I thought you were gonna get real food,” Steve said. He dumped half of his fries into the tray and pushed it towards Billy. “You need to eat.”

“I’m not an animal, Harrington.”

Polly doesn’t want a fucking cracker, get it?

Steve’s face pinched up tight like he’d grabbed a lemon instead of handful of fries. “I--” Steve shut his mouth. “Jesus, I’m just being nice. I bet you’d be less of an asshole if you ate something.”

He had been hungry and then he got another headache special delivered from Hell. He couldn’t think about eating much of anything now without feeling like he’s going to puke. Billy shoved a
few fries in his mouth. “Happy?” He said with his mouth full.

“Yeah,” Steve muttered. Billy ignored him, he’s pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to hear that anyway.

“It’s not like you eat real food,” Billy said petulantly. “You eat popcorn and M&M’s for dinner, that’s not even close to a real meal.”

Steve avoided looking at him, his shoulders dropped. He wanted to defend himself, say he only eats like that when things get really bad, but he didn’t want to talk about when things get really bad. Billy probably already knows what it’s like for him, he has his memories after all. So Steve ignored him like any mom with a really fussy brat for a kid would. He bit into his burger, “you know Bell is gonna kill you as soon as you decide to show up in gym class,” he said. “I’m pretty sure he’s gonna have you run laps.”

“Great,” he grabbed another fry, “if I can get out of playing tennis then I don’t care.”

“You’re skipping because of tennis?”

“No,” Billy huffed. He’s not sure why he’s skipping, it’s not like he’s recently had a reason to not be there. Just the idea of gym and...and people and the noise. He doesn’t want to be near it all. It’s bothering him, not like it bothers Steve from time to time. No, the noise is bothering him, specifically. Billy doesn’t say any of that because Steve doesn’t need to know it and it’d only raise questions. “It’s gym, Harrington, if I don’t feel like going I’m not gonna go. What are they gonna do? Hold me back a year?”

Steve shrugged, “they couldn’t even if they wanted to, Mrs. Palmero’s stopped marking the records. I’m pretty sure she hasn’t written down a single incident since the new year.”

“Peachy,” Billy said, obviously liking that new information. “She always has the rod up her ass or is that a new development?”

“No, she’s always been like that,” Steve said.

Billy grinned, “I bet I could fix that.”

“That’s what I said sophomore year.”

“And?”

“Have you seen her smile?”

Not. Once.

“Oh come on, Harrington, you probably didn’t even try that hard. She’s a bored, old lady with a bunch of incompetent co-workers. That’s easy.” Billy smirked. “Bet I could uncork her screw in ten days.”

Steve choked, “Jesus, she’s old enough to be your mom, man.”

Billy laughed. He really is a prude and that was the point, it’s fun to mess with prudes “If you’re not gonna do your job, I guess I have to.”

“I keep forgetting you’re a walking headache,” he grumbled. “She doesn’t need someone to uncork her screw, man, that’s not always how it works.”
Billy thought of a million ways he could prove that theory wrong. “You clearly haven't had yours since Wheeler,” he grinned.

Sometimes he really does forget who he’s talking to. Plenty of bitches in the sea, that’s who he’s talking to. I’ll make sure to save you some, that’s who he’s having an early dinner with. Steve rolled his eyes, “whatever.”

Billy kept on grinning.

Steve’s pretty sure Billy hasn’t looked this amused since November. “I’m glad you think I’m so entertaining,” he quipped.

“I think you’re so entertaining,” he repeated loftily. “You have no idea, pretty boy.” I could look at you for hours.

“Jesus,” he looked away from him to the Jukebox in the corner and then back, Steve didn’t recognize the song on. “You’ve got all my memories.” Steve wasn’t sure how Billy saw them. He was thinking his brains like a view master, flick the switch and see something, flick--another flash, flick--another flash. But never a whole story, just a moment. He hoped they were brief. “You have no idea how weird that is for me.”

“I think I do,” he said. Unfortunately, he probably does if he’s in his head and all. “Don’t worry,” his tongue licked across his bottom lip, “I’ll keep all your secrets to myself.”

Steve sighed, “that doesn’t help, like, at all.”

Billy shrugged, “I dunno, I feel like your life would be a lot rougher if the whole school found out about your cute little hair regiment. I’m surprised Henderson hasn’t blabbed, the kid seems like the type.”

“Fuck you,” he said half-heartedly.

“If it makes you feel any better, the personal shit starts to fade,” he informed him before he could go into another bout of hysterics over everything. “I keep all the knowledge, the memories I want. Everything else I forget eventually.”

His eyes widened, all big and especially Bambi like. It dawned on him that this has happened to Billy before. “H-how many people have you...uh...like...absorbed?”

“I’m not a sponge, Harrington,” he groused. “And that’s my business, not yours.”

Steve pouted. “Can I get a range? Is it one through ten?”

“I’m not telling you,” Billy asserted.

“Fine, I...I probably shouldn’t know everything anyway.” He bit into his burger, “how much does Max know?”

“Nothing, you’re not telling her or anyone shit,” he said seriously. “Not your band of twerps, not Wheeler, not Byers, no one.”

Steve nodded again. Billy trusts him for the most part--in some weird turn of events. If he can keep the Upside Down and El a secret he can keep this one too.

“Am I the only one who knows?”
He shook his head, “my old man does.”

“Okay,” Steve looked at him. “Do you remember anything?”

“Like?”

Steve leaned in a little, his eyes shifted. “You know like...like a lab or...weird stuff?” He was never inclined to ask El what growing up in Hawkins lab was like. Truthfully, she freaked him out a little with her knowing brown eyes and unreadable expressions. He preferred if everything before November 1984 stayed as much a mystery to him as anyone else.

“No, I’m not a fucking McGee, Harrington,” Billy intoned. “Nothing weird happened to me. One minute I’m fine, next I can feel it and it’s like...like buzzing. That’s it.” He’s never had to describe it to anyone before, “it feels like my skin’s buzzing and it’s always been that way. Then it goes away.”

Never longer than an hour, Billy couldn’t imagine a day when he couldn’t get his skin to stop buzzing.

“So absolutely nothing weird happened to you?” Steve asked. He leaned in a little. “Wait. Do you have a number?” He thinks he would’ve recalled if Billy had a tattoo of a number inked into his skin, he’s seen him naked countless times and the only thing marking up his perfect, golden skin is a round birthmark on his left shoulder.

“No,” he emphasized for Harrington’s thick skull. “I’ve just always been this way. I wasn’t abducted, I don’t remember weird labs, or a number tattoo, or science fiction shit, I just... am.” A little bit of frustration crept into his tone. Billy thought about mentioning his plans to talk to El to see if she could help him. He didn’t though, Steve doesn’t have to know everything. “I don’t know shit about anything that has to do with,” he looked down at his hands, “whatever this is. Why would I want to?”

Oh Jesus Dustin would hate you, probably shouldn’t have been Steve’s first thought, but he has inhuman abilities and he never thought to look into it? Steve ran his hand through his hair. “I mean, knowing why you’re like this might help you figure out how to...I don’t know, control it? Fix it?”

Control it?

Fix it?

Those concepts were pretty foreign to Billy and for once he didn’t know what to say or what to do. He’s just looking at Harrington and he’s still going on, something about El practicing from time to time and getting stronger, Billy hasn’t said anything. Maybe because Harrington’s the first person he’s ever told, the idea of controlling what he can do or even making it go away has never crossed his mind.

It’s just...something he has to live with. Like a fucking allergy or a weird condition.

It is what it is, sweetheart.

That’s what his ma used to tell him about what he could do. He supposed if he was raised to think it’s normal for the most part and never ask questions about it, he wouldn’t ever want to know.

“Don’t pull a muscle over there, Hargrove,” Steve grinned at him. He had a special twinkle in his eyes and laugh lines around his smile. It made him feel like ice just rolled down his insides, down
to his toes. “You should do a warm up before you start thinking that hard.”

Billy knew he was little gone and he shouldn’t have ever agreed to eating with Harrington. He’s all caught up in the warm little flame sitting in his eyes, he’d let himself burn up in it if he could. “We both know who really needs the warm up.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“I’m wondering what you’ve got to care so much about?” Steve raised an eyebrow at him and waited. Billy almost snorted, like that’s supposed to do something. He might as well add that ‘I’ll wait’ shit that teachers are always spouting.

“Smoothie, Harrington,” Billy said slowly, he shook the almost empty cup around. “It’s better for you than chocolate, you know?”

“Fine, whatever, don’t tell me.”

“It’s the truth,” Billy grinned wolfishly. “I’m your buddy now, isn’t that what you said? I’m looking out for you.”

Steve rolled his eyes so hard they could flew out of his skull like a derailed roller coaster.

Billy liked not telling him anything just fine - he liked it even though Harrington pouted like a baby. They agreed to look out for each other, and sort of being friends. Friends don’t tell each other everything--that’d be weird. He finished off his smoothie, there were more than a handful of fries left in the basket Steve gave him, but he really didn’t feel like eating anymore.

His ma used to warn him about making friends. He’s not sure why she was so paranoid about who he spent his time with as a seven year old, kids don’t do much anyway and friendships don’t last that long. She used to wanna get a look at them, a real good look at them right in their elementary school aged eyes because the eyes are the windows to the soul or some shit.

It must not be true, otherwise, every girl he’s ever met wouldn’t say, wow, Billy, you’ve got really nice eyes. They’re so blue. And then he wouldn’t have to make up some bullshit response. If the eyes were really the window to this soul nobody would want to say anything about his.

But his mom believed in that kind of stuff and, if he did, he’d say she had a free soul and, if he did, he’d think Harrington has a lonely fucked up soul and he’d be right about both.

He and his new friend would sit down at the little table in the backyard and eat cherry pie even though that’s for dessert and she’d ask enough questions to fill up a ream of paper.

The point is, his ma probably wouldn’t want him hanging out with Steve Harrington. That lonely, fucked up soul of his and that little thing in his head where he just can’t think straight when he gets consumed by it all off the sudden would freak her out.

But his ma is brain dead and she doesn’t make any sense anymore, so it doesn't mean much anymore.

“I should take you home,” Steve said like he was reading Billy’s mind. Except if he was, he’d know wanting to sleep and wanting to go home are two very different things for him.

“Sure,” Billy agreed.
Steve went up to the bar and paid for both of them which, admittedly, was kind of nice considering he didn’t have his wallet on him anyway. He made a mental note to maybe pay him back, he didn’t like feeling like he owed Steve; he liked feeling like a charity case even less.

“Now I’m really taking you home this time,” Steve said like an idiot. He had on a sheepish grin, a tentative one at best.

Billy knew he was really taking him home, he didn’t need a fucking reminder. He needed to get home, yeah, he really did no matter how much he technically didn’t want to because there’s missing dinner like a disrespectful piece of shit and then there’s missing dinner like a disrespectful piece of shit and staying out late.

Maybe Steve could sense the shift in his mood, he shut up after that.

Maybe he had his own shit on his mind, like the fact that he just took the guy that tried to kill him out for dinner. You’ve got to be some kind of fucked up to something like that.

Except Billy knows Steve is some kind of fucked up.

He’s a lot of kinds of fucked up actually.

Billy added Steve driving him around to list of things he didn’t like. It got him a little off-kilter having him in charge of where they’re going and how turtle fucking slow they’re going, Steve drives really slow when he’s got a lot on his mind. He never liked being in the passenger seat--he might as well tie himself up and get in the trunk at that point.

Steve turned the radio down and Billy figured that meant whatever was on Steve’s mind he’s about to hear about too. “Your si--step-sister was asking about you the other day. You know she actually sounded worried, she kept asking about Saturday.” And Steve says Saturday the same way Max says that night, you know? Like it means everything and nothing all at once. Billy groaned. Fucking hell. Steve looked at him, eyebrows almost drew together. “And here I thought that you’d actually be happy.”

“Why the hell would I be happy?” He snapped. When has Harrington ever seen him happy anyway? “The fucking gremlin needs to mind her business.” Jesus. Wouldn’t that all be perfect? She goes around asking what the fuck is wrong with him because suddenly she gives a rat’s ass and his dad notices, wouldn’t that be just peachy? He’d be a dead man walking. “She thinks I’m fucking suicidal or homicidal or sick or something, I don’t know the brat won’t leave me alone.”

Steve wanted to point out he’s pretty sure Billy is sick too. “That bitch is gonna say the wrong thing to the wrong goddamn person.”

He frowned, hearing the malice in his voice. The threat that goes completely unsaid, but is entirely there. “She’s just worried, it’s a step up from the whole ‘nail your balls to the floor with a bat’ thing, that’s why I thought you’d actually be happy,” he said. “If you’re that worried just tell her to leave you alone and that you’re fine.”

Billy snorted. “Does that work for you?”

Steve opened his mouth and abruptly shut it.

“That’s what I thought.” Her skull’s so thick it’s probably bulletproof, so, yes he does have to yell at her. Max understands yelling just as much as he does. And he doesn’t owe her anything anyway, they’re not actually family. “If I wanted to make her think everything’s fine, I’d yell at her. That’s our normal.”
“Jesus,” Steve breathed.

“I didn’t say you had to like it,” Billy said. It is what it is. That’s just who they are, Susan minds her business, his dad beats on him, and then he yells at Max--that’s the Hargrove-Mayfield family dynamic. Nature’s in its most brutal order, but it’s order and, you don’t question nature.

“Maybe you should make a new normal,” Steve suggested lightly.

“Maybe I should put my boot so far up your ass you taste shit for a month,” Billy said, mocking Steve’s tone. “I’ll handle it.”

“Perfect,” Steve laughed, all high pitched and too dramatic. “Because when you handle things, it usually ends up going so well.”

King Steve really is just a bitch, a really vindictive, spiteful bitch. Normally there’d be something twisted in him that’s delighted in it, but for once, for now, Billy’s normal person and not a freak of nature so Steve’s bitchy tone just pissed him off more than he already is. “If you're talking about that night,” Billy said. And there it is, that night again, only this time he means it one way. He means it like it was a big fucking deal, in the way that Max was trying to avoid. Steve can’t mistake it for a random Wednesday two years ago, he means that night. “You could’ve just let Max go and we would’ve left.”

He’s the one that lied to him anyway.

He’s the one that complicated something all too simple.

“All you had to say was ‘sure, I’ll go get her’, and we would’ve both left. Your pretty little face would’ve been intact, you could go on being a babysitter or whatever,” he said. “I would’ve been gone.”

And she didn't need to be in those tunnels anyway.

“She said you were going to kill her,” Steve’s knuckle turned white around the steering wheel. “No.”

“Yeah,” Billy felt toxic again. “No.”

He was so fucking mad at her, he was, he was so mad at her he really didn’t even want to fucking look at her. He wanted to hit something, he did, but it’s not like he could actually hit Max. He leaves a mark, Susan notices, and he’s dead. D-e-a-d. Neil would actually kill him for that, he’s pretty sure. So no, he wouldn’t have actually killed Max.

“I wouldn’t have,” he gritted.

“Well, that’s completely believable given your track record.”

“I wouldn’t have,” Billy repeated. Because he really wouldn’t have, but God he was so pissed at the time that Harrington thinks he might’ve really intended to do it and that’s really what mattered. “You lied.”

“I already told you why,” Steve said.

He knew for a fact Harrington wouldn’t understand anything about that night unless he explained everything before he ended up at that shack of a house, and he wasn’t going to do that. It’s twisted and weird, the way he was thinking that night. Billy couldn’t articulate, how would he know to
anyway? They both know he’s better with his fists than with his words. Billy couldn’t even say he didn’t want it to end like that, needle and everything, either. He wanted to hit and Harrington gave him something to hit.

It was all just so fucked up.

“I had a shitty night,” Billy said. Mostly because he’s an idiot and Harrington’s got this look on his face without even looking at him really and he can tell he’s expecting him to talk.

“Yeah?” Steve snorted, “so did I.”

“You were there,” Billy sighed. “And you got on my nerves and it was stupid,” he droned on. “I’m sorry.”

Steve’s eyebrows hiked up to his hairline. “You know that actually almost sounded genuine,” he scoffed. “I don’t even know why you’re apologizing to me if you don’t mean it.” Steve shook his head, “whatever, man.” He could think of a few people he should be apologizing to before he even gets to him.

And Billy was this close to agreeing with him, but that would be lying and he’s tired.

“Stop here,” Billy said when they reached the crooked Old Cherry Lane sign.

“I know where you live,” Steve pointed out. He obeyed anyway, stopping. “I can--”

“Here’s good,” Billy stopped him.

“Fine, okay,” he huffed.

“No,” Billy turned to look at him. The intent in those bright blue eyes startled him. They shimmered from the sun hitting the front of the car, the way he turned to Steve was just right in capturing the beams, his eyes drank them in greedily. “No, Harrington, it’s not just fine,” his voice rumbled. “When I’m in your car, you don’t cross this fucking road sign. Your band of twerps or my stupid step-sister in here? That’s fine. But when it’s just me you stop here. Understand?” Steve nodded. He nodded like it was a life and death matter because Billy was treating it like it was. “Say it.”

“Why do I have to--” Steve rolled eyes at the look Billy was giving him. “Fine. I’ll stop here, Jesus.”

Billy turned to get out of the car, “good.”

There was no ‘see you tomorrow, Harrington’ no ‘you sure you’ll be alright walking back home?’ Neither of them said anything, in fact, the only noise was the sound of Tina Turner and the healthy hum of his car. But Billy said ‘when I’m in your car,’ and Steve thought that was kind of funny; like maybe Billy was expecting to be in the car with him again or something.

Maybe he would be.

Billy hated the real world, the real world had his dad and Hawkins and all of that bullshit hanging onto him like a ball and chain and it sucks. He hated that false world even more. He had that false world with Harrington, and his stupid car and his stupid smile. It was like being a snowglobe and no matter how fragile that little wall was, there was a little wall between the two of them and the real world. Billy hated himself a little for getting lost in it.
Getting out of his car was like stepping out of a dream. And look what he fucking did? He agreed to look out for him. He sat down and had a fucking milkshake with him like they’re best buddies or something.

And it was nice...so fucking nice it made his chest ache.

“Home,” he grumbled. He only did that because Susan’s at the sink about to start doing the dishes and she startles easy and she’s always complaining that he startles her and honestly, they both know who’s going to get in trouble if she drops one of them because of it.

There’s no salmon thank God, it’s Tuesday, which meant she had the long hours at work. Every Tuesday they eat the driest rotisserie chicken on the face of the earth that she picks up from the Big Buy on the way home. Salmon tomorrow then, and he and Max will both have to stomach it.

“Hi,” Susan said in her little voice. They don’t talk and Billy’s pretty sure they never will; that’s completely fine by him. She doesn’t say any of that all American la-di-da shit like ‘your dinner’s in the fridge’ either. They both know it’s in the trash, that’s the price of missing dinner and that’s completely fine by him too.

Billy didn’t have to listen for steps coming up the stairs or pray Neil miraculously passed out in front of the TV. They had a tape of last week’s match going on at the bar. He slid into his cramped room and started working on his essay on multiculturalism. He didn’t have Steve Harrington on his mind, or the taste of a strawberry smoothie on his tongue.

He had his homework and utter silence.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that ending was slightly depressing??
Fun Fact: When Billy says he's 'not a McGee', that's a reference to Andy and Charlie McGee from Stephen King’s Firestarter. The book has to do with a father and daughter who were experimented on in a lab, got powers and were on the run from the government.
Jonathan and Nancy were late.

Not that Steve made it his thing to wait for them, or even sit with them. He’s got his own friends, sort of, and his own life without the two of them in it.

Thank you very much.

He got to lunch a few minutes early and the benches outside weren't taken yet, The weather’s finally starting to show signs of Spring. He kept his sunglasses on and let the rays ebb the early April chill from his bones. On a day like today everyone would be trying to get a seat outside.

Nancy says they’re tethered by the Upside Down and they’ve all got vines still wrapped around them—an invisible connection, or something. Maybe that’s true otherwise he wouldn’t really talk to either of them anymore. It doesn't give him any comfort that he’s got all of this on his mind when he’s still sitting outside at a picnic table waiting for them. Nancy and Jon were also right when they said nothing will bring the three of them together faster than something going horribly wrong.

Steve would consider Billy something horribly wrong. He's got abilities, no different than El in some ways, and that's more up their alley than he wished it was.

Billy was on the hood of the Camaro, he had a perfectly from here. That definitely wasn't one of the reasons he decided he wanted to sit outside. Sitting outside is quieter, more secluded than the prying eyes of most of the school, he wasn't going to use it to keep an eye on Billy.

No. Way.

Steve bit into his sandwich and scanned the row of cars that kept Billy's blue Camaro company, some he recognized and others he didn't and the slow once over only led him back to Billy, anyway. The same sun warming Steve is warming him even when it feels like he’s in another time-zone. He held a book in his hand and an apple in the other-- does he only eat an apple for lunch? It really shouldn’t keep Steve’s attention but it does, the book cover is bright candied apple red and Billy’s looking at it so intently that it must be a book that he’s enjoying. He raised the apple curled in his fist--a granny smith this time--up to his mouth and bit into it not once taking his eyes off the page. At that moment Steve was sure Billy really actually liked books, which he would've never believed unless he saw it with his own two eyes.

Half-way happy.

That's what El called it.

Bill looks half-way happy, which is probably as close to happy as Steve’s ever seen him. That’s why he’s staring, he’s just never seen Billy look anything close to happy before and that’s all. He
didn’t know he was one of those people that could be just enough by themselves.

Secretly, it made him a little envious.

Billy looks more like himself than he has in the last few days. Those too tight jeans hugged his body almost all the way down to his mid-calf, the sleeves of his t-shirt are cut off in a ridiculous display of his biceps for early Spring weather, his denim jacket is balled up behind him. He looks like himself, which is comforting and horrifying all at once.

Billy looked up and looked at Steve.

Fuck.

From however many feet it is, from the little country Billy has raised on his Camaro, Steve can see that tongue wagging out at him. Steve watched both arms fit their way into the sleeve of his denim jacket. He bit into the apple again before chucking it into the grass bed a few feet in front of him. He’s summoned Satan that’s what he’s done, a teenaged Satan in an old Aerosmith t-shirt and sinfully tight jeans. Billy put the candied apple red book back in his car and started to stride over to him.

“Oh great, this is just great,” Steve grumbled. He bit into his sandwich and tried to play the whole thing off.

“You need rescuing, princess?”

“Hi.” He must think he’s the most entertaining thing to exist if the look in his eyes is anything to go by.

“Hey,” Billy said smoothly.

“What do you want?”

He snorted, “just told you.”

Steve blinked. Maybe he missed a beat but he hadn’t had he? He asked if he wanted to be rescued. Rescued from what? They’re at school it’s not like Billy going to rescue him from the inevitable pop quiz in Mrs. Gunderson’s class. “Yeah…?”

Billy had that look on his face again, the ‘Steve Harrington is a funny little monkey’ face. “Don’t worry, pretty boy, I come in peace.” He sat down next to Steve on the bench so close that their elbows knocked, probably on purpose. Billy had his back to the table though, with his legs stretched out in front of him, “You look bored.”

“I’m not bored,” Steve lied.

He was never one of those people that could just be enough on their own and he hasn’t been envious of it until recently.

“You know what I still don’t get?” He said. He shook his head.

“What?”

“You look at Wheeler like the sun shines outta her ass,” Billy said matter of factly. “Can’t see why, Harrington, she was a shitty girlfriend.”

We were both shitty, Steve’s pretty sure with some solemn assurance. The only high school
romance to ever look as good in real life as it does on TV is Tommy and Carol, and they’re both assholes who deserve each other, so no one’s really winning except the two of them. He was playing house and Nancy was somewhere out in the real world, or maybe in the Upside Down, and that was a problem on both their ends.

He felt a little bad thinking that when Tommy’s still in the hospital and Carol hasn’t stopped chewing bubble gum compulsively since.

“Whatever.”

“Yeah, what-ever.” Billy’s mocking him and he can’t possibly see why this time. “You know what else I don’t get?” He said.

“Probably a lot of things,” Steve grumbled.

Billy snorted hard. It might have actually been the precursor to an actual laugh, not one crackling on the edge of rage. “What crawled up your ass and died, pretty boy? Didn’t get enough sleep?”

“Yeah,” Steve said in the same annoyed tone. Billy has a lot of effects on him, one of them is wanting to hit his head against the wall repeatedly. “Sure.”

“Sure,” Billy said again in that same low tone that made Steve’s leg twitch and toes curl in his shoes. “I really just don’t get why you hang out with either of them. You know, you have a friend problem, Harrington?”

“Right, should I be spending all my time with you then?” Steve hissed. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Just saying you’ve had shitty friends,” Billy said.

And maybe that means that he’ll be used to all of Billy’s shit and he’ll tolerate him and he won’t leave, but it probably doesn’t. He’ll be the worst of them all by far. “Byers and Wheeler included.” He decided he didn’t like either of them, well, he never really liked anyone in the school, except Harrington most of the time. He just, especially, doesn’t like those two. How could when he has Steve’s memories and thoughts? Sometimes he barely likes him. Byers is a creep with serious boundary issues under the guise of carefulness and Nancy’s got more in common with a viper snake than a suburban teenage girl. If he was the type of person to have a shit list that’s supposed to mean anything, Bill would have them on it.

“Force together by the Upside Down?” Billy snorted. “Sounds like bullshit to me. You could skip if you really wanted to. You don’t owe them shit.”

“You mean leave them? Like I almost did the first time?” He asked. “They would’ve died.”

“Yeah, and you saved their less than capable asses. Which leads me back to the question,” he said loftily like this is supposed to be some grand lecture or something, and like most lectures, it’s just left him confused and with a headache. “Why stick around?”

“Because they’re going to need my help,” Steve said. “And there’s nothing wrong with that, they’re my friends.”

Billy raised an eyebrow. “In what? Two months? A year? Ten years?”

Steve pinked and then reddened. He wanted to punch him in the fucking face, he wanted to put a split in his lip. He knew he had been thinking the same thing, that he thinks about it all the time.
“Stay out of my head, I swear to God, Billy,” he gritted.

Billy didn’t say anything or more aptly, Billy didn’t have anything else to say. He pulled out his lighter and flicked it around. The noise is as familiar to Steve as it is to him, there are worn patches on the thing like he does it all the time.

His ma used to tell him he could pick and choose his battles which now he’s sure is just some shit she used to tell him because she read it in a book and now he’s telling it to Harrington, when Billy’s never chosen a battle in his fucking life. Harrington’s always on the frontlines and that’s really fucking stupid. No one with a brain would put someone like the doe eyed boy in front of him on the frontlines.

“It was just a thought,” Billy said, not looking at him.

“A thought you got from my head, don’t do that.” He expected Billy to get up and leave after that, but he didn’t. Steve ripped open his applesauce and pushed it towards him...since he’s not going anywhere, apparently.

“I ate lunch,” Billy wrinkled his nose.

“You had an apple.”

Billy wasn’t sure whether to call him a mom or stalker first. “You’re giving me applesauce, stalker,” he liked stalker better. He was watching him like one anyway. “And I had a sandwich.”

Steve wasn’t going to let it go though, so it didn't seem like he had much of a choice.

Billy took it from him, "happy?"

Steve gave him a half hearted glare. “Are you coming to gym today?”

He shrugged, “I don’t know.”

Steve shoveled in a handful of grapes. “You’re a deadman in coach’s eyes either way.” That’s way more important than having someone around that can keep up with him and on his side. He almost missed the constant overbearing presence that was Billy, it gave him something to focus on for better or for worse.

“I know.”

“It’s gonna be nice having you as friend rather than a foe,” Steve said.

Billy really laughed. Steve’s never heard him actually laugh like he means, there was that same snort--a precursor to a real laugh. “Oh no, I’m gonna kick your ass still,” he grinned. “I’m just not gonna leave any bruises.”

He was pretty sure more than half a dozen pairs of eyes were staring at them, because Billy and Steve are next to each other, because that usually spells trouble, because something has to happen. Or maybe it’s because nothing is happening, and Steve just gave him his applesauce like they’re friends. Apparently giving someone applesauce is big news, and honestly if it really truly is, Steve can understand why Billy hates this place so much.

“You look like you again.” Steve said with as much nonchalance as humanly possible. It’s not like he was looking at him that intently to notice. He wasn’t. He just noticed the large, overall and completely noticeable change that Billy wasn’t hiding in a sweatshirt. “You look better.”
“You don't wanna know how many fucking pills I popped to even see straight today, but at least I don't look it.” He smirked, if he’s being honest, pulling on the ripped t-shirt and tight jeans felt like coming home in a small way. “I’m burning that hoodie, man, first chance I get.”

“Graduating class usually has a bonfire at the end of the year,” Steve said because he didn’t want to comment on another one of Billy’s headaches or if it’s just the same one. He didn’t dare ask if it has to do with his powers or if it’s a side effect. “You can burn pretty much whatever you want then.”

“Oh yeah? Are you inviting me?” He raised an eyebrow.

“I’m letting you know about it,” Steve said. His tone bordered on flirtation, bordered on wanting him to go, and Billy drank it in like a plant that’s never been watered.

“I’ll think about it then,” he replied coolly. He finished off the applesauce and put it back on the table, his arm bent back wide. “What are you gonna burn?” If he really wanted to he could search for the answer, but he doesn’t hate talking to Steve, so he might as well ask and listen.

Steve laughed through his nose. “Every chemistry test I’ve ever had to take, and algebra.”

Billy nodded like he was taking this in seriously.

“And that one essay I had to write about 1984,” Steve shook his head, Mrs. fucking Almer had it out for him and he’s certain. “I nearly failed English sophomore year because of that essay.”

He could agree 1984’s probably one of his least favorite books, 1984 was also a pretty shitty year for him. It was the months leading up to moving and it sucked just as bad as actually getting here. “Yeah, fuck 1984.”

“Steve?” Nancy said she had her tray and Jonathan his clunky metal lunch box, together standing side by side. Her eyes landed on the back of Billy’s head, it’s not like hair like that is gonna belong to anyone else. “Leave him alone, Billy.”

Billy’s head lulled back until the crown of his head touched the wood table just look at her.

Bullshit.

Billy flinched. Now is not the time for ‘this,’ now is not the time for heartbreak that isn’t his and things he knows he doesn’t want--Nancy Wheeler absolutely being one of them. Still, Steve’s a sucker for blue eyes and Billy shoves it down somewhere to never think about the clear blue with beds of green that are narrowing in on him.

“What was that, Wheeler?”

“You heard me,” she put her tray down on the table, probably louder than necessary. The milk carton toppled over. “Go away. No one wants you here.”

See, he never gets to pick his fucking battles, it was all bullshit what his ma had told him. “It’s called burying the hatchet,” Billy said. “I’ve heard you’re not too familiar with the concept. We’ve decided to start being buddy-buddy. No more of my fists making dents in his face. You get it?”

Watching the two of them is like watching two natural disasters at once. If Billy's a hurricane, Nancy is a tidal wave and he’d hate to have the two of them meet. The air was charged,
pressurezied, Nancy’s face reddened and her hair that fell neatly past her shoulders nearly stood on end like the fur on Tews’s back whenever she comes across a particularly brave squirrel. She scoffed, “I’m not going to believe a word you have to say.”

And who would? It’s Billy.

"Fine," he grinned. "You tell her, Harrington." Steve felt his arm snake around his shoulders and draw him in close, “

“Actually…” Nancy and Jonathan and more than two dozen pairs of eyes looked at him. “Actually, he’s cool?” Billy snorted. “And we’re cool and everything’s fine, so…” he eyed the bench in front of him and looked back at them.

“What?” She said. She didn’t ask, she’d heard him right. “You can’t be serious.”

“It’s not that big a deal.” He felt himself say more than he really thought about it, because it’s not. “C’mon, Nance, just sit. It’s really okay.” He would really like to stop having stare at them now. He would really like for Nancy to stop looking at him like this now.

The two of them looked at him like he’d gone bald. Nancy dropped onto the bench more like she couldn’t stand anymore, like she’s in shock. The look on Jonathan’s face, who’s trailing in her wake, is more disappointed than anything. With one sage look, he can see the ‘Steve, why in the ever-loving fuck did you do’ in his eyes.

“You’re just...friends now,” she said hollowly.

“Uh...yeah, sort of,” Steve said.

Maybe because he pities himself. He’s thrown too many pity parties in his own honor, it’s embarrassing. If Billy has to feel the same way he does, he’s so sorry he can’t help but pity him too. He owes it to himself in some way, maybe they can be friends. They both like basketball, he drives a cool car, it’d be nice to have a friend his age that isn’t his ex-girlfriend or his ex-girlfriend’s new boyfriend or a pack of thirteen years olds. It’d be nice to have a friend that understands. For better or for worse Billy gets him, or at least has the capacity to understand him.

Nancy’s lip wobbled not from tears, maybe from betrayal or frustration, but certainly not tears. The Nancy she’s built herself into doesn’t cry as much as Steve was used to; her expressive blue eyes still give away everything. So much of her has changed since they put Barb to rest for real.

She looked at the two of them.

The look on Jonathan’s face is just as disappointed. With one sage look, he can see the ‘Steve, why in the ever-loving fuck did you think this was smart?’ all over the other boy’s face. He's never been good at ideas.

“We’re friends, I guess,” he shrugged.

Nancy did that thing that always reminded Steve of a gaping fish, she looked like a fish out of water. Her mouth opened and snapped shut her eyes were comically large. Bill almost felt tempted enough to douse her water and see if she fixes herself.

The Billy in front of him is still the same Billy everyone knows and everyone hates, but he wasn’t a total ass to him yesterday and he wasn’t a total ass to him today and that’s...progress. He was honest with him, at least. He’s trusting him or whatever. And maybe the air between them has changed. He could sense the threat vibrating in the air like the molecules or atoms or some science
thing were charged up whenever they got close. His body always sensed his danger before he was ever really around.

“What does he have on you?” She asked more or less like Billy wasn’t sitting next to him. Sometimes he still gets a jolt of surprise by how much she’s changed since the Upside Down, since they put Barb to rest. Sometimes she’s more like the girl in the bathroom at Tina’s party than she is like the girl he usually knows.

“Nothing, Wheeler,” Billy lied smoothly. He lit up a cigarette and grinned at her.

“He doesn’t have to blackmail me into not hating his guts, Nance,” Steve said. So it’s officially official he’s defending Billy fucking Hargrove. Dustin’s gonna love having a flying pig. “We talked it out...sort of.”

Billy snorted, not helping at all. “You screamed mostly,” he grumbled. “Fucking busted one of my ear drums probably.”

Steve glowered at him.

“Steve,” Jonathan said softly. “What happened to the whole avoiding the landmine thing?”

“I’m hard to avoid,” Billy said.

He and Jonathan never really finished that discussion anyway. They weren’t really ever supposed to, and it wasn’t meant to mean a whole lot. It was just Jonathan being wary and Steve digging himself a new grave, which seems to happen almost every day, but Jonathan meant every word he said.

“It’s different,” Steve said, trying not to sound too cold. It is different he insisted to himself, that was before the note and the quarry. “We just...we’re just friends.” That’s all they need to know; how much could he really tell them anyway? “We’re okay with each other.”

“Well,” Nancy said, sharp and tight like she’s holding something in. “How then? Because you’ve been at each other’s throats almost every day.”

Isn’t that a hell of a question? He thought humorlessly.

Steve shrugged. “We got milkshakes yesterday, talked a little. He’s not so bad.” The lie tasted wrong in his mouth. “I’ve been around worse,” he corrected.

“Thanks, Harrington,” Billy scoffed. “You really know how to flatter.”

Nancy and Jonathan looked between them. “So just like that? You share milkshakes and now everything’s water under the bridge?”

Steve made a noncommittal gesture caught between ‘well...yeah?’ and ‘when you put it like that...’ Shit, when it’s put like that it does sound a bit ridiculous. “We’re okay with each other.”

“Like I said, Wheeler, buddy-buddy.” Billy grinned. “You can’t underestimate the power of a good milkshake.”

Who would have thought that milkshakes are the ultimate feud ender? Maybe that’s all the world
needed, more milkshakes? Nancy’s jaw worked a little as she thought. Of course she’s not dumb enough to believe any of that. A five year old wouldn’t believe something that stupid.

That’s just utter bullshit.

Nothing on him?

They just made up and everything is finer than silk between the two of them? No, he’s lying to her and at the center of all of it Billy’s there grinning. It made her a little sick. “Fine,” she said. Her lunch was untouched, but she wasn’t hungry anymore anyway. “I have a calculus test next period.”

Jonathan looked after Nancy as she left. Steve thinks he might be paler than usual, worry lines appeared on his forehead. “I should…” Jonathan stopped. “I have to go. I’ll see you around, Steve.”

Billy didn’t say anything, he lowered his cigarette down to lips with a grim look that seemed a little out of place on his face.

For once Steve didn’t need an answer from him to understand.

You know, you’ve got a friend problem, Harrington?

Chapter End Notes

I just wanna say I actually love all the characters in Stranger Things (except Neil and Brenner, lol, they can choke). But I also really like writing mean dialogue and then head canons about people’s personalities get in the way and yada yada. I just wanted to say that because writing Jonathan and Nancy make me nervous lol (and psst I have to Dustin next). This is technically part of a two part chapter because they happen in the same day (and this chapter is slightly shorter than usual) but I don't see them as the same chapter, exactly. So while I won't post "part two" tonight, I'll post it tomorrow or the day after at the latest.

Cheers and happy reading!

:)  
Ps: Sorry if this is late whoops :(
This was supposed to be short but it ended up not being...like...at all...so cheers this is practically a full-on chapter! Whoops! Just wanna say though, writing the kids is suuuuuuuupperrr hard for me so...um...go easy...please? Or pointers would be nice? If that's your thing.
Anyway, Happy Reading and enjoy!
:)“I saw Steve pick him up, I don’t know where they went afterwards,” Max shrugged. "They were probably just doing stupid teenager stuff.” The air of indifference that felt more like a brisk slap to their faces. Their ‘babysitter,’ ‘ride giver’ and ‘resident demodog slayer’ encountered the Mind Flayer, and not a fuck could be given from the one person who’s supposed to be keeping an eye out.
“What do you mean it doesn’t really matter!” Dustin shrieked. “Why didn’t you follow them!”
Her eyes narrowed, “because they have a car and I have a skateboard, asshole, I thought you were supposed to be good at science?” She shook her head, “he was only gone for, I guess, two hours and then he came back. That’s, like, barely even time for a movie.”
It’s a lot of time for other things though, for talking, for hanging out, for somehow finding a way to turn Steve into one of its minions or something.
“And?” Mike asked impatiently.
She’s really starting to hate this whole spying thing. It looked so much cooler in the movies, with gadgets and a cool spy suit. She got a skateboard, a walkie-talkie, and two shitheads riding her ass. She’s not a spy, she’s no better than the creepy stalkers she thought the boys had been months ago.
“And I don’t know! I tried talking to him and he brushed me off,” she said. “I tried again after dinner and he told me to ‘politely fuck off,’ and then he was gone.”
“So, the evidence we have,” Lucas said, counting on his finger. “He’s acting weirder than normal.”
“He’s was sick Sunday morning, the day after,” Max pointed out. “He doesn’t go out much either anymore and he sleeps a lot.”
“That too.”
Will wrung his fingers, he fidgeted around the pencil he had between his fingers, looking nervous. “That’s not really enough.”
“But all this happened after he went into the woods-- alone,” Mike emphasized.
Max gnawed her lip, “he wasn’t...alone alone.” It’s only a matter of time before they start poking around Steve and he’d probably mention it sooner rather than later. It’s better they hear it from her.
“What does that mean?” Lucas turned to her.

She swallowed. The whole ‘friends don’t lie’ thing has always sounded like a load of bullshit to her. Her friends used to lie to each other all the time back in California, no matter how few they were. It’s a good thing it’s only a ‘Party’ thing, if she had to live with everyone giving her the look they’re giving her now, she’d probably go crazy. “Steve said he was in the woods with him,” she tried to look nonchalant.

“What!” The three of them exploded.

Will’s eyebrows pulled together. “Max that sounds important,” he said sagely.

“It didn’t seem like a big deal,” she crossed her arms over her chest and turned away from them. Oh yeah, it was though. As soon as she asked him if anything weird happened he got all defensive about it, something definitely happened. “He like…” she realized Steve never told her why they were in the woods together. “He just said they were at the same party Saturday. I guess Billy went into the woods and he found him a few minutes later.”

“And you didn’t think that sounded like a big deal!” Max winced at the sheer volume of Dustin’s cracking voice.

“Don’t yell at her!” Lucas shouted back.

Max combed her hair into her face again, like the curtain of red strands could keep her from being put on the outside again. The guys have just barely finally started to accept her—even Mike. “I’ve been spying on my asshole brother for days and all you guys do is sit here with your thumbs up your asses telling me what to do!”

It’s a good thing it’s after school and they’re in the AV room, they would’ve gotten in so much trouble by now. Especially if Mrs. Gregory was wandering the hall, she loves handing out detentions.

“Hey! Hey!” Lucas said getting between them. “Right now, what’s important is getting Steve away from Billy.”

Dustin scowled, it looks weird on his usually smiling face. “Yeah, before he does something to him.”

Max scoffed. He acts like they’re actually related or something. “Fine. I’ll do better or whatever, but I’ve gotta go.” She stepped on her skateboard, keeping one foot firmly on the ground. “You know who hates waiting.” Max stepped onto her skateboard and glided past them, “see ya tomorrow.”

The boys watched her go.

“Guys, I think she’s actually starting to feel sorry for him,” Dustin said.

“So?” Will asked. He’s never met Billy, he’s only heard he’s about as bad as they come, but the Mind Flayer will always be worse and more evil than any bully. He felt bad for him too.

“Not everyone has Jonathan for a brother,” Lucas said solemnly. “That’s not even her brother, he’s just some jerk she has to live with.”

Dustin lips curled, “could’ve fooled me.”
While they argued Mike was sure of one thing, Billy the Mind Flayer is encroaching on their lives like an infestation, like...like vines. Max and Steve, and soon others and then El. If Billy finds a way to El then everything is over. “Who cares about Max--”

“Mike!”

He glared at Lucas. “Who cares about Max,” he said. “If she wants to get all wooby over her stupid brother or step-brother or whatever who cares! We need to do something, she can do whatever she wants.”

Will fiddled with the strap to his backpack.

Dustin itched his head under his cap and curls.

This is bad. This is really bad.

Lucas crossed his arms and huffed out a sigh, “alright, fine, what are we doing?”

“I’m gonna talk to Steve,” Dustin said.

“I’m going to talk to El...to see if she’s noticed anything.” Will, Dustin and Lucas shared a look. “What?”

Will bit back his smile, “nothing, Mike.” He said slowly.

His cheeks pinked. “O-kay,” he said. “We’ll share info tomorrow morning and move from there, sounds good?”

“No,” Lucas said. “What about Max?”

“We’ll look out for her,” Mike grounded out. “Happy? If she’s close to Billy she’s probably in just as much danger as Steve.”

Exactly why she shouldn’t have been spying on him in the first place.

“Fine,” Lucas said. It isn’t fine, fine, but it’s close enough that he’s okay for now, he thinks. In one way Mike is right, they can’t let things get worse.

“Okay good,” Dustin said. “Because the high school let out like a half hour ago, so...I’ve gotta go.”

Dustin shouldered his backpack and left the party within the safety of AV Club room. He had to go out there and talk to Steve, which used to sound easy but not so much anymore.

Well, no.

It’s still easy, except it might not be. Billy and Steve went somewhere together, and even if Billy isn’t the Mind Flayer is still doesn’t spell good news for anyone--especially Dustin. Billy is...seventeen, maybe even Steve’s exact age, he has a cool car, he understands sports, and he’s probably touched a boob before.

He’s got no chance if they become friends.

Dustin dropped down into the car seat before Steve could even get a word in let alone tell him to buckle up first, he got, “Steve, you’re putting yourself in danger.”

“What?”
He looks tired, or moody or something, Dustin thinks, but Steve sort of normally looks like he’s on the brink of a bad mood. “Sorry.” He took a breath. “I think you’re putting yourself in danger, given the facts,” he said seriously.

Steve’s head thunked loudly on the steering wheel. “Jesus,” he said. Oh yeah, Dustin thought, he’s in a bad mood. “Don’t even get me started on facts,” he groaned.

Because:

Fact, Billy Hargrove is a nuisance.
Fact, Steve Harrington has a friend problem.
Fact, Billy is also a fucking McGee.
Fact, Nancy is royally pissed at him.
Fact, he has a pre-calc test tomorrow and he’s going to bomb it.

Steve is very tired of facts as of late.

The look Steve batted at Dustin is one of annoyance, not in the way that Dustin’s used to. He looked more like one of the high school assholes that would make fun of them than the cool guy that would try to save their asses.

“Okay, I understand--”

“Hey, Steve, how’s it going?” Steve snorted, bitter and jerkish. “I’m fine, Dustin, thanks for picking me up. You wanna try that first?”

No.

Dustin groaned, “I’m serious and no. Sometimes diplomacy comes after, when the situation is serious and needs to be sorted out immediately.”

“What do you mean?”

Dustin gulped in a big a breath. Here it goes, “Max says she saw you pick up Billy yesterday.”

“No,” Steve said. He pulled out the school’s parking lot. For once he was itching to get home and sit in front of a television. There’s no way he’s studying for that test, he’ll just take the D+ if he’s lucky and the F if he’s not.

Dustin sighed in relief. “But Max said--”

“No, as in I’m not talking about this, right now,” Steve clarified. “And buckle your seatbelt, your mom will kill me.”

Dustin did as he was told, but did nothing to hide his confusion. “You were out with him,” it wasn’t a question anymore.

For motherfucking milkshakes.

“You were in the wood with him too,” he said.

“Yeah,” Steve grounded out. “I’ve helped him... twice. It’s not the big of a deal.” He wondered
how well it would go over if he just turned the radio all the way up and ignored him. He’s tired. 

*Bone tired.*

“It is a big deal!” Dustin screeched. He wanted to tell him outright that they’re sure Billy’s been infected, overthrown—the asshole Steve’s hanging around with is worse than he thinks—it’s the Mind Flayer. “You’re fraternizing with the enemy!” Dustin yelled. “He’s a psychopath! He tried to kill you.”

“Fraternizing with the enemy,” Steve rolled his eyes, “we’re not in Dungeons & Dragons, you know?”

Dustin groaned again, he looked up at the roof just like Steve did. “You know what I mean, fine he’s on the...” he searched for words. “The...opposite team. He’s on the opposing team.”

“Did you really just...” He shook his head, he can’t help be amused by how nerdy Dustin is. It doesn’t mean he hates it though. “Never mind and he not on my opposing team.”

*He has mind powers and he has me in his head and he knows about the Upside Down and we’re, like, I guess friends or allies or something.*

Steve wished he could tell him, then he would understand and so would Nancy and Jon, but Billy’s power isn’t his secret to tell. It’s only Steve’s to hold onto and take to the grave, just like the Upside Down. He might bring down the local authorities on the guy if he starts acting like an ass again, but the whole United States government? Whoever those people at Hawkins lab are? Hell, *Russia*? No.


“Complicated?”

God, he feels like he’s on *Dynasty.* “Yeah, we’re...sort of hanging out for a little bit. So...complicated.”

*Hanging out for a little bit?* Dustin’s worst fear has almost been confirmed and they’re barely halfway back to his house. “Steve, he’s the enemy! He’s... he’s like... evil.” *He could be the freaking Mind Flayer!*

“He’s not evil,” Steve said. “He’s rob a bank evil at best.”

“We are not comparing evils this time! Evil is evil” Dustin yelled. “He’s the enemy!”

“He’s not my enemy, not anymore, sort of.” Steve shook his head. “And he’s not going to be a dick to you guys anymore either.” At least he hopes Billy won’t. He’s still surly around Nancy and Jonathan but he was generally tamed today, and they weren’t exactly nice either.

Dustin threw his hands up in the air like the news might as well be the biggest upset of the century.

“What does that even mean? How can just not be the enemy! He’s insane!”

Steve grimaced, hearing his stupid voice crack. “Would you quit yelling?” He’s always yelling and right now he’s too exhausted for it or to pretend it doesn’t piss him off a little. He hasn’t slept well enough for it—‘it’ being the yelling, ‘it’ being this conversation. “I can hear you just fine without it, you know.”

“You can hear me,” Dustin announced. “But you’re not listening.”
He rolled his eyes at the boy. “I’m not listening because my mind’s made up. We’re friends now and that’s just it,” he said with a certain amount of finality that reminded him of a mother. It was more so a ‘fuck you’ to the world than Dustin specifically. He didn’t look at the probable heartbreak and confusion on the other boy’s face.

Dustin looked up at Steve with is lips pursed. “I know when you’re lying to me Steve,” he pointed out. He went on with an almost scientific, detachedness, he always uses when he’s making a point of observation. “You won’t look me in the eyes, and you’re doing that thing with your jaw where it shifts just a little to the left. It’s a tell-- your tell,” Steve’s head rolled to look at him, Dustin couldn’t read the look on his face and maybe that’s the point. “What did he--”

“He doesn’t have anything on me,” Steve groaned. That’s always the next jump. He just keeps rolling his eyes at the ridiculousness of it, God forbid two people settle their differences, or maybe it’s more like God forbid Billy settles his differences with anyone. Everyone can see he’s not really the settling type. “He’s not bullying me into it. He doesn’t have anything on you guys. He’s not paying me. The guy's a complete jackass,” Steve said tersely, “but we’re okay with each other now.”

Dustin looked at the profile of Steve’s face, he’s not looking at him now or at least deciding not to look at him and keep his eyes on the road. Dustin looked down into his lap, a mix of embarrassment and shame and that feeling of abandonment for some reason Steve seems to get so well too.

“I know we’re not the coolest,” he said. “And you still miss Nancy--”

“I do not--”

“You still miss Nancy,” Dustin spoke over him, sullen and serious. “And you’re not, like, the coolest guy ever or whatever at high school anymore, but you’re the coolest guy to me Steve. You don’t have to be friends with that asshole. You don’t have to choose him.”

*Please choose us. Please choose me.*

He gripped the steering wheel. Maybe it has a lot to do with being lonely, maybe in hindsight choosing to be friends with Billy is a terrible idea, but it’s not like he has much a choice anymore.

Between trying to help him and ignoring Billy’s pleas that night at Lori’s party, they both took that away. “We’re friends,” Steve mumbled. “I don’t really have a choice.”

“You have a choice,” Dustin insisted.

Steve shook his head, and that’s what everyone’s been saying all day; if they knew they’d agree with him what can he do? “Not this time,” he said. “I’m still friends with all of you guys, I wouldn’t stop giving you rides for the world, alright? And if you tell anyone that, I’m telling your mom about that book you’re not supposed to have, so keep your mouth shut.”

Dustin grinned, which made the next words even harder.

“Billy’s my friend now too,” his voice is softer than any apology he’s ever given. He knows it isn’t even an apology, it just feels like it should be. “And we’re going to be for at least a little bit...I guess.” All Steve knows is that it’s hard for the guy to turn down a strawberry milkshake (smoothie) and he guesses they can build from there or Steve can build from there. He can’t imagine Billy building much of anything.

You’ve never seen a hurricane put a house back together.
Dustin nearly thought about blowing it all. He thought about yelling in Steve's face that he hopes he’s been turned into a useless lackey by Billy the Mind Flayer and that the Steve they know wouldn’t dare to put any of them in danger.

He sighed as they pulled up to his house. He could even say ‘the evil son of a bitch has his claws in you deep’ and the words feel ready in his mouth. Dustin looked at Steve, the dark circles around his eyes and the flatness of his hair and...he couldn’t.

He just couldn’t.

Today’s been a shit day for Steve, by the looks of it, a really shitty day.

Before Dustin can say anything else, Steve rubbed his eyes hard with the pads of his fingers. “I’m tired, and today was shit. Can we sort this out later?” He thinks maybe he should’ve opened with that.

“Yeah,” Dustin pulled on the car door handle. “But you’ve gotta promise me that you’ll be careful,” he said. “And you won’t take any of his shit, none of it, okay Steve?”

“I won’t,” he agreed.

“Good,” Dustin said.

He isn’t happy. He’s confused and angry, and more than anything he didn’t get how someone so cool could stand to be around Billy. But Steve said he wouldn’t ditch him for the world, and he said he would be careful. As of right now, until they can get rid of Billy, he’ll take it.

Dustin shut the door behind him and waved as he left.

**AT THE SAME TIME**

Are you and Steve friends now?” She asked. “I saw his car come to pick you up.”

Billy pinched the bridge of his nose. It’s too goddamn early for this bullshit. “Listen, shithead, stop fucking spying on me you little creep.”

*You don’t always have to yell at her.*

He’s technically *not* yelling. He’s not exactly calm, but he’s not yelling.

Her eyes widened a little, “I’m not--”

He grabbed her, pulling her close. “Don’t lie to me, yes you are,” he growled.

“You’re being weird,” she struggled, her pale blue eyes glazed over with tears. “Let go of me, Billy.”

*Just try talking to her.*

*Just try talking to her.*

*Just try talking to her.*

Billy let go with a sigh, irritatingly enough, out of his own volition--sort of. He’s got Steve2 on his
ass now, which is obviously worse than one. “I’m not crazy, alright?” He said, taking a step back. “And I’m not suicidal!”

Her bottom lip wobbled. “You suck,” she scowled up at him.

“Jesus, what the fuck are you crying for Maxine. You that upset, I’m not planning on offing myself?”

“It’s not that, you asshole!” She yelled.

“Then what the fuck is it!” He roared back.

They’re probably going to be late as hell for school now. “Quit grabbing me! I’m not a rag doll! You’re such a Neanderthal!”

He liked it better when Max put him on ice, they never spoke, they barely even looked at each other. Their mornings were quiet and they were barely ever late because of it. Sure it was lonely or whatever, but at least he didn’t have to deal with all her whining and crying. Crying over dumb shit like being grabbed, he’s tempted to show what it’s like to get nailed in the face. “And you’re a goddamn creep, Maxine! Stop spying on me!”

“You know what, Billy?” She seethed. “You were right! I wouldn’t care if you died!” She picked up her board and jumped out of the car, slamming the door behind her.

“Fucking Christ,” he rubbed his hands over his face and groaned.

It always ends in yelling, it always ends in fighting; that’s just who they are. Billy went inside, did the dishes from breakfast--something else his dad was yelling about this morning, worked out, and avoided Max until dinner.

They do that too, it’s all they really can do anyway.

At dinner, they shared matching pouts, which made Susan really fucking pleased. It didn’t matter that her daughter and step-son both looked like they’d had their favorite thing taken away (Billy’s car keys are still on ice--so yeah, they have been taken away technically) as long as the two of them are sharing something she’s delighted.

She probably thinks they’re going to bond over failing a test or ‘relationship’ troubles or something. He’d love to turn to Susan and tell her her creepy sea goblin of a daughter is a nosy bitch.

It’s only by some divine intervention, Max hasn’t done exactly what he’s thinking about and turned to tell Neil his monstrosity of a son is hanging out with her babysitter and being a total asshole about it.

That would just be perfect, he’d be dead before the leftovers are put away.

They ended up not escaping Susan’s goddamn salmon and the possibility of food poisoning which seems almost inevitable at this point. Max pushed the pale pink slab around her plate absently and Billy watched her, doing the same, but at least stabbing it a few times to look like he tried.

Max was answering with one word sentences and Susan’s already learned not to ask about Billy’s day, the woman yammered on about hers, which is fine. She’s usually quiet, but when she starts, it’s impossible to shut her up which is also fine for Billy. He and Max nod their heads when they’re supposed to. Neil’s listening and occasionally adds a comment or question when he feels like it.
Sometimes Billy thinks his dad actually likes Susan, that the horse looking red head might be more than just a necessity. They go out and do things together, they watch movies on the couch, sometimes Susan looks at his dad and smiles like it’s supposed to mean something or some shit.

And it’s gross.

A sentiment he and Max share, Susan would be so proud they’re sharing something.

Dinner came and went, with little event. Except Neil brought up the whole ‘psycho locker’ situation again--more so as a public humiliation tactic masked as fatherly concerned. Max was looking at him like he’s a fucking psycho ironically enough and Susan worried her lip, but thankfully kept her mouth shut. She always does over the important stuff.

He did the dishes--punishment for storming out earlier--and Max lingered. She said she’ll put them away, but he knows she’ll sit there at the table eating shit she’s not supposed to be eating and try to make conversation.

Billy thought about just impaling himself on a kitchen knife and hoping it brought just enough pity or shell shock that Max would leave him alone. Better yet he could turn around and cut off a few of her toes or something.

She won’t be able to stalk him after that.

“Are you done apologizing now?” She asked, sounding especially stupid.

Billy sighed, the guilt feels gross, it makes his mostly empty stomach feel full and his muscles annoyingly tense. On the bright side, slowly but surely it’s getting to be a little easier to endure. “Why do you insist on talking so much, is it a girl thing? You need me to get your mom, Maxine?”

He could feel the anger radiating off of her from behind him. “You can’t solve everything with a fist, meathead.”

Billy snorted. “You’re right,” he said. “I forgot if you can’t solve it with a fist you drug them.”

Max scowled at her step-brother’s back. She hates being like him, as Dustin says ‘stepping into the Underworld, stooping to his level’ or whatever. Max hates it, she’s not going to be a psycho. “I’m sorry I acted like you earlier, you deserved it, but what I said was pretty awful...it sounded so much like something you would say and I don’t want to be angry like you.”

_God, this is talking._

He knew there had to be a reason he’d been avoiding it for so long.

From the sounds of her chewing, she’s broken into the taffy Susan’s been hiding from her.

Billy sighed, this is _exhausting._

“Sorry for grabbing you,” he mumbled, and that’s how it starts because the next bit comes up like vomit--completely against his will and unstoppable. “I don’t want to be angry like me either.”

_Angry like Neil._

He could hear her smacking on taffy. “You’re not as bad, you know…”

“I don’t like you following me,” he said. “You’re worried or whatever? Fine, I don’t really care, just stop it. It’s weird.”
Max didn’t say anything, there was just more loud chewing. “So no more following and...no more
grabbing and getting in my face?” She asked, sounding hopeful again.

Billy’s pretty sure he’ll have a conniption if he has to answer one more question from anyone. “Yes,” he hissed. “Just stay out of my shit.”

“Okay,” Max said easily enough. “You’d tell me if something weird was going on, right? Like, really weird.”

It took every functioning cell in his body not to strangle her right then and there. “Other than you stalking me?” he gritted through his clenched teeth. “No. Now can you fuck off?”

She made some little affronted noise that reminded Billy of the entire opposite gender, “jeez, alright. You’re such a grouch,” she said. He heard the chair at the table move. “You know if my mom or Neil hear you cursing in the house you’re going to get in more trouble,” she warned.

Billy almost laughed at that. He doesn’t get in trouble for cursing in the house, he gets in trouble for swearing at or near Max. It’s practically a tragedy how oblivious she is to what goes on in the house, Billy always wondered why she acts like she’s got a whole other universe to worry about. He has to remind himself she’s just a dumb kid, she’s not supposed to know any better anyway. “Go finish your homework, Maxine,” he grumbled.

Which is code for, fuck off.

“Good night, Billy.”

Which is code for, you’re an asshole.

Some words are better left unsaid.
XI. Dangerous

Chapter Summary

Into the past...and a surprise at the end :)

Chapter Notes

This chapter is going to be a little different, but I wanted to do this and I was just ignoring it. I didn't have a part like this at all in the fic, but I thought I really should just didn't know where to put it. This chapter was a completely random, new so I just wrote the whole thing from scratch this week.

Side-note: Most of what I write was written during the school year and I doctor up each chapter a little (a whole lot) before I post it because my writing has changed a lot from when I started this and it would be literal garbage lmfao.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Billy rubbed the rubber wheel of the toy car against the pad of his finger, a cotton candy blue Volkswagen Beetle, just like the car his ma drives. He’s too old for stuffies or a blanket, but the Beetle goes everywhere with him and he sits it on his bedside table every night. Some of the paint chipped off and the passenger side door doesn’t shut all the way, not like his ma’s real car back home. His dad says the only reason the thing looks so new and beautiful all the time is because she never uses it.

The thing is a waste of money, he says. His ma hates going into town and she doesn’t like strangers either, but she’ll use it when she’s run out of pottery clay, or she’s bringing a cherry pie or a birthday cake down to someone.

He played with the Volkswagen Beetle and waited anxiously for the doctor to come over and sit in front of him again. He’s always got on the same thing, a white lab coat, a button-up shirt and jeans. The doctor is balding too, his hair is a tawny shade of brown, thinning and graying a little bit in the front so that he could see his shiny scalp when the light hit at certain angles. He looked like a doctor in that way, which made up for the glasses he didn’t have on, his jeans and how red he is. He always looks like he’s run a marathon. His dad says it’s because he’s Irish, but his ma is Irish and she’s not red.

Billy’s sure he’s Irish though, he turns red like a fire truck. Red when he’s angry, red when he’s sad, red when he’s happy and red when his ma pokes fun at his ears. His dad turns red when he’s angry and only when he’s angry so he has to be at least a little bit Irish.

Maybe he is and he just doesn’t know it, Billy thought.

He pressed the door shut only for him to turn on its side and have it fly open again.

His dad is in the room with him, but several feet away, in a plastic red chair. He’s always sitting in the same plastic chair, the only thing that changes is its color. The walls are very white, sterile, he
thought looking at them. All of them are sterile except the big mirror in the wall that Billy has to sit in front of so that he’s always looking back at himself. On the other side of the room is a diagram of the Human Brain. The first time he came there was just the brain, he came again and they added the hippocampus, specifically.

The hippocampus, specifically, is what’s wrong with him.

He’s heard his dad and ma argue at night and he knows there’s something wrong with him. You don’t go to see doctors when things are going well, except he isn’t sick. He heard his dad say he’s a freak of nature, that’s what’s wrong with him.

He jabbed his thumbnail into the rubber wheel again.

His mama stopped coming with him and his dad to the visits and honestly, Billy misses her but he’s not too upset about it. She cries like he’s going to die almost every time. His dad doesn’t talk or come near him or ask the doctor a lot of questions like his mom does. He doesn’t sit in the chair with him until it’s time for testing. His dad stays quiet and his jaw clenches so tight the bone might snap like a rubber band.

Billy ran his thumb over the new dent in the car’s roof, he was kicking and screaming today, he wasn’t being a man about it this time, he was a goddamn pansy. Billy ran his thumb over the dent again and frowned, he dented his toy car and he knew there were bruises under his shirt from being lifted and maybe one on his side from hitting the console when he landed.

He should know better, doctor’s visits are not negotiable, boy, do you understand me? Not negotiable.

Not negotiable. Which means inevitable. Which means inescapable. Like the headache and the nausea are. Tomorrow his bed will be inescapable and he’ll feel too sick to get up. His mama will stay in bed with him all day and cry into his hair and stroke his cheek and give him whatever he asks for.

Not negotiable.

Inevitable.

Inescapable.

The door to the room opened the doctor came in through it with the big box and the spine helmet. It reminded Billy of the outside of a bug, like how his mama tells him the spine is on the outside for bugs. That’s why they crunch like when Bruce broke his arm.

“Good afternoon, Billy,” he said. The white light makes him look even redder. He frowned a little, “are you not talking today?”

“He knows the faster he starts to behave the faster he gets to go home,” his dad said. “Isn’t that right, Billy?”

He pushed his nail into the rubber wheel until he thought the nail would snap. “Good afternoon, sir” he mumbled. It always the same doctor, but he doesn’t have a name tag, Billy’s never learned his name

The doctor offered him a shaky smile. “How about I let you have this, tough guy?” He pulled out a shining red lollipop from his pen pocket, “do you wanna chomp down on this while I finish getting set up?”
He heard his father make a bad noise from the other side of the room.

“Is that alright with you, Mr. Hargrove?” The doctor turned to him. “I’d hate to spoil his dinner.” Billy thought that was ridiculous since they all know he won’t want to eat anything after this.

His dad’s chin tilted up a little, his crossed arms somehow seemed more threatening than they did when it was just the two of them. “I don’t need him thinking he deserves a reward every time he decides to throw a fit,” he said.

“Ah,” the doctor offered him the same shaking smile. “Well, if he doesn’t cooperate we have other methods. This is just a lollipop, Mr. Hargrove, it’s something I’ve had in my pocket for a few hours now that I need to get rid of.” He said in his ‘I’m a doctor, and I know what’s best’ voice. They both know he is just an annoying byproduct of their short misgivings, one that leaves an especially bad taste in the mouth; but like broccoli before the desert, his father is necessary and tolerated the same way. He handed the lollipop to Billy. “I’m more of a blue raspberry guy, anyway.”

His dad’s jaw clenched up.

Billy took the lollipop and unwrapped it with shaky fingers, it tasted like cherry sweet and a little sour on his tongue. He kept it in his mouth and let a little smile pull across his face, he loves cherry flavored things almost as much as he loves strawberries.

He sucked on the lollipop and waited. He pressed at the inside of the car, still trying to fix the dent. The doctor turned away from him and was hooking things up like he always does. Wires are attached to the bone helmet and then the bone helmet goes on his head, the big machine spits out reams and reams of paper that the doctor scours over before placing inside a manila folder.

“How was your week, Billy?”

“Good,” Billy muttered around his lollipop. He didn’t have to get yelled at this week, and his ma didn’t cry once even when they went to the grocery store. He saw a butterfly hatch in the garden and Ms. June came over for dinner last night with a big bag of lemons for lemonade. “I read the book you gave me.”

“All of it?” He asked.

Billy nodded. He only spoke when he realized the doctor’s back was still turned to him. “Yes, sir.”

“It took you ten days to finish it,” he said. “That’s very impressive for someone your age.”

“I could have...sooner,” he mumbled. He could’ve if he was allowed to have with him more often. He knew it was a little weird he’d learned how to read so quickly, and he wasn’t allowed to have it with him out in public. He could only take little books with him like Dick and Jane when he went outside.

“Really?” He turned around. His head cocked to the side and Billy squirmed in his chair. He felt like a sideshow bit. Billy chewed on his tongue instead of the lollipop and nodded. “Next time, I’d like you to finish it as quickly as possible, do you understand?”

How high can the monkey jump?

How fast can the monkey run?

Look at what little tricks it can do.
Billy nodded. “Okay.”

The man’s eyes shifted to the side, “and what of the book, Mr. Hargrove? It was L’Engles’ *A Wrinkle in Time*?”

There was a beat of silence, the little boy rustled in his seat like he’s on some sort of trial about to get convicted. “I told you he read it, you just heard him say it,” he heard his dad said gruffly. He grumbled afterwards, “he’s a damn *five year old* he should barely know how to read.”

The doctor snorted. He’s never seen someone laugh at his dad before. “On the upside, you can call him precocious, he’s reading at junior high level, and that’s nothing to snuff at for a five year old.”

His father didn’t smile back, but Billy doesn’t see him smile very often at anyone. He wished he’d warned the doctor before. “However,” his smile dropped. “He’s at the age where he should be beginning to learn how to read, so we’re hypothesizing his ability took the necessary steps to extract the reading skill and immediately integrated it into his brain all on its own,” he said a little breathlessly. The doctor had everything set up which means he’d ask Billy questions, *lots* of questions. He sat down on the right side of the table, Billy could still see his reflection in the glass at the front of the room.

He played with the car’s broken door.

*Click.*

*Click.*

“These should be easy questions, I’m sure you’ll be alright.”

He’s too old to believe that, and they always start off easy. “Okay,” he said.

“Alright. Before you learned how to read, were you excited to? Or do you really like books? You saw other people reading and you wanted to learn?”

Billy chewed on his bottom lip.

*Click.*

*Click.*

He tried not to look at his dad. Billy nodded. His ma liked reading, she keeps books in her big purse and there’s a big cookbook on top of the fridge. His dad reads too, newspapers mostly and a few serious looking books.

“Oh,” he wrote something down on his notepad.

“You still get sick?” The doctor asked. “Your head and your stomach still hurt?”

He nodded.

“And you still can’t get out of bed for about two days? Sometimes three?”

He nodded.

*Click.*

“It’s still the same pain on the left side of your head?”
He nodded.

“Click.”

“What about after you read?”

“Sometimes,” he said. “Not a lot anymore.”

The doctor hummed, “can you show me how bad it hurt in the beginning?” He opened the manila folder and pulled out a piece of paper with six faces, one was smiling and one was crying and the rest were in between. Billy stared at the faces, he's done this before with their last test, and it’s always the same. He pointed to the sobbing face at the end of the sheet.

“And you said not a lot anymore, what is it now?”

He pointed to the face just shy of the middle, closer to a smile than a frown. He thinks it’d just be better to erase the smiling face off the paper. The man pulled out a pen from his breast pocket and clicked it, he flipped a page over in his notebook and wrote something down with a small frown. “At least you’re consistent, kid,” he said. “Are you getting dreams? Any nightmares?”

He shook his head.

His fingers ran over the dent in the roof and his bottom lip rolled between his teeth. The doctor looked at him, kind and patient as if he knew he’d crack open soon. His ma’s always said he’s an awful lair, his face gets red then too. Billy’s eyes once again tried not to shift over to his dad. He looked down at the sturdy white table in front of him, it’s so white it hurts his eyes to look at.

“I need you to tell me the truth, Billy,” he said. “It’s very important to everyone that you tell me the truth.”

He’s still not even sure why he knows your dad shouldn’t be in your nightmares. That’s wrong, another thing that’s wrong with him. It’s bad to hate your family. Sometimes he thinks it’s bad that he throws his ma into the bathroom or into the car, the same way he does Billy. But his dad is smart and he knows what’s best.

“Sometimes,” he muttered.

The doctor wrote down more, “not every night?”

He shook his head.

“What are they about?”

Billy pressed at the dent again. “I’m getting in trouble most of the time,” he said. “Sometimes I’m not me, sometimes I’m not getting in trouble either.”

“Okay,” he set down the pen and stood. “What about those times when it’s not either?”

Billy’s eyes tracked him as he walked over to the big machine on wheels. “They’re weird.”

The doctor came back over with the headset in his hands. There are two spines on the headset, one that fits around his head and a strap goes under his chin like a bike helmet, the other spine is on top the first around his head with wires that lead back to the machine.

“Describe them to me,” he said.
Billy swallowed. He wanted to shake his head and take the headset off, they call him smart for being able to tell that when the headset is on and it’s ‘recall time’, pain usually follows. He looked like a goddamn freak of nature in it too, that’s what his dad says. “It hurts,” he mumbled softly. “It hurts when I do that.”

“I know, Billy,” he sounds impatient now. “You have to do it anyway.”

“But it hurts,” he repeated.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face in a way that reminded him of his dad. It was jerky and exhausted in the same way, right before he turns red. “Being a big kid, Billy means doing certain things even if you don’t like it or it hurts. Now, I know two things about you, one, you’re very special and, two, you’re not a little kid. You’re not a baby are you?”

“No,” he said.

He’s not. His dad doesn’t like babies either or he tries not to be one.

“That’s right, so, I’m going to need you to be a big kid and do this for me,” he said.

Billy held onto the toy car between both hands, he wished they’d let his ma come along. The problem with her is that she cries too easy, she’s a big baby is what’s wrong with her and seeing her cry makes him cry too. She tells them when to stop, she can get the doctors to stop, she can get his dad to stop too. She could make it all stop.

“Do as he says,” he heard his dad say. “The better behaved you are, the quicker we go home, you know that.”

Not negotiable.

Inevitable

Inescapable.

“Describe them, please,” the doctor said slowly.

It’ll hurt, it always hurts. It’s... excruciating, that’s the word underneath the sobbing red face on the sheet of paper. The sobbing red face looks like Billy’s. “I’m working, and I... I work in a mine. I’m really sweaty and I want to take a break, I want to go home and watch TV... sports and drink a cold beer. There’s a game on tonight. I don’t though, because work is work and I’ve got a family.” His throat felt dry, it clicked when he swallowed. This is a bad one. “I’m working it feels like the whole earth is going to shake apart and crack right down and there’s screaming, so much screaming it feels like it’s bouncing in my skull, not in the tunnels. It’s not my skull.”

Billy stopped. His head hurts and aches and his eyes burn like they’re full of soot and rocks. “My head hurts.” What he wanted to know was if he could stop now. The headaches roll in like a storm, it waits off the coast somewhere but it’s always there and the more he pulls at his dreams and the more he does things he shouldn’t know how to do, it’s like he’s pulling the storm clouds to shore with him. “My head really hurts.”

“I know it hurts,” he said. He’s got a smile like his dad and his ma, it never reaches his eyes. His ma smiles for real sometimes, but it’s rare. “Continue,” he said.

“I’m running before I know I’m running because the screaming’s scared me so bad. I’m coward for it, I’m a coward for running away from the screaming when I should have been running
towards it. I could've helped somebody, but I just kept running. But...you can't run from the earth splitting in half, you can’t run from the apocalypse...not without a spaceship, I guess. And I’m swallowed up in the rocks too. Sweaty and scared. And I know now I’m supposed to pray, but it’s dark and all I hear is screaming. I don’t even think there’s anything left anymore.”

He pressed his hands to his eyes, they stung from tears and felt tight like they were going to burst. He’s pulled the storm close enough to shore, close enough that everything down to his skin and nails hurt. Billy stopped any more words from coming out. The man that passes out the flyers at church hates the world now and no one knows it but the two of them, he doesn't think anyone else should know. He thinks there’s nothing left here like there’s nothing left in Billy’s skull but thundering storm clouds and sharp rain that beats into his brain.

The doctor pulled a lilac handkerchief that reminded Billy of his mother’s garden from his back pocket. “Like I said, you’re a very special, Billy.” He reached to wipe the blood from his lip and placed it in his palm. “You can do things that no one else can, do you understand?”

He understood very little actually, words drifted in and out and he could only catch a few. “I've got a few more things we can try and then you get to go home.”

---

Billy jolted awake in bed, his breaths came out in gasps that he couldn’t control. The part of his brain that kept his body in control seized uselessly and he could only whip around tangled in his sheets, tacky with sweat that poured from his body until he slammed onto the floor.

He sat up still breathing hard.

*What the hell was that?*

Actually no, he didn't *want* to know what the hell that was.

He groaned into his hands and rubbed a hand over his face, dried blood there—*again*. Billy let his body cool before standing. He threw on a shirt and left his room for the bathroom.

It’s not like Susan’s a stellar cook or he couldn’t feed himself, but the house lacked the smell of coffee or burnt toast and peanut butter. He didn’t hear Max hogging all the space in the bathroom either. The house was too quiet for a Thursday, not when Billy’s supposed to have himself and Max in the car by 7:20 AM.

He looked down at his watch, it’s 8:46 AM.

“What the fuck?”

“Language please,” he heard Susan chastise from the living room.

He’d like to say he didn’t just jump out of his motherfucking skin at the sound of her voice like some sort of scared wuss, but he did. “Mother—” He cut himself off, instead of heading for the bathroom, he turned and headed towards Susan for answers.

When she looked up at him, she frowned, “you...are you feeling, alright?”

If he looks as bad as he feels, Susan has a right to be staring. “Couldn’t sleep,” he grumbled.

Max was next to her on the couch, spooning cereal into her little gremlin mouth while watching the
TV. His dad must not be home. No food in the living room is a rule they’re both subjected to. She looked at him far longer than she normally would, even with her new interest in him.

“Well,” Susan said. “School’s canceled. Some pipes burst, waters all over Hawkins High and Middle. You choose a good night for no sleep.”

“No one chooses not to sleep well. Did you make breakfast?”

She’s gone all wooby eyed and sad again. Maybe Neil just likes women that get sad eyed at the drop of a hat. Susan shook her head.

“Great,” he said. “I’m making myself pancakes.”

“You can’t make pancakes just for yourself,” Max said. Which means she wants some, obviously.

And normally Billy would be in a semi-good enough mood to make a few extra since there’s no school for God knows how long and he managed to have a conversation with Harrington without being a total scrub. But he feels like shit and that dream was fucking freaky, so, no pancakes for Maxine.

“Oh, yeah? Watch me,” he snorted. ”Maybe you’ll actually learn something.”

Max stuck her tongue out at him which only proved to Billy that she’s a goddamn gremlin at all times of the day.

“Oh, one more thing, if you...if you don’t really mind,” Susan said in her mousy voice “I always mind,” he groused. She got even more wooby eyed and Max glared at him. Billy sighed, "what?"

“I’m going to Ruth’s baby shower today and it’d help if you could take Maxine to her friend's house today,” she said. Billy wondered why she even bothered asking anymore she takes her fucking kid everywhere already. Jesus Christ, he should just be a chauffeur.

“When and where?” He asked.

“Six-thirty, but I don’t know where yet,” Max said.

“Her name is Jane,” Susan sounded so fucking over the moon, probably because it’s not Dustin, Lucas, Will or Mike—all boys. “The Chief of Police, his daughter.”

“Mom--!”

“T’m just helping!”

Christ.

Max is going to hang out with El which means he’ll see her. Not that Billy didn’t think she was real, but he didn’t ever think he’d actually get a chance to be near her. Honestly, it’s the best news he’s heard all day, even above school being out.

He was kind of looking forward to and seeing Harrington and tell him his freaky fucking mind powers are doing weird things again. He’d go fucking buck wild over it probably and he’d probably have to bring earplugs, but it’d be worth it. He's supposed to tell him some things, right?

Maybe he’ll call Steve before his dad gets home.
Probably not. They're not friend friends, they're just...whatever the hell they are.

It really doesn’t matter when he might get to see El.

Chapter End Notes

Poor little Billy :(
But! On the upside Billy's going over to El's and who knows what that will entail. Also obviously El and Max are friends now lmfao because that was a whole silly misunderstand girls need to stick together anyway :)
Thanks for reading.
Billy found out pretty quick this was a girl thing. Max had a Shangri-Las record stuffed in her backpack along with a Madonna cassette and some shitty People magazine she normally wouldn't be caught dead with.

Definitely a girls’ thing. No wonder Susan was so chipper and adamant about the whole thing.

“Since when did you hang out with girls?”

Max glared at him. “Since when did you hang out with Steve Harrington?”

Billy ignored her for the road, Susan would hate for him to crash the car and kill Maxine. He’s pretty sure Neil would rejoice if he was flung twenty feet through his windshield.

Max shifted in her seat looking really fucking pleased with the fact that she had shut him up.

He’s supposed to be nice-ish now or whatever but he really wanted to smack her in the back the head.

“Harrington hangs around me, not the other way, understand?” He decided to say, and he saw Max roll her eyes from the corner of his eyes. “He’s stalking me. Sound familiar?” He wasn't sure when he leered at her if he meant the fact that she is and was also stalking him or that she still lovingly refers to Lucas as ‘stalker’.

He decided it was the former rather than the latter. He knew that was a lie, but he decided it, so it is.

“You’re the one that got in his car,” Max muttered. “That doesn’t seem like stalking to me.”

Billy snorted. He was so nervous then he thought he was going to bust veins, his or Harrington's he wasn't sure. At the moment he regretted it. “You wanna shut up?”

Max smirked.

Max-2, Billy-0

He’s really happy he gets to drop her off and pretend she doesn’t exist for a few hours.

“And anyway, a cop’s kid?” He asked. “Really Maxine, you trying to help me out or something?”

He’ll be pulling the ‘you know my little sister’ card all the time now, not that he doesn’t think Hopper won’t call bullshit on him in a second. Neil’s not gonna be happy about Max hanging around a cop’s kid, that’s a risk.

Neil doesn’t like risks.

“Ugh no,” she huffed. “Jane’s my friend and she’s cool.”

Billy snorted at another one of her indignant noises, Maxine’s a tight ass, really. And if he let her know about she’d probably say something annoying like, it’s because I have a moral compass, and she would probably be right. “She’s friends with you and those freaks, how cool can she be.”
Her red hair fanned around her head in a fury as she turned to glare at him, “They’re not freaks!”

“Yeah, sure,” he drawled. He didn’t ‘ask around’ about Max’s friends and never planned to but he has Steve now and Steve knows freaky little Will Byers got sucked into another goddamn dimension, Mike has a thing for a chick with freaky fucking mind powers, Dustin raised a creature from a different dimension like it was a harmless pet gerbil or something and Lucas…. He clearly has a thing for Max which makes him just as weird.

They’re certified freaks.

And Billy’s the one calling them freaks when he’s having dreams about being his mom and living as a lab rat, which really must mean something.

Billy turned onto one of Hawkins many back roads onto the unpaved road which sucked considering he has to drive over it for God knows how long. At the end of the long road would be Jane’s house, he just knew. He could just tell. It seemed like somewhere she and Hopper would live. Almost out of town, close to the Byers’ neck of the woods, and far off from the lab. She’ll be there and she’ll be real with her wide, all-knowing brown eyes that give him chills whenever he thinks about them.

He’s got chills just thinking about the fact that she exists. He thought he was the only one like this for so long, and maybe he wasn’t, but what was the chance he was ever going to meet someone else that can do things like he can?

Slim to none.

That’s what the chances were. Slim to fucking none. And then moved to a middle of nowhere town likes Hawkins, then he met Steve Harrington and they both attended the same stupid party.

And El is real, and he’s not alone anymore.

He still kind of wished he’d called Steve to tell him all this. Even if the concept of sharing was new to Billy, he wanted to tell Steve about this. By now he's awake and probably bored out of his goddamn skull. He’d go buck wild over the news. He’d know what to do better than Billy would. Steve’s good with people like that, even people that give him the creeps like El does...Billy not so much.

Who knows what the girl will do with him, maybe she won’t know what to do at all. He could see her and her wide brown eyes, almost the same color as her curly dark, staring right through him with her head cocked to the side a little. The look wouldn’t mean a whole lot, just another stranger that comes in and out of her life--one of the few with meaning so she’d study his face a little longer. It’d only be long enough for her to remember he’s Max’s brother.

And maybe that would crush him a little.

Jesus.

He’s scared of the way a twelve year old girl is going to be looking at him. He rubbed a hand over his face and winced at the healing bruise on his cheek and the steady pulsing on the left side of his head.

“I’ve never been out this far,” Max said with all the carefulness of being locked in with a hungry lion. She sounded like Susan.

“Good for you,” he drawled. Her cheeks glowed a little and Billy knew he’d foiled some sort of
plan she had. His head rolled to look at her, his eyes hooded with a whole lot of disinterest in whatever game she’s playing. “Spit it out, Maxine.”

“You know your way around this place,” she said matter of factly. “But you hate it here?”

The truth is he figured after Harrington absconded with him to Beatrice’s he figured it’d actually be smart to put his curse to use and get acquainted with the roads through Harrington’s brain. It’s come in handy so far, including needing very little direction to get anywhere in this backwards town. Instead he snorted, “I have to drive your ass everywhere and make sure we get home in time for whatever bullshit reason my dad makes up, I don’t have time to get lost.”

She took that with a lot of careful consideration like she was looking for a lie. The thing is Billy’s been told he’s a pretty awful liar, at least his ma used to tell him he was shit at it, so he doesn’t tell many anymore. He drives her everywhere and really doesn’t have time to get lost despite how it happened from time to time.

“You need to stop being such an observant little shit,” Billy said for no reason other than it bothered him and they’d just past a mailbox which meant El’s house couldn’t be too far ahead. “Someone’ll punch your fucking lights out for it.”

“You’re a wealth of knowledge, Billy, honestly,” she scoffed.

Yeah, he’s really excited to dump her ass at the Hoppers for a few hours. He’s done babysitting, being her chauffeur, or any other miscellaneous Neil will come up for him to be for her.

The house at the top of the hill reminded him of the one he lived in when he was little for the very same reason, it was a small house on top of a hill far from town. The vinyl was a dull sand color that hadn’t faded yet which was a sign of how freshly painted it’d been. If he had to guess they’d only been living here full time for a few days.

He stopped next to Hopper’s Blazer and killed the engine. “What are you doing?” Max asked, her eyes widened.

“What’s it look like, Max?” He groused. “Walking you to the fucking door.” He got out of the car and pretended this was a very normal thing for him to be doing and hoped Max would just shut up for once in her life and do the same.

“Why?” She said indignantly. She jogged behind him with her backpack slung over one shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Walking you to the fucking door,” he repeated, tougher this time, leaving no room for argument. “I thought we had this figured out already.”

She blinked with her eyes ridiculously wide, Billy had to bite his tongue to keep from telling her she looked as stupid as Wheeler does when she makes that face. “You don’t do that, Why’re doing that?”

Max thought about Billy the Mind Flayer, she shouldn’t have brought him here. It was too late to try to stop him.

_God, I’m so stupid._

She led him right to her. She should’ve had Hopper come and get her, El’s the one that called her and she could’ve just mentioned something. She’s supposed to protect El at all cost and even if Billy isn’t the Mind Flayer, there’s something seriously wrong with him.
“You don’t have to do that, it’s not that far of a walk, Billy really, you could watch me from the
car,” she stammered.

“What’s the matter,” he jeered. “You don’t want me meeting your friends, Maxine? You hiding
something from me?”

“ Seriously, this isn’t funny,” she said.

He snorted, “you see me laughing?” He moved her out of his way and kept walking.

“Hey!” She picked up one of the larger rocks. Max’s face hardened to that look again, the same
one grimy from anesthesia from that night at the Byers. “Get back in the car.”

Once again he wanted to call bullshit on his ma, he never gets to pick his damn battles. Every
second of his life he’s just getting dropped from one fight to the next, he knows by now every
second of his life, waking and now unwaking is there’s a bell ready to ring to start some sort of
fight.

Her grip tightened around it. He almost wanted her to the throw the fucking rock, he wanted to see
if she could do it or better yet she’d miss. He doubted it though.

“Is there a problem?” He heard Hopper say from behind him.

His ma was religious so he honestly wouldn’t be surprised if she asked God to keep an eye on him
and God decided that means ruining everything for him whenever he needs a good little chuckle
for the day.

Max dropped the rock like it was molten lava. Her face pinched up, “no,” and Billy’s starting to
think Max might be just as bad of a liar as he is.

He walked off the porch, Billy could almost see him in a decade or two walking down the stairs
telling jerk off kids like the two of them to get the hell off his lawn. He even wondered if that’s
what Hopper intended on saying next right now.


“Max,” Hopper said in low voice. “Jane’s pretty excited to have you over, so we’re all going to put
the last five minutes behind us. You’re going to go inside take shoes off and go watch TV or
whatever it is you’re planning on doing. Do you understand?”

She blinked again with those big ugly baby doll eyes and nodded. “Okay,” she shouldered her
backpack and again and trudged past the two of them, she managed to give Billy one last dirty look
as she passed.

“The door’s unlocked,” he said to her.

Max went up the stairs to the door and closed it behind her without looking back or glancing over
her shoulder.

Why would she?

Max doesn’t know how important Billy’s plan was or that his chance of actually coming face to
face with El was getting slimmer and slimmer by the second. She’s just a stupid thirteen year old
with a natural talent for fucking him over as often and as completely as humanly possible.
Billy spun on his heels to leave.

“Yeah,” Hopper said slowly. “I don’t think so.”

“What?” Billy snapped. He turned back around to glare at the man, his fists balled at his side like he’s ready to swing even if he couldn’t. Hopper’s a cop and he’d be in way more trouble than it’s worth over it.

“Cool it with the attitude kid.” Hopper groused.

“I didn’t do anything, alright? She was the one about stone me in your yard,” he growled at him, Hopper looks at him the same way a grizzly bear looks at a chihuahua baring its teeth.

“I said,” Hopper took a step closer, the smallest step and the boy took four. Not good. “Cool it,” he said more gently. “I don’t care about whatever problem you two have, I don’t care about the rock, we’re just talking, alright? Just talking and that’s all it’s going to be, talking and listening.”

He knows this game.

He wasn’t sure about much on the boy standing in front, but he’s pretty sure the dark circles around his bloodshot eyes and the pale color to his face isn’t the norm. And in all honesty, he had been wondering how he’d been holding up since Saturday, from the looks of it, not well.

Hopper pulled out two cigarettes and lit one, handing it to Billy. “Figured you’d want one, you’re an antsy kid, Hargrove.”

Billy glared at him. He’s never been called antsy before, he’s not turning down a cigarette over it though. He put it between his lips and inhaled, “I’m not antsy.”

“Chief of police wants to talk you all of a sudden?” Hopper gave him a knowing look. “C’mon.”

Billy didn’t say anything, the damn old man was right.

“Like I said, relax,” he said. “I’m the only reason why you weren’t suspect numero uno for the whole Hall thing, which wouldn’t have been right anyway because George Clemson is an asshat.”

“You…” It’d slipped his mind completely, ’it’ being that Tommy Hall still unconscious in the hospital and a third of the two still thinks he’s to blame. “Why’d you...How’d you do that?”

Hopper sniffed. “I told them you were stuck doing housework for me for some cash and then I took you straight home afterwards.” Billy knew his face was stone still in some threatening, mistrustful expression, but he is Confused. Confused with a capital ‘C.’ Billy wasn’t following. “Because you were at my cabin that night.”

And then like a strike of lightning, he was.

Fuck!

“So what I want to know,” Hopper said lowly, “is why?”

Was he there? Billy couldn’t remember. He’s a cop, they’re never home. Could he’ve taken a day off? Again, he’s a cop. Billy let the smoke file out of his nose. His throat burned, the last thing he was going to do was show it. The only one home was Jane or El or whatever she goes by now.
She must’ve seen him.

Which means she saw him.

“My bad, I was taking a walk,” Billy shrugged. “I’ll keep away next time.”

Hopper’s face scrunched up into this weird look Billy couldn’t decipher, “yeah, I wish that were it, but you lingered for a long time.”

“I was wondering why there was a beat up cabin in the wood,” Billy lied.

“For nearly twenty minutes?” Hopper looked at him. “You were wondering about that for twenty minutes?” He snorted, his lips curled into a knowing grin around the cigarette. “Try again, kid.”

Billy glared at him, “I don’t know at what. Who cares? I didn’t fuck with any of your shit.”

Hopper’s eyebrows rose into his hat, “my shit?”

Shit.

Billy shrugged, he’s already fucked and decided he might as well cut his losses with the cop that could easily wrestle him to ground and handcuff him. “Those fucking traps you got around your house like it’s Alcatraz or something. Kept my distance, y’know, ‘cause I’m not asking to set off any alarms.”

Except he did, El saw him.

He took a look at his shortening cigarette, “as fun as the conversation is, just tell me why you were out there and how you found it. You know it was trespassing.”

“Dumb Cali kid accidentally wanders into your backyard and you’re going to arrest him,” Billy scoffed. “That’ll be great for your track record.”

“It’ll be even better for yours,” Hopper said.

Touché.

“I fucking hate cops,” Billy groused looking up at the blue sky. “I got curious, alright? You were the one that said I could…” there’s just no way to say ‘talk to you’ properly, without sounding like the broken down pussy he was. Saying I, a seventeen year old, wanted to talk to your daughter, a twelve year old, would go over even better he thought. Billy tried to amend himself anyway, “you said I could ask you shit if I wanted to, so I made Harrington tell me where your place was at.”

“Okay,” Hopper said, face all stone.

Billy fucking hated cops. “Are we done now?”

“No,” he said. “We’re not done.” Hopper sighed and all of sudden he looked real tired like he was exhausted from something that’d happen and he was dreading this. “You ever met my kid, Hargrove?”

“I didn’t know you had one until this morning,” Billy lied. He wanted to know why he asked if he knew Jane. It vibrated under her skin like pure lightning, Jane saw him and said something about him to Hopper. “Why?” He tried to keep his tone calloused.

“No reason,” he grumbled. “I figure, pretty sure she saw you there hanging around my cabin and
she was just curious about who you were, what you were doing hanging around there. Kids get curious, especially her.”

Hopper looked at him, it made him want to go stock still with those weathered blue eyes obviously making a point of keeping track of every detail on his young face. El seemed to think he was important for some reason or at least she’s got some weird feeling about him. Hopper wasn’t sure whether it was a good weird feeling or a bad weird feeling, but he wasn’t willing to take that risk. He’s didn’t want to add this punk ass of a kid to the long list of people he has to keep an eye on, but it doesn’t really seem like he’s got much of a choice. Billy turned to look out at the woods, lip jutted out menacingly, he hates being studied. Especially with the bruise on his cheek still healing.

He sighed. “Hawkins is a strange place, alright, kid?”

Billy snorted around the cigarette. He would’ve thought it was in a way that meant he was thinking about calling bullshit on him. He snorted in a way that said ‘no kidding,’ and that concerned Hopper a little more than it should.

He has a right to be paranoid.

“Just keep your head up and try to stay out of trouble,” he said in his rumbling, ‘I’m still a cop’ voice. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Billy knows he won’t.

He’s only trouble and El was asking about him, which had to mean something. His whole body felt alight. He was lit up with anxiety and excitement to the point that he felt like the Crayola box again. He’s the five pack of crayons they give to the kids at restaurants to keep him quiet, with all he’s feeling it’s like shoving a professional artist size kit into that little pack.

He’s going to burst wide open.

His aching head is going to crack in half and his body's going to split like a tree struck by lightning. His fucking guts are going to spill all because El knows about and he might've been a goddamn lab rat and he still wants to talk Steve Harrington like they're actually close friends or something. He's going to break. “Got it,” he forced out. “Make sure Max knows I’m coming back at seven for her.”

He thought about flicking the cigarette into the grass but thought better of it. The brown hay looking shit on his front yard would catch fire in a minute.

If there’s one thing the kid from California understands, it’s how forest fires get started.

Billy walked back to his car and drove off without a second glance, Metallica playing at nearly unreasonable volume for just past noon on a Thursday. He chugged back down the gravel, the tires of the Camaro spat up rocks and dust. At the end of the unpaved road, he stopped and screamed. He screamed, braked and practically parked on this back road in the middle of nowhere in the middle of Indiana, where nothing should ever feel like it’s too much because everything feels so slow and old country. Nothing about this place should feel that way, to him, it feels like everything is.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: The Shangra-Las are like a punky (or 1960s version of punky), sort of pop-y
all girls group that I think Max would've liked a lot. They have a song specifically called Remember (Walking in the Sand) which she would really connect with because it'd remind her of California. I personally really like them and they were a pretty bad ass group.

IMPORTANT: This chapter is a little shorter than usual, but that's because there's a small possibility I'll be updating later in the week with another chapter. There's also a possibility I'll be going on a hiatus mostly because I've just started work which means I don't have as much free time and I've made some life changes (trying to live healthier is awful omfg) and yada yada.

Either way sometime this week there will either be a chapter or a brief little message saying I'm taking a little break from updating, however, I'd rather knee cap myself than stop writing this fic (like I said a long time ago, this trashfire is my magnum opus) so no worries there!

That being said thank you so much for reading and commenting and being so encouraging and helpful and amazing. Writing this fic and having so many people enjoy it and making so many people happy has honestly been the highlight of my March-June so far. You all are awesome and every time I think about how awesome this has been I get a little teary.

*Hugs and kisses*
XIII. Wouldn't That Be Nice?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Billy did a pretty good job of staying out trouble like Hopper said, considering everyone’s out of school and running around like goddamn gremlins. Half his gym class which happened to be ninety-percent of the basketball team were going to Lover’s Lake, the Hawk was lined with viewings on Police Academy 2, and Billy just about avoided everyone like the plague. Harrington had a couple of quiet places he knew of, like Jonathan’s stretch of road just outside of Hawkins, like the Quarry, there are places he could go and hide.

There’s no place in Hawkins you can hide for seven hours when everyone and their grandmother is out running around except the library, so that’s where he went and hid. He headed back home for lunch and hid out some more. He had six books--stolen because it’s easy and no one needs to know just how much he likes books--in the back of his car on everything about the hippocampus, *The History of Memory*, and EEG headsets and machines. Billy’s pretty sure his brain is going to fucking hemorrhage if the headaches are anything to go by, which is just fantastic.

It was 6:27 by time Billy gave up on trying to understand a whole lot, his head ached and his eyes hurt and when he looked at himself in the visor mirror he looked blitzed. He threw the books into his trunk and rubbed at his face.


And would Hopper believe that? Maybe because he isn’t.

Would his dad? Hell no.

Billy rolled back up to the Hopper’s this time with his music down low. He turned the lights off a good fifty feet from the house. The only noise was the sound of wheels rumbling over loose gravel, his heartbeat was so loud it vibrated in his throat. This time he had a plan, it was by no means a perfect plan, but it's all his idled brain could come up with.

He got out and walked up the squat cement stairs that lead up to the Hopper’s front door. His painfully simple plan, to be at the door before Max could dart out, was going to work. He fiddled with his lighter before he knocked, The dread or excitement rushing through his veins didn’t matter as much as the building tension in his muscles did. It’s the preparation for something. He could hear the TV on from the inside. Billy flicked his lighter again, he’s too goddamn nervous over meeting a twelve year old.

El is more than just a little girl in her own right and he knows that she’s killed people before. Steve doesn’t know that, but somehow Billy knows without even looking at her. She’s a whole lot more than just a little girl from a small town listening to the Shangri-Las probably for the first time, glossing over *People* magazine, and painting her step-sister’s nails.

*Sterile.*

The white front door of the home, freshly painted, looks sterile like the white walls in the lab from his dream. It echoed in his head, he reflexively pressed the heel of his palm to the left side of his head.
His raised his fist to knock on the door.

“Quiet,” Billy heard a soft voice say from behind him.

Eleven.

He didn’t have to turn around to know. His body went stock still and ice cold. The cement stairs had swallowed his feet whole. “Be quiet.”

Billy nodded slowly and turned around. Jane, or El, or Eleven, whatever she goes by, he wasn’t sure what to call her when actually standing right in front of him, was looking up at him with those all-knowing eyes.

Her hair was parted to the side and brushed out or maybe even straightened so most of the curls Steve was familiar with were gone. It’d been a long time since Steve had seen her and she looked less like the fish out of water Billy was expecting. He wouldn’t have thought anything at seeing her over their own house on the street. She had on what looked like a pair of gym shorts turned into pyjama pants and a light blue t-shirt. She looked so unassuming for all that she meant to him all that she’s been through. Except in her eyes, they looked like they’ve lived a thousand lives and Billy would believe that if she told it to him.

“Would you like a candy?” She asked. Her voice was more sure of herself than it had been, her sentences weren’t marked with hesitancy and questions unasked. “It’s spicy,” she added.

Billy swallowed thickly looking down at the red candy wrapped in shiny plastic and thought of Dr. Whatsit, offering him the cherry lollipop and Neil’s angry little jaw jiggle. “Sure, I guess,” he took it and popped it in his mouth.

Jane smiled softly, “I like candy too.”

“Who doesn’t?” He said, in a charming little way that reminded him too much of Steve.

She seemed to be sizing him up while he could only look down at her. He didn’t have a sharp ‘so?’ waiting for her, not even a ‘hello.’ Billy doesn’t normally wait for someone to make their own conclusion about him, he can do it for them all on his own in a matter of seconds, but with El, he wanted to know what she had to say.

“Jane,” she said. She stuck her hand out for him to shake. “You call me Jane.”

Billy stared at it, feeling almost dreamy. He wouldn’t normally shake hands with anyone, especially Max’s friends. He didn’t think meeting Jane would start with a normal handshake on her front porch.

It all feels too normal.

“Jane,” he repeated, shaking her tiny hand with his calloused one.

Her hand dropped. “You hurt Max,” she said. Her lips seemed to curl into a frown, “you hurt the babysitter, you hurt Lucas and you scare my friends, mouth breather.”

He should’ve seen that coming.

In some dimly coherent way he had, the bell always rings.

Jane looked up at him and knew. She knew with the soft shake of her head, everyone who comes
from the lab is angry. Her sister was filled with some righteous rage, Jane herself had been scared and fiercely protective of her new friends, home, and family. It can turn to anger like an out of control fire fast. Billy's filled with anger is what Max told her, he was always mean and now he's angry too. She could see it in his shoulders and the slight curl of his lip.

“You're always angry, like...Wolverine,” she said. Her nose wrinkled almost like she was expecting Billy to correct her.

He has no fucking clue.

“So?” Billy said like he should've five minutes ago. His shoulder squared even if she could send him flying through the front of the house.

“I get angry too and I do awful things,” she said quietly. Jane's knowing brown eyes seemed to burn a little like she’s remembering something she’d rather forget.

Billy nodded, stupidly. He didn’t know what to say to her, he wanted to know what she wanted to forget so badly, and maybe, it’s something they both remember now. “I’ve...heard,” he said.


“Harrington? You know I--”

She nodded. Jane tapped at her head lightly, “I can see...in the static.”

Billy let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

She pressed her finger to her lips. “It’s a secret, for now. Promise?”

Billy almost laughed. For starters he’s making promises and secondly, he felt like this should be the other way around--him asking for her silence. “Yeah, alright, I promise.”

Jane nodded again, short and curt.

“What are you going to do?”

Her eyebrows pulled heavy and broad over her round eyes. “Go back inside,” she said. “It’s cold.”

“No, I mean--”

Her lips spread into a wide grin. “Got you.”

Christ.

“You’re impatient,” she said and sounded out the word carefully. “Max says you're very impatient.”

Max is a narrow assed pain in my fucking neck. Billy wanted to say, but that probably wouldn’t go over well. When Billy watched her face morph into annoyance, he figured it didn’t really matter. “I’ve done awful things,” she said seriously, eyes going dark like bad coffee at the bottom of an old pot. “But I’m sorry when I should be.”

Are you? The question her voice rang loud and clear. “I…”

She glared at him. The red-hot candy in his mouth all used up and gone, leaving a tingling sensation in his mouth. He shouldn’t take shit like this, he should have seen it coming, though.
He’s a natural shitheel. It’s like the lab had implanted a chip on each of his shoulders as soon as he was born, he’s no more in control of it than his powers.

And everyone wants to know if he’s fucking sorry.

“No one’s ever been sorry for…” he stopped and shook his head. He look down at Jane, the back of his eyes and the bridge of his nose burned. “You think those people are sorry for what they did to you? What they did to Will and that girl...Barb.”

Jane seemed to flinch at her name. The same way Steve’s skin feels too cold to even think straight when he hears it. “I’m sorry when I should be,” she repeated placidly.

*Are you sorry for* that night?

*I don’t even know why you’re apologizing to me if you don’t mean it. Whatever, man.*

Without Steve it had mostly been fragments and sharp edges fraying in the corners of his memory, though he thought about it all the time. Between rage and frustration, anesthesia and release. It was push and pull, and at the center of it, he was lost somewhere in the eye of a brightly colored, too intense storm.

He couldn’t say he was sorry he lost it, if he was sorry for every time he’d done something like that he’d probably just die from the weight. His ma was annoyingly hopeful, so, “Would’ve been nice if things were easier.”

If he understood he wouldn’t have bothered, he would’ve fucked off somewhere while Harrington and a bunch thirteen year olds played ‘save the town.’Better yet he would’ve dragged Max out of those tunnels himself.

Jane stared at him with expectant eyes this time. He understood why Hopper was so annoyed most of the damn time, the kid’s more irritating when she doesn’t speak than when she does.

“What?” He snapped.

“*Go on,*” she emphasized.

Billy glared down at her, but something told him she wouldn’t want anything to do with him if she wasn’t speaking with his damn heart on his sleeve. He could weigh out the option of being a dick and ending this all, self-sabotage or whatever. Jane’s getting cold, if the goosebumps on her arms are any indication and Max is bound to be looking for her at this point.

“It would be nice if it wasn’t like that all the time,” he said. Billy meant it. He has no control over the fight bell, his power, his whole goddamn life, but it would be *really, really* nice if he did.

“Good enough?”

Her lips quirked up into a small smile. “The babysitter wants you to do better,” she pulled out another candy, butterscotch this time and handed it to him without asking. Billy only took it because he assumed this time he wasn’t going to have the option. “I want you to do better too,” she said.

That’s all Jane could really wish on him, it’s all she could wish on Kali too. She watched him stick the candy in his pocket, a few lines in his forehead, a frowning angrily at nothing and smiled. They are the ones that come from the lab and she accepts that the anger does too.

“It’s cold,” she mimed shivering. Billy watched her start to back down the stairs, the flesh of her
socked feet pressing deep into the graveled rocks. “Count to one hundred and twenty and then knock,” Jane said.

He nodded.

“Bye, mouth breather,” she said.

“I have a name,” Billy said.

She grinned mischievously, “I know, punky.”

Jane walked off the gravel into the dead grass and out the light of the porch, soon he couldn’t see her at all like she was standing in front of him. Billy’s shaking fingers lit up a cigarette and he counted to one hundred twenty in his head.

At one hundred twenty he knocked on the door and waited a few more seconds. Hopper opened the door looking pretty much the same, Billy might even think he looked a little happier than he did. Then again there was about to be a stoning on his lawn when he saw him earlier today so of course, he looks happier.

“Hey kid,” Hopper said.

Billy reflexively rubbed at his eyes, which were probably still red. His head didn’t hurt as much as it did when he left the library. “Hi,” he grunted. If his dad were here would’ve gotten a slap to back of the head for that. “She’s not dead is she?”

Hopper scoffed. “She’s fine, you can go ahead and pretend to be relieved.” Billy didn’t even try to mask his irritation. He’s never happy about going back home, especially with Max in toe. “They did hair stuff, in case your folks have a heart attack. If Max comes around the corner with anything but the long, orange hair she left with it’d be easier to wrap the car around a telephone pole than deal with the shit he’ll have to when he gets home.

God dammit.

“She’s going through this hair thing,” Hopper groused. He pinched the bridge of his nose like he’s stopping an oncoming headache. “I’m hoping it’s just a phase.”

If she comes around the corner with boy’s hair or something worse he’s a dead man, and let’s be honest Max would do something like that just give her mom a heart attack. She’s persistently defiant when it comes to ‘girly’ things, especially after they moved. He’s pretty sure it’s her own way of getting back at Susan.

I’m not going to be a proper housewife and let some douchebag move us to the middle of nowhere because he said so, something like that.

Little Maxine came around the corner down the hall, same red hoodie and jeans, her backpack looked heavier than the when she came. Her fucking hair though, Billy internally groaned, at least it was the same length he’s pretty sure and the same Garfield color. Her hair was split down the middle, pulled back tight with one braid for each hemisphere.

A Dutch braid, and Billy’s really annoyed that he knows that. He also knows it’s sometimes called Boxer braids.

Girls don’t fight, he could hear Susan screeching.
There’s nothing soft, curly or approachable about Max’s hair and she looks really damn happy about it. Billy’s already decided he’s not going back home, today he’s dropping her off looking like that. She can jump out of the car and roll while he’s still driving for all he cares.

“Can you go any slower?”

Max says you’re very impatient.

“I’m coming,” she hissed. Max shouldered her backpack and pasted the threshold, glaring at him.

“Say thank you, asshat, Jesus,” he said. “Susan didn’t teach you manners?”

Max glared at him in all her shrewd little glory and turned to Hopper. “Thanks for having me over, I had a lot of fun.” And she did and not it’s ruined because Billy ruins everything, honestly.

“No problem,” Hopper smiled down at her. “Take care, kid.”

Billy was pretty sure he was going to gag on all of this wholesome, good life bullshit, even if he’s the one that asked for it. Max glowered at him one last time and stomped off the new porch steps.

“Do us all a favor and drive slow, alright?” He said gruffly.

Billy snorted. “Always.”

He pulled out his keys and walked off the porch steps. “Have a nice night,” he drawled because he really couldn’t care less about being too nice. He just wanted to nice enough that Hopper called him a nuisance and not a problem.

Billy dropped into the front seat of the car with a huff. “You know Susan’s gonna fucking kill you, right?”

Max’s pressed into a thin line, she turned away from him a little in her seat.

“What? You’re not talking to me now?” He scoffed. “I’m not the one that gives a shit about your hair. You look the same amount of fugly to me as you always do.”

She crossed her arms, rolled her eyes at him.

“Just make sure to get out of my car fast,” he said. “I’m not staying home.” He’s not her big, perfect brother that’s going to go take somewhere nice and ask what she’s so fussy about. He would barely even do that if Max was his blood sister.

“You’re still grounded,” Max said, finally, petulantly.

“Which is why I’m not staying long,” he repeated. “Listen next time.”

He peeled back down the dirty unpaved road and roared away down Hawkins’s lonesome backroad streets. He’s smart enough to know not to go home to a bloodbath, and he’s got too much on his mind anyway.

Chapter End Notes

I know I said I'd have a message or a chapter somewhere in the middle of week, but
week turned out to be crazier than I expected and I'm so sorry lol. I'm usually pretty good with keeping my word :( :( . Anyway, Billy met El! Max has new hair (which will start a trend in this fic lmfao I can't help myself!). I'll keep y'all posted on this 'Will I, Won't I take a break thing.'

Thanks for bearing with me and I'm so happy and excited that you all finally got the Billy-El meet up that I've had so many questions about, it was so hard to keep my mouth shut and I'm really happy that's finally here! *Pops champagne. Plays Started from the Bottom even though that's an outdated song*
The Upside Down doesn’t bother Billy, he looked out over the dark road in front of him. His eyes still scan for deer, because they come in droves and the last thing he wants to do is fuck up his car that way. His music is loud, he doesn’t care enough to listen for to the bone chilling noise that rips from their crooked bodies. Those things aren’t monsters to him, he knows real monsters.

He knows real monsters that wear lab coats and maybe offered him a red lollipop once, real monsters that aren’t sorry for what they did to him.

His grip around the wheel tightened as they sped towards home. Hawkins has a beautiful, awful type of weather in the Spring. At night everything is slick and shiny with dew or rain, it makes the pavement glimmer under headlights and the night watery and soft.

Max’s arms were crossed with a prominent pout on her face, Billy couldn’t care less about it. He couldn’t care less about driving all the way home before Steve, he wouldn’t risk pulling up to their driveway and dropping her off before. He would drop her off at the Old Cherry Lane road sign and tell her to kick-fucking-rocks.

He doesn’t care about the Upside Down, but those things are out there, so he drives Max all the way home. Billy pulled up the curb by their mailbox.

“Have fun explaining that to Susan,” Billy said even though it’ll be his fault no matter what.

“I will.”

“Hey,” Billy nearly reached out the grab her, but they’ve got some sort of weird agreement going on where he’s not supposed to grab her and she’s supposed to be minding her own fucking business.

She stopped anyway, her twin braids whipped around nearly smacking him in the face. Billy decided the two of them are just weapons attached to the back of her goddamn head. Great.

“What?”

“This isn’t as shit as I thought it would be,” he said, gesturing to her hair. Maybe it’s what left of the Steve in his head or he really doesn’t want to piss off Max more than she already is and maybe disappoint Steve a little, but he decided not to say ‘you still look like Pippi Longstocking.’

Because she kind of really does.

Max’s face twitched and her nose wrinkled like she’s trying to break a code or something. “Okay, great.”

“Get the fuck out of my car.”

“I am ,” she huffed.

He didn’t watch her shuffle up the rest of the driveway with her too heavy backpack, if she can’t make it the twenty feet from his car to the front door on her own that’s natural selection in his
opinion.

The glassy road slid smoothly under his tires, feels like driving over a black heaven pathed road that could take him anywhere, except, in a town like Hawkins after dark there’s hardly any place to go.

Hawkins is such a shithole, especially after dark.

Especially when there’s only one place in the entire town he actually wants to go to. Billy palmed at his eyes, they hurt a little less than before but not really.

Steve is sulking somewhere in his mansion, he’s probably watched so much TV his brain is slowly dripping out of his ears and he’s still in his pajamas like the worst contribution to society the town has to offer. He meant to talk to Steve today even though that makes no sense because he doesn’t talk to people.

There’s not a single person on this earth that knows about him, more than a few decided details and characteristics.

He lit a cigarette, stuck it between his lips, let the nicotine roll over his hot, sparkling nerves. The slick black roads weren’t heaven pathed, how could they be if they lead him to the one place he really wished he didn’t want to go to.

The bright cherry of a cigarette ignited a swirl of excitement in Billy’s gut. The shimmering outline of a nailed bat and Steve’s stiff form sitting outside on the bench in front of the Harrington’s home was enough to send some sort of cool relief over him.

Billy could’ve been subtle, pulling up Steve’s house, but the lights were all off. It’s not like he was sneaking up on Steve either.

“You look like death warmed over, Harrington,” Billy said, getting out of the car.

The porch lights make him look thin and gaunt. His eyes shine too wide and to wet to be anything but tears. The sun’s done something to his skin, Billy’s pretty sure, the slow, hot tan washing over his skin is gone in the light.


“Someone’s surly tonight,” Billy purred, blew out smoke from between his lips. “You gonna hit me with that?”

Steve looked down at the bat like he’d completely forgotten it was there despite that fact that his knuckles, white and strained, are curled around it. “Is that an invitation?”

Billy actually grinned, Steve Harrington is really something special when he’s in a sour mood.

“I'm just being careful, you know me.”

He shook his head and ashed his cigarette. “It’s not for you.”

Billy knows he means it’s for demogorgons and demodogs, he knows that Steve means his own version of monsters. But like he already figured out, those things are just dumb animals. They don’t lie, cheat or destroy.

“Yeah, whatever. My back fucking hurts,” he sat down next to him on the bench, his arms fanned
out around the back. Steve is pretty sure he just doesn’t understand the concept of personal space or he literally keeps him in arms reach on purpose.

“God, you’re ancient,” Steve scoffed. “I’m gonna buy you a cane.”

“A jewel-encrusted cane,” Billy said with a puff of smoke that curled into the wet night air. “I bet daddy could pay for it if you’ve got this place and that car.” Steve Harrington has a goddamn mansion and his family is arguably one of the richest in town, there’s nothing anyone could say that could convince Billy otherwise.

He might as well be Hawkins’s own royalty.

He let out a low whistle at the massive expanse of a house.

Steve Harrington is loaded.

But Billy already knew that.

“Pretty sure he’s not shelling out on a pimp cane for anyone else but himself,” Steve laughed coolly. “But I could try and ask him next time he swings around. ‘Hey dad, my friend with an aching everything’ wants a jewel-encrusted pimp–”

“I didn’t say it had to be a pimp cane.”

Steve gave him a withering look, “if it’s jewel-encrusted, it’s a pimp cane.” He shrugged, “anyway if I asked he probably wouldn’t hear me anyway, I asked him for a unicorn with a rocket launcher for a horn four months ago, he nodded and said sure.”

“You’re shitting me?”

He shook his head.

Billy snorted, that almost laugh thing that Steve recognized from lunch yesterday. “Rich people are all idiots I’m pretty sure.”

Steve would’ve rolled his eyes, but so far the theory hasn’t exactly been disproven. All his dad’s friends assholes, his mom doesn’t even have real friends. “Tell that to Bill Gates.”


His lips pulled into a sharp smile, one that was made for Billy’s shatter temper, but looked too damn good him that the laws of nature had to allow it. Steve knew that he couldn’t do either with Billy, spending time with him is too much, being away from him isn’t enough.

“Pretty sure I’m going crazy,” Steve mumbled into the silence. He waited for that to be taken into the wind too. “I’ve never said that out loud.”

“Join the club,” Billy grunted. “This town is full of crazies.”

Steve sat back on the bench. It doesn’t feel right to talk above a whisper, so they don’t. Harrington was being vulnerable around him, and Billy knew he couldn’t do the same for the life of him, so he asked instead. “What were you doing?”

Steve looked down at the chrome table in front him and shrugged. “I don’t really know, I was just
sitting. Thinking. I was in my backyard, but...then I just freaked myself out...it’s less freaky out here.”

“A little morbid don’t you think?” Billy asked. “Didn’t Barb die back there.”

“She didn’t die there,” he snapped. It’s not like Barb was murdered in that exact spot, right there on his diving board, who knows where it was in the Upside Down that she took her last breath? He definitely doesn’t. Nancy doesn’t either, nobody except maybe El knows.

They stared at each other without words for a moment, Steve’s eyes were twinkling with more tears. A look of understanding fades over Billy’s bright blue eyes. “Still trying to feel something, huh?”

Steve went stiff. “I told you to get out of my head. You don’t get to do that.”

He could hear Billy laugh from next to him, cold and sharp enough to make the hairs on the back of his neck rise. “I want you out of my head, I didn’t do any of this. I told you to stay away from me.”

Steve said nothing, he looked down at his hand curled around the grip of the bat.

He’s the odd man out. He wants to keep his mouth shut, he doesn’t think it’s his fault Barb died, he’s not angry—not really. It’s the jagged edge in the knife that twists in Steve’s gut. He’s nothing like Mike or Jonathan or Hopper, he’s just...he’s just too stupid to understand the gravity of everything is what he thinks. It’s what he at least hoped everyone would think of him. Nancy would probably think he’s heartless or a coward, and the kids, what would they think of that?

It keeps him up at night.

“I didn’t kill her,” Steve said. “Nancy didn’t either, but would she believe that? Probably not.” He shook his head and sighed, mourning in his own way maybe. “She just sat there and I guess it...it took her. How could I know she was going to sit around my pool?”

He fed on this in a sick sort of way. Something about it made his insides warm all the way down to his fingers and toes. “You could have walked her to her car?”

Steve made a face. “It was Barb, I wouldn’t even do that with Carol. It wasn’t my fault.”

“That doesn’t make me sick,” he said.

“Yeah.” Billy didn't think it did, but it's not like he's the leading authority or what's morally acceptable or not. In fact, he'd considered himself the exact opposite. "You're pretty much a goody two shoes, Harrington," he added, "you know I'd know."

His ma says the night shows everyone who they really are, Billy looked at Steve’s reflection in the windshield. He saw the woods as shadows across his skin like deep fissures. In the night Harrington is nothing but a shattered porcelain doll. "This doesn’t change anything," he said. Which is a real big fucking lie, but they’re not going to say anything about it. Steve's decided they're not going to say anything about it. “Are you doing anything for like...I guess after right now?” He stammered. He only knows how to be too much. He knows how to take and pull towards him, he was such a clingy boyfriend. He was probably a clingy friend just as bad.

Billy’s lips curled into a grin. “You asking me if I wanna hang?”

“I want another milkshake,” he said.
Billy assessed that. It probably was the truth. Steve’s got an insatiable love for chocolate in almost all of its forms, but he knew better. “You look like you need a change in scenery, pretty boy.”

And he does, oh God he does. The idea of getting out of the cold dark atmosphere that never leaves his house sends a warm shiver through his body. He could wrap his arms around Billy he’s so desperate to leave this place.

“Yeah, let’s go,”

Billy’s more than happy to oblige.

“You wanna change?” Billy looked at down at his wrinkled, oversized pajamas, a dingy teal t-shirt with a mountain in the corner and gray sweatpants, and figured maybe Princess Steve Harrington might make a brief appearance.

Steve did the same, he looked down at himself for a few long seconds. “I’m too tired to give a shit,” he decided some more seconds later. He had a hoodie on the back of arm of the bench and pulled it on unenthusiastically.

Billy stared at it for a moment and mentally gagged. He’s definitely burning the hoodie he’s been wearing the last few days.

He stood, the bat still curled in his fist, its own slumbering beast in both their opinions. “Is that coming with us?” The word us curled around Billy’s tongue, feeling weird and warm, and hopeful.

“Oh...no,” he dropped it into the bushes behind the bench. “No...I guess not.”

Billy shrugged, it’s not his business to give a shit whether or not Steve thinks he needs the bat when he’s around or not. He probably doesn’t even matter that he’s around. He decided not to think too much about whether or not Steve trusted him that much.

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*Beatrice’s* is the only place in Hawkins beside the police station and the clinic that’s up and running 24/7. It’s a good thing, it’s the only place in town that offers a strawberry milkshake (smoothie).

Neither of them said a thing to each other. Billy doesn’t hang out with people places that take a lot of conversation and Steve’s lips are perpetually pressed against his two front teeth. They each uttered their orders and ‘thank you’ to the woman and promptly shut their mouths. Her eyes lingered on them probably because Billy still looks somewhat stoned, there’s a bruise on his cheek, and Steve looks like a zombie in pajamas.

Like the song says, the freaks come out at night.

*Diane* only moved when Steve gave her a big look. A whole lot of ‘What the fuck are you looking at?’ A whole lot of ‘Fuck you and fuck off, I’m not in the mood.’

Billy bit into his lip, amused at that glimmer of fire in his brown doe eyes. Maybe he should just call him, Big Bitch Harrington. He wasn’t really ever a king, he was just a bigger bitch than any other teen in Hawkins.

They sipped on their milkshakes for what felt like decades. The radio was on at a low volume playing older music that sounded like Timi Yuro, the light above them buzzed and the bell at the
door jingled while Diane took her break outside. The sound of her voice at the payphone carried into the diner.

Steve hated that this was helping. He didn’t think getting milkshakes in the dingy diner on the outskirts of town would make the statickey fear that blankets his brain to finally go quiet. Billy seemed to know though and that infuriated him to no end. Steve fought through heavy eyelids to keep a watchful glare on him, focusing on how ridiculously slow Billy drinks and that this dickhead is clearly playing at something.

“Strawberry’s a shitty flavor,” Steve said, breaking the silence first. He felt like a child, slouched on his side of the booth, pouting mostly because he’s cold and tired and there’s no one around for him to really take it out on.

His tongue wiggled the straw in front of him, he grinned. He’s so happy he could burst out of his goddamn skin watching Harrington’s theatrics, they’re... cute... or something. “You getting cranky over there, princess?”

“No,” he hissed. Yes. “Stop calling me that.”

“You like it,” Billy tossed back. “You like pet names, makes you feel special.” Steve fumed at him.

Steve pulled his milkshake towards him and drank, somehow managing to keep on scowling.

To that Billy just sipped, piercing blue eyes still on him. “Relax, you’re the one that asked me if I wanted to hang out,” he said. “You’re all keyed up and I don’t wanna go home, Harrington, so suck it up.”

Steve’s shoulders slacked again, even his flat hair seemed to deflate. “Yeah, alright, fine. I did.” He could hang out, he took one of the fries from the large bowl sitting between them and dipped it in his milkshake. “Sorry.”

“Whatever,” Billy said, which translates to ‘apology accepted.’

“Why’d you come to my house?” Steve asked.

Billy shrugged, swallowed, he sucks at lying. “It’s a free country and now I know where you live,” he tapped his head knowingly. “I decided I wanted to see the castle in person.”

Steve snorted, offended. “It’s not a castle.” He avoided looking at him and instead smashed an undercooked fry down into his napkin like a child. “Seriously though, why were you at my house?”

_I meant to call you._

_I think I was in a lab._

The words stayed locked in Billy’s brain.

“And we are friends, so before you say something like a dick, don’t? I know you’re capable of it.”

Billy’s face cracked then and kept cracking until he had that same deranged smile that night at the Byers’ with just as much tongue and teeth, and an even brighter glimmer in his eyes. “You would make friends with chimpanzee if it listened to you,” Billy said, as a fact. Steve had trouble making friends from the get-go in kindergarten he had no one, he didn’t have any real friends all the up
until the third grade, Tommy and Carol were assholes, and for intents and purposes his ex-girlfriend, her new boyfriend, and a pack of thirteen year olds shouldn’t count. “You gotta pretty skewed idea of what friendship is.”

“I know,” he didn’t seem to flinch this time. “I’m pretty fucking aware of it, actually,” more of the milkshake disappeared up his straw. “So, why are you stalking me?”

“I’m not stalking you,” Billy growled. “I just… figured, thought, assumed… he’s so bad with words, he’s always been bad with words, ‘assumed since you like knowing every little thing that’s weird about my life, I had a lab dream.”

Steve blinked. “A lab dream?”

This is so stupid.

“I dreamed I was in a lab,” Billy grumbled. “Or I remembered being in a lab, who gives a shit.”

“Who gives…” His eye ticked.

Billy should’ve seen it coming a mile away. As quick as a learner he likes to think he his, he should stop acting like this isn’t a big deal in front of Harrington. It only pushes him further over the edge. “Figured you want to know,” he said, even if he shouldn’t have. “So you can be all hysterical over it or whatever.”


“If you say ’are you okay’, I will pour the rest of this milkshake down the front of your sweats, Harrington. Don’t tempt me,” Billy threatened.


“A lab and some guy with a skin disorder or the worst sunburn I’ve ever seen asking me a bunch of questions while I was being hooked up to a head machine,” he said. “It was weird, I was like five years old or something and I read a whole ass book.”

This was a really bad idea.

“You read a book?”


Steve’s eyebrows pulled together, “but five year old you read it? How could you read that when you were five?”

He shook his head, he was really trying not to think too hard on it. Thinking hard on it hurt, like taking a jackhammer to walls of his skull. “You know it was probably just a fucked up dream,” Billy waved a hand.

“Or it seriously was a memory,” Steve said. “Do you know what that means?”

Steve said ‘means’ the same way they all say that night, Billy knows it’s a big fucking deal no matter how much he wishes it wasn’t.

He’s a freak of nature. He’s a goddamn lab rat.

“I don’t give a shit what it means, I thought I’d tell you so you can get your rocks off or whatever,”
he growled. His shoulders felt tight, his brain seemed thrum and his fists ached with the urge to punch and punch until his knuckles were split to the bone.

For the first time since Lori’s party, he saw that look in Billy’s eyes—fear.

Steve’s voice was measured and so caring Billy wasn’t sure what to do with it. He’s not a baby. “I didn’t mean to freak you out, this is freaking you out a little isn’t it?”

Steve prepared for the splash of cold in his face, to be sticky and angry all the way back to his house, Billy’s certainly not above throwing one or both shakes at him like a petulant toddler. He expected Billy to storm off like the wild hurricane that he is without another word. He looked at him, Billy’s face was damn near unreadable.

“You’re so fucking queer, Harrington, I swear,” he said grumbled.

His huffed loudly, dramatically, “I’m just being nice to you. You looked freaked out so I’m not gonna...I don’t know, push you on it.”

Billy hated that it was relief that coursed through him.

“I’m still keyed up and you don’t really want to go home,” he said. “So we’ll talk about something else. We'll just drop it...for now.”

Forever would be preferable, Billy didn’t even try to hide the sentiment written plainly on his face.

“Can I ask you anything about anything without you snapping at me?” He asked.

“Friends talk,” Billy said. “They don’t play twenty questions.”

“Friends play twenty questions, it’s literally a game made for making friends,” Steve said like an asshole.

“My favorite color.”

“What?”

He watched Steve blink with those big doe eyes, looking intrigued. “You can ask me my favorite color,” Billy said, like an asshole with a capital ‘A’.

“Fine, what it is?” He said haughtily.

“Red,” Billy lied. It’s yellow, but no one knows that. Yellow’s a dumbass color. “You like pink.”

Steve flushed a pretty shade of his favorite color. “For Christ’s sake,” he looked up at the ceiling as if calling on the Messiah for help. “It’s not my favorite color.”

Billy chuckled, “I’m in your head, Harrington, you can’t lie to me.” He grinned. “You’d never wear it, you’d never tell anyone, but you like it. You like blue too, but there’s something nice about pink isn’t there? A really light shade of pink that’s practically white.”

He wanted to change topics, they’re not discussing colors like two five year olds. “What were you reading at lunch?”

“A book,” Billy tossed back. “I know mags are more your thing, but I’m pretty sure you’re familiar with the concept of them.”
Steve rolled his eyes, he bit down on his lip to keep from smiling. He can’t even be mad how every little thing with Billy is like pulling teeth down to what book he’s reading. “For school?” Steve tried. Trying to get him to communicate in anything besides insults and taunts is like trying pry Eggos from El.

He made a face at that. “I like stealing books from the library,” Billy answered. “Haven’t checked one out since I got here.”

Steve nearly shot chocolate milkshake out of his nose at that. “No!” He laughed so hard it hurt. “No fucking way!” When Hopper finds him he’s gonna wring his neck. The librarians been riding his ass about missing books for weeks, Jane had to explain to them all why he’s been in such an irritable mood lately.

Billy scowled at him, “what?” He growled, daring him to say anything out of line. Daring him to call him a nerd, or geek or a freaking bookworm. He'll deck him if he does.

Steve waved it off. “You’re a wanted man, Hargrove,” he explained. Billy-fucking-Hargrove is the book thief, the bane of Hopper’s existence. “The Chief’s been looking for a book thief for like...since December, man when he catches you, you’re gonna be dead.”

“You plan on telling him?” A challenge and a question raised in his voice.

“No,” he shook his head, grinning. “God, no. I have a sense of humor. It’s going to be better when he catches you and puts your thieving ass in jail, you klepto.”

Billy had a lot to say about that, could’ve said a lot about it, but Harrington has that smile on his face like the world’s been washed anew and reborn. He might be a little delirious from sleep deprivation, dark bags under his eyes, bedhead and pale to prove it. He felt his heart flutter against his will. “Kleptomaniac’s a big word for you,” Billy teased, his heart needs to go right back to beating at a normal pace. “Can you spell it?”

“Can you?” He challenged.

“K--”

“It does not start with a ‘k,’” Steve interrupted him disbelievingly.

Billy glared at him, “fuck you, yes it does.”

“How would you know?” He almost jabbed his chest with his long, pale finger.


They heard someone clear their throat across the room, Diane was eyeing them again. “I’m not sure if y’all are studying for a spelling bee or not, but language, please.”

Billy put on an air of charm, “sorry about that, sweetheart, just trying to help a friend,” he flashed her a warm smile. “Won’t happen again.”

She raised an eyebrow, clearly buying what Hargrove was selling. “Alright,” she shook her head a little.

“One more thing?” Billy asked, using that low sultry tone again. Steve wondered if his voice could go that low, he’s never really had a reason to try.
“Yes?”

“Kleptomaniac starts with a ‘k,’ right?” He asked.

She smiled, “it sure does.”

“Figured you’d be just as smart as you are lovely,” Billy said. “Thanks.”

Her cheeks colored a little, “oh, you’re welcome.” She grabbed the row of napkins up front on the bar and headed towards the back. “Let me know if you two boys need anything.”

“The course,” he grinned.

When the doors swung shut behind her Steve gagged. “You’re a sick, sick con-man, Hargrove.”

Billy grinned, less romance and more cocky idiot. “I’m a goddamn saint and I won the spelling bee when I was ten, get bent.”

Steve wasn’t sure which lie was bigger. “Was your competition a wooden chair?”

Try every snot nosed fifth grader in the whole goddamn county. “By the end, the only thing left was the wooden chair, dumbass.”

Steve eyed him, there’s no way Billy Hargrove won a spelling bee. That’s just not... well, for starters it’s not fair because that would mean he’s got brawns and brains and that’s just so unfair. Second, Billy just... well... well... he’s Billy.

Billy likes driving fast, alcohol, and heavy metal. Everyone knows that about him, and that’s all everyone knows about him. Steve realized he’d have no choice but to take his word for it. Who’s to say maybe he did win a spelling bee once? It’s not like he’s telling him he fought a dragon.

“Fine,” Steve huffed, “so you won the spelling bee or whatever.” Steve tapped his chin, trying to think of other things he could ask Billy that wouldn’t set him off. Clearly, family is very off limits.

“Are you from San Diego, like Max?”

Billy shrugged. “Yeah, depends on what you mean.”

Steve chewed on his tongue, depends on what you mean, “are you going to elaborate or is that it?”

“I grew up in LA, I was born in San Diego,” he spit out. And then they moved back to San Diego after his mom, but he didn’t want to go into that, so he left it. He still missed their home way up on the hill in Los Angeles, it always felt like nothing could touch him all the way up there.

His mother loved it for the same reason. They were far away from everyone; the city made her nervous. She especially didn’t like when Billy ventured off down there, but it was theirs and it was warm and safe.

Steve watched him fiddle with one of his rings, which looked weird on Billy because he’s not absolutely exuding confidence at the moment. “Did you see any famous people?”

“Sometimes,” he shrugged. “It’s not that exciting.” It really isn’t, but he’d imagine if he grew up in a hick-town like Hawkins it sure as hell would be. “You’d probably cream your pants though.”

Steve nodded, “I don’t know anyone outside of this place.” He thought for a minute, “My parents used to take me to Italy every summer to visit my mom’s side of the family, I used to write my cousin.”
Billy smirked, “you’re such a princess.”

“Because I used to visit my family on the other side of the ocean?” Steve snorted. “Okay.”

“Your family has enough money to do it,” Billy pointed out.

Steve made a noncommittal gesture. “Yeah, I guess, you’re right about that.” He took a sip from his milkshake hearing it sputter in his straw as he drained it.

He looked tired and content and Billy felt as ready to go home as he’d ever be. He eyed his cup and stood. Steve scrambled after him, nearly tripping out of the booth. “Of course I'm right, Harrington.” Billy clapped him on the back. It just as playful as last time, but less antagonistic. “Now take me home.”

He threw down a few dollars for the milkshakes and tip. “Yeah, yeah, okay,” he said. Steve rolled his eyes. “You really are a kid.”

“Must be why you like me so much, amigo.”

Steve sighed, he should’ve known this would all go straight to Billy’s head. He can’t say he’s mad about it.

Chapter End Notes

So honestly this was just a chapter where Steve and Billy get to be together and there will be A LOT more of those from here on out so...like, yay! I finally get to slowly add in some cute stuff like...FINALLY. (I should really stop shitting on my own slowburn lol sorry) I'm gonna ask for your opinion again because I really am curious, what do you think about Steve saying it's not his fault (or Nancy's) that Barb died? I was writing this chapter and I just kind of came to this conclusion on my own...or maybe I read it somewhere honestly I'm not sure. Just curious what you're opinion is on it! As always thanks for reading my fic and making writing more fun than it already is! Thank you so much!

Also I guess a random fun fact about the author, I don't know, I don't assume anyone really cares but I laughed about the Kleptomania thing for months and I've moved that scene around soooooooo much.
They talked in the car, mostly about school, about how absolutely awful all of it is. In a few hours they’ll be there anyway, getting the soul sucked out of them. Steve didn’t bring up Billy’s locker and Billy didn’t bring up Steve’s grades--which aren’t the best right now (but getting better) and have never been.

They talked to keep each other awake and because neither of them really talk to a whole lot of people anymore.

“Thanks for...uh..stopping by and...the food and,” Steve felt sleep slow and lethargic. He turned in the front seat of the Camaro to look at Billy with his half-closed eyes and smiled. “What I mean is that I had fun, so thanks for all of this...I don’t know why that was so hard, I guess I’m just tired and...and rambling so...”

Billy was smirking, Steve thought it might have actually been a smile if he turned to look at him. “You need to go bed, princess, Jesus.” His head rolled to look at him, he is smiling genuinely, softly almost. His eyes are bright blue, they remind Steve of the glaciers, the glossy blue ones on the front cover of the National Geographic sitting on his bedside table.

His mouth went dry, “I’m rambling.” He shook his head, cleared his head of the idea that Billy’s not ordinary in the face. He hasn’t spent a whole lot of time studying Billy’s features, actually, it’s been about three minutes collectively since he met him, but he decided now wouldn’t be a good time to start. But he should...start... maybe. “Yeah, no, you’re right,” he laughed awkwardly. “I’m exhausted.

Billy looked out through the windshield at the large palace behind them, “you want me to tuck you in or something?” He is by no means kicking him out of his car but if he doesn’t leave in about 10.7 seconds, he’ll probably do something really, really stupid.

Steve followed the look and nodded again, a weird hooked smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “My mom’s actually home for a bit so...no, you don’t have to do that.”

No wonder he was sitting outside, Billy thought. Although Steve would never say anything bad about his mother, he’s got enough mommy issues to make Freud cream his pants. The broad is more serpent than woman. Maria Harrington could give Hell the fucking chills in his opinion.

Billy thought about ending this all on a bad note, before all this ‘friendship’ and ‘getting along’ all goes to Steve’s big, lonely head. He thought about saying, ‘well your mom’s a huge bitch so good luck with that.’ He didn’t even when he normally would’ve, he had Steve right where he wanted him, placated and happy. He’d worked to get the tension to unravel from his muscles and the color to come back to his face.

Billy might be a jackass but he knows how to appreciate hard work so he kept his mouth shut and kept his biting comment to himself. Steve shifts anyway, Billy’s pretty sure he has a little bit of a death wish because either he forgot or just didn’t care enough to put a seatbelt on. “You should get some sleep too,” he said. He was giving him those soft marshmallow eyes, Care Bear is what Billy’s going to call them. Harrington is giving him fucking Care Bear eyes, looking at him through his eyelashes and it makes Billy almost want to punch him in the face just so things would
feel a little normal. “And thanks for this, it actually really helped.”

Billy wasn’t very good at saying ‘sorry’ and he’s no better at saying ‘you’re welcome.’ He’s really good at saying ‘I know dickhead that was the point,’ but he’s trying to be better so he nodded. “I owed you one,” he shrugged.

“See ya around,” he said. Steve was slow and careful getting out the car like he didn’t want to get out and Billy didn’t really want him to get out either. “Night, man.”

“Yeah, night.”

Steve stared up at his house, dark and ginormous, even with his mom sleeping somewhere in there it looked just as soulless and empty as usual. His lips tasted like chocolate and his clothes smell faintly of Billy and a lot like cigarettes, which really only adds to it. He let out a heavy sigh, swallowed and offered up to the darkness.

He liked what it had given him back, and his tired drooping eyes agreed, Billy isn’t the absolute worst jerk he thought he was.

_Gross, he’s drooling._

_You drool, Mike_

_I don’t drool._

_You definitely drool._

_Sorry, Mike, I’ve seen it._

_Steve._

_Hey, Steve._

_Steeeeeveeeeee._

“What…”?

Steve rolled over. There’s no way these twerps are in his fucking house, not with his mom home at least. There’s just no fucking way.

“Steve, are you awake?”

Except that’s Lucas, and if there’s Lucas there’s Dustin and Mike and maybe even Will.

He groaned lowly, how the fuck did they manage to get in his house? It’s not like he gave any of them a freaking key.

“He’s a high schooler,” Dustin whispered. “They don’t wake up.”

Yeah, that’s Dustin.

“I’m awake, dickheads,” Steve grumbled into his pillow, eyes stinging from suddenly opening.

“What the hell are you doing in my house?” He tasted grime in his mouth and rubbed at his face.

“Why aren’t you little shits…”
Steve looked over at the clock on his bed side table it’s 1:39 in the afternoon. Which reminds him really was out with Billy until what felt like the asscrack of dawn, he wouldn’t normally sleep in this late. “Why’re you here?”

They looked at each other. “Well,” Dustin started. “First, we called, but your mom hung up on us,” he frowned, “which was really rude--

“Yeah, dude, no offense, your mom kind of sucks,” Lucas interjected.

“She called us homeless,’” Mike snapped. “Your mom totally sucks.”

Steve rolled his eyes. If she really thought they were homeless she would’ve given them a few dollars and told them to get off her lawn.

Dustin gave them a look, the ‘you’re not helping look.’ “Anyway, your mom let us in and we cleaned up the shattered vase in your foyer, by the way, someone could’ve seriously--”

“What do you want?” He groaned

“We need someone to take us to go see Porky’s Revenge ,” Mike said. “The asshole at the ticket booth won’t let us in without an adult.”

Jesus Christ.

Only a bunch of stupid thirteen year olds would want to go see a dumbass movie like Porky’s Revenge. “You know, Jonathan’s old enough,” he rubbed at his face again, “ and he works there . Why’re you asking me?”

How the fuck is this his life? Byer’s is the one that nearly has a heart attack when one single thing goes wrong for these kids.

“He went out with Nancy,” Will said, Dustin’s taught him to wince whenever he mentions the two of them together. Which is completely unnecessary.

He's still getting used to Will's new look. The whole bowl of brown hair on his head done away completely. He looks less like Jonathan now and even less like the boy plastered on all of those Have You Seen Me? ads and the newspaper articles from almost two years ago. Steve is pretty sure that was the point, but the kid looks nice and he is an angel so he didn’t really comment on it.

“Driving practice,” he added after a beat.

Steve didn’t say anything. He still remembered when Nancy was arguing with her dad about letting her get a license. He remembered telling her she doesn’t really need to, it’s another thing he could happily do for her. He guesses now that probably wasn’t the right answer.

Okay, maybe teaching Will to wince like that wasn’t all that unhelpful.

“I could’ve had plans today,” Steve said in a withering tone. He got out bed, pushing through them to his dresser and vanity.

“Oh, Billy?” Mike accused, using Billy’s name like a swear. “Are you going to go hang out with Billy ?”

Jesus H. Christ.
Of course they would all know. Nancy and Jonathan probably mentioned something with Mike and Will in earshot and Dustin’s a pretty great kid, but he can’t keep a secret to save his life, so Lucas either found out from him or Max.

It was really on a matter of time.

A really, really short matter of time.

“Mike!” Dustin slapped his arm. “Ontday entionmay illybay,” he insisted, raising his eyebrows.

Steve still thinks it’s an insult to his intelligence he can tell when the little assholes are speaking Pig Latin, but he’s got no clue what Dustin just said to Mike and why they’re glaring at each other. It’s too goddamn early for this.

“I’m just saying he’s a psychopath,” Mike hissed, his eyes narrowed on Steve and at the moment he could almost see a resemblance between him and Nancy.

“He’s not a psychopath,” Steve sighed.

Well, it’s too early in his day for this.

Normally he would shrug, the kids have a right to hate his guts. He wouldn’t try to force them to feel differently about him, and really, Steve doesn’t want them around each other but he owed it to Billy to defend his honour. He was nicer than he’s ever been last night, in the light of day he knows it--he had fun. He actually had fun with someone his own age for the first time in a while.

So he owes Billy.

“He just...look he hasn’t figured out how to count to ten yet even though he’s really smart.”

“What?”

“Jesus,” Dustin huffed. “He stuperider than I thought, how’d he get to high school if he can’t count to ten?”

“What?” Steve echoed, his eyes narrowed. “No, no, not like he can’t physically count to ten,” he said. “I mean like in kindergarten when you get angry they teach you to count and think and use your words before you do something?”

They nodded, following.

“He really, really missed that step,” he explained. It didn’t take Steve long to figure Billy can’t express more than three, possibly four, emotions without it all quickly devolving into anger. He’s also pretty sure he’s even worse at putting them into words. “He’s...selectively intelligent.” Which Nancy called him once, and it was insulting, but whatever.

“Selectively intelligent?” Lucas repeated, his eyes bugged out of his head. “His brain is in his fists!”

“It really is,” he sighed. “...Most of the time, but I think he’s learning...just....really slowly.” And Steve would like to think he’s helping him in some way, but he can’t really think of how except for filling up his day with chatter. Still, he thinks it’s helping... maybe. He rubbed his face “Listen, I’m not hanging out with Billy...today, and if I was,” he glared at them. “It wouldn’t really be any of your business anyway. I’m just saying he’s not...”
Dustin groaned, “you’re about to compare evils again, aren’t you.”

He shrugged, “uh...yeah? I mean...he’s not Darth Vader bad...he’s more like…”

“Boba Fett?” Will suggested.

“Yes, he’s more like that.”

Mike’s face was twisted and curled in so many places and in so many ways he might as well be an elastic dummy. “That’s a huge insult to Boba Fett.”

He sighed.

“This is why you can’t compare evils, Steve,” Dustin said.

“And you can’t just march into my house and demand rides whenever you want.” He pulled out a shirt and pants just to give his hands something to do. “But I can take you to see your stupid movie or whatever, alright? So everyone’s cool now right?” Dustin didn’t look at him quite like a dirty, traitor anymore. The only one really laying it on thick was Mike, but Mike hates people that aren’t the Party and Jane, so he takes it with the same grain of salt.

They seemed pleased, except for Will, but he was pretty sure he was only going to get out of the house for a few hours without an ‘adult,’ he didn’t matter to him what they decided to do. “Come back in, like, an hour. I gotta get dressed and you little shits are giving me a headache.”

“You just woke up,” Dustin said.

He vaguely wondered if this is how Hopper feels whenever they come over, “and I already have a headache,” he said in the best dramatic impersonation of his own mother, all he needed was a bottle of Ibuprofen and bottle of wine.

“Iway inktha ehay aught cay ethay assholeway om fray illybay,” Lucas muttered.

Steve rubbed a hand over his face and groaned. He doesn’t understand Pig Latin but he heard asshole and he can make the leap that ‘illybay’ probably means Billy. “In my house, you dickheads speak a language I can understand, got it?”

“Ehay efinitely day aught cay itway,” Mike sneered.

He didn’t have to turn around he could feel him rolling his eyes, “I swear to God, Wheeler.”

It’s early and he figured he’s allowed to be a little bit of an asshole considering they’re in his house watching him sleep like a bunch of aliens. “I’m gonna take a shower,” he said. If he’s being one hundred percent honest with himself he actually does smell a little like Billy still and it feels so weird he can barely put it into words. “Come back in two hours.”

“I thought you said an hour?” Dustin said

“I said like an hour,” he really does sound like Billy. “I gotta eat breakfast too.” And watch TV. And figure out why the hell my head feels like a live wire. And deal with my mom.

“It’ll take you like ten minutes to--”

Steve crossed his arm, “can I live, please?”

“Fine,” they huffed like they were the ones being inconvenienced.
Steve waited for them to file out of his room and followed them down to the door. His mom’s voice floated distantly, but still sharp and curt, from the living room. More than likely she has her ear attached to the phone.

“You guys are gonna stay out of trouble right?” He asked. It sounded like he was teasing, but he’s dead serious.

“Trouble finds us,” Will said with a short sort of smile that made it harder for Steve to keep from wincing. “We’ll be back in two hours.”

Steve let the door shut behind them and watched them pedal off for only a few seconds. His skin is crawling and his brain is buzzing like he’s excited about something, excited for something.

The static laid itself across him last night, soft and secure like a blanket, and if they had let him wake up on his home Steve imagined he would’ve woken up with a smile on his face. He tries not to dwell on things that confuse him too much, a product of already being stretched too thin. The warm feeling floating over his system from the top of his head to his toes is one of those things, but it feels good. Good enough that he keeps thinking about it and last night and how he actually feels rested for the first time in a while.

He went to the kitchen and fixed himself a bowl of cereal, an easy functional breakfast--Cocoa Puffs and milk.

“So you’re a babysitter now?” His mother leaned against the wall with her arms crossed. “That’s an interesting way to spend your time.” She spends a few more weeks home than his father does. She can’t stop him from chasing every tail, that’s futile and they both know it. They can’t bring him back from Indianapolis if he doesn’t want to leave, they both know that now.

Steve spooned his cereal, interesting is not a good word in his mother’s vocabulary. He shrugged. “I helped them out with a bully,” he said, a half decent lie he came up with a month ago. “They admire me or they like me or something now, I guess.”

She hummed and said that word again, “interesting.”

“It’s not that interesting,” he said, being smart.

She grabbed the mug off the counter and sat down next to him at the little breakfast nook that overlooks the pool. Steve always keeps the blinds drawn even if he loves the morning sun.

“It really isn’t,” she sipped. “You know working with children is a thankless profession.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he crunched down on his cereal and swirled the remaining around his spoon.

Their conversation is as stilted as it usually is. His mother has no interest in pretending she cares too much and Steve could try chipping away at her cold demeanor all he wants, but it doesn’t change all that much. She’s icy, glacial, sharp like Billy’s eyes.

“There was glass in the foyer this morning,” his mother said. There wasn’t an accusation in her tone, just a stated fact. He’s supposed to feel accused by it though, he can hear the disdain in the blankness of her voice.

“I went out last night, driving,” Steve’s hand went up to rub the back of his neck. “I just...I just needed to get out and clear my head.”
She hummed. “So foggy you couldn’t clean up your own mess,” she pulled out something Steve doesn’t know the name of and dabbed it on the bruise lightly. “I can only imagine what would have you so upset, Lord knows it doesn’t take much.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “Just...just stuff with friends.”

Whether he had something to do or not, he’d be getting out the house today. His mother’s inches away from going on the warpath, he knows the signs. It’s better to just clear out and wait for it to be over like a monsoon or a volcano. Although Steve’s never been in her crossfire before, he’s never purposefully tried to find out if that’ll change.

“Steven, what did I say about the mumbling?” He rolled his eyes, which would get most kids a smack on the skull or at least warrant a berating. She, however, didn’t acknowledge it leaving a wide challenging stretch of silence between them.

“It’s annoying,” Steve sighed. “Pick a normal volume or just don’t say anything at all.”

Nothing.

“I can’t wait until you’re out of high school. This drama is aging me,” she eyed him carefully, scrutinizing his bedhead, Steve thought he looked better than usual these days, but her eyes said otherwise. “It’ll age you too if all this fighting doesn’t kill you first.”

Steve almost pointed out he’s eighteen, and his great grandma is nearly a hundred years old. If demodogs or Billy don’t kill him first, longevity won’t be a serious problem. “I’m fine,” he looked up to realize she wasn’t paying attention to what he’s saying. “How long are you staying?” He decided to ask instead.

“As long as I want to,” she answered petulantly, like him asking that question when she’s never around is some sort of insult.

“Okay.” It’s been four weeks since she’s seen him and he knows that there’s nothing else she wants to know—not about Lori’s party, not about Tommy H., not even his grades. “Okay.” The milk turned a light shade of brown like the milkshake he had last night and he smiled faintly, he found he didn’t care too much about it at all.

The wild serenity of the Camaro, two opposites kept the sting at bay. It was a soft balm that made the next few minutes of unwelcoming, frigid silence bearable. “I’m taking them to the movies today, so…”

“Have fun,” she said, sipped her coffee.

Steve’s lips pressed into a thin line. “We might fly to Japan while we’re at it.”

She turned to look at him, he thinks he probably has the same eyes as his mom but they’re darker and somehow brighter or more alert. They’re lined with dark eyeliner and wide, even lashes. Everyone says he has her eyes though. “That might work with your father, saccente, but it doesn’t with me.”

Steve winced.

*Smart-ass.*

“Sorry,” he muttered. What he meant was how was he supposed to know she was listening when she’s stiller than a statue?
"Apology accepted," she said calmly.

He dumped his bowl into the sink and went upstairs to shower and get dressed. Maybe after the movie he’ll see what Billy’s doing, at least make sure his head isn't giving him any trouble.

He smiled faintly.

It’s just a thought.

Chapter End Notes

As you can tell this is kind of late which I apologize for sooo... :( :( But! It's the perfect transition for some news! I'm moving my update day from Saturday to Sunday. It'll still be the same distance in time, just moved to a different day. Anyway! That's some pretty important news but not as important as what's going on with Steve...what a poor, blind baby, he'll figure it out eventually.

Dumb fact: My younger cousins used to speak Pig Latin and I could never understand what they were saying so yeah Steve...I sympathize. Plus that's just a nerdy, code related thing they'd definitely know how to do.
XVI. Dream A Little Dream (Of Me)

Chapter Summary

The boys are more concerned than usual and Max learns something she really wished she hadn't.

Chapter Notes

Soo...this was supposed to be up waaaaaay earlier and I'm super-duper salty about it because no...I don't want impromptu plans thrusted upon me so...yeah. Sorry about that! :( Anyway, this chapter is kind of A BIG ONE plot wise (hence why I used the chapter summary this time). I had to put A LOT of thought into it and I think it is a little...'creepy' at the end (?) I don't know I kind of thought it was. Anywho, enjoy!

“You can’t favor Mike because he’s taller, Steve,” Dustin said from the back seat.

Steve scoffed, “trust me, I’m not favoring him, it’s just he’d literally have to fold up like a piece of origami to fit in the back seat with you all.”

Dustin, who usually rides shotgun with Steve, pouted.

“You mean like me?” The younger Byers smiled sheepishly if didn't have enough room in the backseat between Lucas and Dustin to wave his arm apologetically. He especially wouldn't have any space if Max came along. Apparently, things are still strained with her over their AV project. Steve knows there’s more to it than just looking at Lucas’s lips curl up when they talked about her.

“You’re okay right, Will?”

He nodded his head with a beaming smile on his face. “It’s fine, thanks for taking us to the movies.” Steve didn't mind doing so so much anymore if it meant he could make Will smile like that, no wonder Jonathan’s always all over him. He deserved the world even before the Upside Down.

“I’m dying back here!” Lucas called, “I think Will’s hip bone just punctured my thigh. And your car smells like wet dog and cigarettes.”

Steve felt his ears start to burn because the cigarette smell definitely came from Billy and the wet dog probably did too all things considered. “Yeah, sorry about that,” he said lamely. He felt four pairs of eyes on him, Steve willed his eyes to stay on the road. “What?” He choked out. Jesus, one of these days he needs to take when the silence stretched on halfway through Huey Lewis’s Do You Believe in Love.

“Wait!” Lucas yelped. “Gross he was in here!”
Jesus Christ.

“He?” Steve asked, playing dumb. “Who’s he?”

“Steve,” Dustin said seriously, bordering on ‘we’ve talked about this.’ “Again?”

Sure his own parents don’t monitor him but he’s got four freaking thirteen year olds up his ass. That’s rich. Steve snorted, how do you even smell Billy? He shook the thought out of his head, he already knows how. Sweat, Marlboro Red, soap and some type of cologne. The car reeks of it.

Je-sus.

“No, not again.”

“But you hung out with him recently,” Steve shrugged and squirmed a little with the sets of eyes on him. It can’t be that big of a deal.

“I just sort of ran into him and then we got milkshakes again,” he explained.

It felt a like a little more than milkshakes, but Steve didn’t want to linger on that thought. He just liked that it was nice, most of last night had been nice, and nice in his life is in short supply.

“Ugh!” Mike squirmed in the seat, bucking to get out of it. “Did he sit here? Was he sitting here?” He gagged.

Steve glared at him, “no, and why does it matter? He drove me. And where would I put him besides in my car if I did?”

“The trunk!” Dustin and Lucas yelled in unison. Will winced sitting between them, he didn’t have enough space to reach up and cover his ears. If they honestly think he could manhandle Billy, unconscious or not, into his trunk they’re idiots. He was going to point that out, but Lucas stopped him.

“How’d you run into him?” He asked suspiciously.

Steve bit his lip, his eyes set on the road. “I don’t know,” he gritted. “He just...appeared.”

“Appeared?” They yelped.

“Look we just didn’t talk about it,” Steve said. And Billy has an uncanny ability to just not mention things when he doesn’t feel like mentioning them. It’s annoying.

“The whole car ride?” Dustin asked. “You said you were friends?”

“Sometimes friends don’t talk, you know, like, comfortable silence.”

Mike scoffed, “not you though.”

“It was late,” Steve added, glaring at the boy. It’s likely he couldn’t see him through his growing mop of curls. Nancy was right, he’s starting to look like a drug dealer.

“You were out at night?” Will’s hazel brown eyes were big and owlish. None of this kids tend to go out when it’s dark anymore, he doesn’t blame them. They wish Steve wouldn’t either, but he has a ‘death wish’ so he still does.

Steve sighed. “I was just sitting outside to clear my head and he...” Steve paused to remember
what Billy had said, except Billy never told him why he was out. Steve didn’t think it mattered that much. “He...he never told me. He just kind of found me and then we went out and then he took me back home. Big deal.”

They gave each other a big look, Steve had no clue what it meant.

“What?”

“You didn’t think that was weird?” Lucas asked.

He did, but he had another thing coming if he really thought Billy was going to tell him. “He,” Steve swallowed on his too dry mouth, “he’s uh...not big on conversation. So, we didn’t talk a whole lot.” He didn’t mention going to the diner, or the spelling bee and Los Angeles, or the fact that he steals books from the library like he’s some kind of grand bibliophilic larcenist. For some odd reason, he didn’t want to tell them, like Billy had trusted him and only him with those truths. He shrugged. “I took him back to his place and I went back to mine, it was fine.”

It was more than fine, it was fun.

“Billy, who always runs his mouth,” Lucas snorted, “is not big on conversation? That sounds like bullshit.”

Steve shook his head, not really sure what to say to that because it does sound like bullshit. “He didn’t talk much last night, he’s kind of hard to have a conversation with,” he admitted.

Mike was staring at him like he had four ginormous noses, with the boy’s face twisted in so many directions it might as well be made out of taffy. “And you didn’t wonder what Billy Hargrove, the freaking psychopath with murder rages, was doing driving around in the middle of the night?” He huffed and crossed his arms, “you’re an idiot.”

And you sound like Nancy.

“It does bother me,” Steve said. “But I don’t pry on his shit and he doesn’t pry on mine, we like...agreed to that. If he wanted me to know about it, he’d probably make a big deal over it.”

Dustin made a face. “Steve, that sounds crazy. He’s crazy.”

Steve shrugged, it does. Billy probably is crazy anyway, Steve knew that back in October. “Yeah, I’m not saying he’s psychologically sound.” He pulled into a parking space at the Hawk. “The guy’s a few candies short of a pinata.”

Pretty sure I am too.

He turned to look at the three of them comically squished in the back seat, none of them were smiling. Dustin and Will looked concerned and Lucas just looked angry not that he could blame him. “He’s fine though, really. It’s fine.” He unbuckled himself and pulled at the door handle, “c’mon, dickheads, before I leave you stuck in here.”

The boys shared another meaningful look. “There’s definitely something wrong him,” Lucas said, he looked out the car at Steve, their frickin’ hero. Their friend. “We gotta save Steve.”

That Morning
Max skipped breakfast, Billy slept through it.

Or she thinks he slept through it because his door is closed and she hasn’t heard him. On a day off, he’d go out and smoke first thing in the morning, his music filtering in through Max’s window. It’s been quiet, she popped a butterscotch from El’s house into her mouth. She kept her walkie in the crook of her arm, waiting until the boys respond. What’s the point of a walkie-talkie when they don’t respond?

She looked at the thing ruefully, angry that it’s her only lifeline. Her only hope. Max repositioned herself under her blanket--burying herself and waited for someone to hear her. She crunched down hard on her candy and started the story over again...

“He tried to cut my head off.”

She waited for a second, and then a minute went by and then several minutes before she could register what Billy just said.

He tried to cut my head off.

“He?” She echoed.

“He.”

Max still didn’t move. Her skin crawled looking at the lumpy bed in front of her. She rubbed her bare arms in an attempt to will away goosebumps, the human side of Billy scared her almost as much as the raging monster he is. She listened to his shuddered breathing, wondered what would happen if she turned the light on.

God, she wanted to have the lights on.

“Billy?”

“He...he cut me. Dad...he,” his lips trembled. “He cut me.”

She felt around the walls with shaking hands, felt the chill against the pads of her fingers running over icy thick off-white paint until she found the light switch.

Billy was sitting up in bed. A few tears rolled down his cheeks. Blood dripped from his nose sluggishly down his lips and chin, but there was nothing on his neck, nothing on his shoulders.

Max could feel her feet root to the floor like she’d never move again. Her eyes slide up from his knees over his shirtless to his blotchy red face and dark, wet lashes. “Mama...he had a knife. He tried to...he was gonna...” Max realized part of his slack-jawed look might have to do with some sort of shell shock. The lack of recollection in his bright blue eyes, even bluer thanks to the bloodshot whites of his eyes.

He’s dreaming.

Billy’s only mentioned his mom once when she was around, it was almost just like this. She woke up to get a glass of water and he was there in the kitchen the same hollow look in his eyes. Dreamy and far away like he’s sleeping, but he looked wide awake. They weren’t a family then, she was 11 and he was 15, but they’d stayed for dinner and then the night over.
“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he told her in a blank voice. “You know it’s three in the morning, Maxine. That’s witching hour, and you never know what you’ll find lurking around in the night.”

It sent a chill down her, through her, long before she knew about Demodogs or the Upside Down or that the monsters on TV could be real. She was just 11, wandering around her mom’s boyfriend’s apartment at three in the morning searching for a glass of water and he was 15 trying to scare her. Max doesn’t really remember what she said to him after that, probably something smart and snappy or nothing at all. She remembers never getting her glass of water. She remembers never wanting to leave her bed at night.

Air hitched in his lungs, rasped, “he was gonna cut my head off.”

She moved from the light switch and Billy’s eyes tracked her like wasn’t still in some sort of sleep, like he’s wide awake.

“This...this isn’t funny, Billy, knock it off,” Max felt more than heard herself say. She knows he isn’t messing with her, trying to scare her like they’re younger all over again. He’s talking in his sleep, crying in his sleep, wide awake.

“He hurt me,” he whimpered like a child, like he’s mental de-aged to five year old she always calls him. “Dad, he--”

Her lips trembled around the words ‘I know,’ but he’s just dreaming. He’s just having a nightmare. She shook her head instead. He’s just sleepwalking and having a nightmare. “Billy, you’re just dreaming. No one tried to kill you.”

“Shut up,” she didn’t want to hear him say it again. Neil wouldn’t...He wouldn’t decapitate him. Max knows he yells in his face and they don’t spend any time together, but Billy is insufferable. If she were his dad she wouldn’t want anything to do with him either. Billy’s lips shut like he could hear her talking to him. Max squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to hold in the deep shudder she felt creeping up her spine, he’s just dreaming. He’s just dreaming.

She shouldn’t have ever left her bed. She wished Billy’s bedroom door wasn’t cracked the tiniest bit tonight, just enough that she could hear him say those words.

“My ma always stopped him. You don’t know him like I do.” He sounded concerned for her, downright terrified like ‘him’ is some sort of monster that’s coming for them both.

“Billy--”

“Max,” he said. “I can’t...he said he’d do it again. He tried to cut my head off and…” The lump in his throat swallowed his voice whole until another choked sob came out. “My ma’s gone and…”

He’s scared.

It took her longer than it should have, it dawned on her like a smack across the face. He’s terrified. She’s never seen fear on Billy. She knows what disappointment looks like, anger, jealousy, she’s even seen him genuinely happy a few times, but she’s never seen him afraid.

“I’ll keep him away from you,” she tried instead. “Just please go back to sleep.”

“You can’t,” he whispered.

“I can, Billy, please, please go back to sleep.” She took a slow step towards him and again his eyes
followed. “I’ll stay and watch...while you sleep,” she said, and that calmed Billy instantly.

“Be careful,” he warned.

Max tried her hardest to ignore the worry lines spreading on his face like this is a matter of life and death.

“Okay, just...just shut up and go to sleep.”

“I...It was just a bad dream, Billy,” she took a little step closer. “You’re okay, I promise.” Max gave his shoulder a hard tap. He collapsed on his side like his spine was a Jenga tower and she’d just pulled out a piece. His eyes shut again too. “It’s just a bad dream,” Max said to Billy, but it felt more like it was for herself.

Neil and Billy don’t get along most of the time, but his dad wouldn’t do that.

That’s...attempted murder.

“It’s just a bad dream,” she repeated, reaching for the dirty blonde waves at the nape of Billy’s neck. “It’s just a dream.” Max pulled them apart feeling the raised, leathery skin underneath, a jagged scar across the back of his neck.

She bolted from his room.

Locking her bedroom door behind her. This isn’t Mind Flayer stuff, she almost wishes it was, at least then she could tell the boys about it--tell someone about it. But it isn’t, she’s not sure what it is. She’s sure she’ll never tell a soul.

She heard three soft knocks on her door, her mom. Max scurried out from underneath covers pulling them up to her chin and keeping her walkie under her foot.

“Hey,” she said gently. “I brought you a little toast and fruit cup. Do you feel better?”

“Sort of,” Max muttered.

She frowned, putting the plate on her bedside table. “Both you and Billy caught something, I think.”

“Really?” She tried to keep her face plane. “He’s sick too?”

Max already knew there was something wrong with him. Something really, really wrong.

“Well, I woke him up twenty minutes ago and...he went right back to sleep. I was going to try to get our Easter clothes shopping out of the way, but if both of you have a bug I think not.”

Max nodded.

Her mom sighed, Max could tell she was disappointed. She’ll never understand how household errands get her so excited--especially for holidays. Her mom is the only person she knows that gets excited by the mundane.

“Well, try and eat something. I'm going to try waking your step-brother up again.” She crossed her
fingers with a small smile.

Max couldn't find her voice anymore. Neil tried to kill him, tried to cut his own son’s head off and her mom married him.

Max nodded as Susan left.

She waited a few minutes, tried not to think about his red eyes or his trembling bottom lip. She tried to think the scar on the back of his neck meant nothing. Max grabbed the toast and stuffed it between her lips. She watched her mom, walking placidly back down the hall like they weren't living with a murderer.

It had to be a dream.

The scar across the back of Billy’s neck said otherwise. What he told her last night said more than otherwise.

She slid down the hall, her fingers hovered over the tarnished gold handle to his door.

Last night is fresh like a wound in her. Opening Billy's door has never led to anything good.

He was sitting up again, like last night, with a ratty black hoodie thrown over him. The hood hid most of his face, but Max could see the pale skin underneath and the same glassy red eyes that he had before. She’s pretty sure he’s the one that’s actually sick.

“I'm up,” he growled. “I don’t need you coming in here.”

Max felt her hands curl up at her sides, her lips press into a tight angry line. “You were talking in your sleep last night, Billy,” Max scowled. She closed his bedroom door behind her.

He doesn’t talk in his sleep, he never talked in his sleep, and there are a million and one things he could’ve said that would make Max come in here. Over half of them have to do with Steve Harrington alone.

“The fuck do you mean?” He said lowly.

“I got up to get a drink,” the tension in her shoulders faded fast, drained like the bright pink that was in her cheeks. “You were in your room I could hear you talking...and crying. It...it looked like you were for a really long time. I told you to go back to sleep and that you were having a nightmare.” She didn’t look at him, she rubbed one of her arms. “After that you...you just...sort of did.”

Shit.

If his dad was awake or around...fuck. He couldn’t stay still, now. Neil couldn’t have been awake, he wouldn’t let him do something like that. Billy got up just to move just to get rid of the nervous energy that it’s too early in the morning for. It must’ve been before or after he fell asleep.

“You were talking about Neil and...and your m--”

Billy slammed his closet door shut, Max flinched. Her mouth shut so quickly he could hear her teeth click. “You don’t talk about her,” he growled. For once Max was smart enough to just nod and keep her mouth shut, her pale blue eyes all big and fucking scared. He gripped the handle on the door until his knuckles whitened. “You said you were done spying on me.”
She made a face. “I was thirsty, dickhead. That's not spying.”

Billy's glare was a warning of several different kinds, for now, he just wanted little Maxine to shut up about all of this. “Don't mention it to anyone or--”

“How did you get that scar on the back of your neck?” she asked. Billy turned to look at her. Max looked pale in the morning light, terrified, and her lips pressed into a deep thin line like she’s trying to keep herself from shaking. She waited for Billy to turn just as pale as she did, for him to turn angry, for something other than the exhausted, annoyed, borderline pained expression he’s wearing.

His eyes narrowed. “How do you even know I have that?”

She blanched, which Billy didn’t even know was possible she's already so pale. “I saw it the other day and I was just...curious.” Max swallowed. “It looks gnarly.”

“Yeah?” He scoffed. “Well, it’s none of your business.”

“I just…” she tried to think of something. “It looks cool.”

Billy rubbed a hand over his face because let’s be honest he knows when his twerp of a step-sister really wants something. “Why’re you asking, Maxine?” He droned on. He’s tired and he feels like shit and now she’s coming in her talking about his mom and asking questions.

“You mentioned it in your sleep… I…” She stammered.

Christ.

He’s never grabbing a smoothie before bed again.

“The old bastard that used to cut my hair nicked me,” he said. “That’s the big secret. Happy?”

Max would like to point out that it’s more than a little nick of flesh. It’s more like a small shave like someone had taken a peeler to the back of his neck. Not only that it looked like it never healed right, she's pretty sure it didn't.

“That’s...that’s it?” Her eyes were wide, huge. Billy hated that her voice turned small like that was both the right answer she was looking for and the one she really hoped it wasn’t.

He tried not to care about it. His head hurts too much and it’s too early to care about it. “What did you think? I fought a fucking bear?” He hissed. “That’s it.” His eyes narrowed. “I told you what you wanna know, fuck off shitbird.”

“I’m not a shitbird, I'm a--”

“Zoomer, I know!” Billy tried to keep his back to her, if he turns around he’ll strangle the hell out of her. “Shut the hell up and get the hell away from me, Maxi--”

“Billy!” Susan yelled from the other room. “Language! Please!”

Billy glowered at Max and it's a feat of sheer willpower she didn't melt into a puddle of molten flesh. “Sorry, Susan!”

“Get out of my room before I throw something,” he threatened in some sort of switched deja vu flash of the day before at Hopper's house. “You know I don’t ask twice.”
“I’m not wearing that,” Max hissed. She swatted the offending dress away from her body. “It looks like someone murdered Pink Panther with it.”

“It’s _seasonal_ ,” Susan insisted. “And it’s springtime, it’s supposed to be bright. Bright colors will do your skin tone some good.”

“It’s a murder weapon!”

Billy lamented his whole _goddamn_ life stuck in Hawkin’s ‘mall’ listening to Susan and Maxine go back and forth over fucking dresses for an _e-tern-i-ty_. He’s not so sure if all that purgatory crap holds up, but if it does he must be in it.

This is _punishment_ , at least Max is on punishment for faking an illness. Billy’s not exactly sure why Susan’s making this as impossible as she can, but he’s sure that everyone’s suffering from it.

“Fine, pick one,” she said shortly.

Max looked at the long rack of dress ruefully while Susan waited expectantly. Billy, even though he hated it, knew exactly what she was going to say.

“Can I just wear pants?”

“No, it’s _Easter Sunday_,” she gritted.

Which essentially means shit to her.

His head hurts, not that that isn’t his new regular, not that pain is anything new to him, but _hurts_. He’s not used to his body feeling off like his brain is dying one cell at a time. He’s not used to feeling like he’s _actually_ dying. A cracked rib, black eye, broken fingers he’s familiar with, this _hurts_.

“No matter what you put on you’re gonna look fugly, just grab one,” he said in the lapse of arguing. Anything to make them leave faster even if it means getting on Susan’s shit list for the day. “She’s going to church for two and half hours, not meeting the Pope,” he shrugged. “It’s not that big a deal.” Besides, if Steve knew anything it was about using your fucking child to impress other people.

Susan blinked.

Max’s eyebrows were in her hairline watching her step-brother and her mother not exactly square off, but her mom looked so _goddamn_ shocked because she and Max are always at odds when it comes to appearances and Billy’s never said a single thing about it before. Billy looked like a whole lot of things. Like he wanted to kick his own ass and smack some sense in to both of them at once.

Wanting to kick his own ass won out, his shoulders dropped and he looked away. “Just...Just saying.” He licked his lips and then there were those magic words again, “sorry, Susan.”
Max would find it all so fucking hysterical if her step-brother wasn’t being ripped into what felt like eight different people at once. If he didn’t look like garbage on a stick and they were supposed to pretend that that’s okay.

“I like this one.” She looked down at it realizing it was one she rejected several minutes ago. She’s not sure why she did it, but her step-brother only makes that face when he knows Neil’s going to yell at him when they get home.

Susan must not have argued for it, she doesn’t remember it, “really? This one?”

“Yeah,” her and Billy shared a look, “I like it.”

Like a lot of things, Susan ignored it. Max had pulled out a multicolored dress white, blue green, red, if she was trying to avoid colors the polka dotted thing with a thin black belt attached to the middle did very little to achieve it.

“You want this one?” Susan’s nose wrinkled.

Max nodded, “it grew on me.” Actually the more she looked at it, the less it grew on her. Its three-quarter sleeves look scratchy and uncomfortable and the top will probably button all the way up her to her chin.

Billy watched Susan hold up to her again. If he wasn’t already on thin ice and it didn’t hurt so damn much to laugh, he’d crack up right about now. The thing is hideous. She’s gonna look like a goddamn Amish woman who collided with an entire paint store.

“It’s not bad,” Susan said. Oh, it’s awful. Once again Billy and Max found themselves sharing a look of complete understanding. “We’ll get stockings for it too, it’s a bit short,” she said thoughtfully.

Max looked like she was lamenting her whole life like stockings are some sort of great American tragedy she’ll have to endure. “We’re not meeting the Pope.”

Billy winced, he can already tell she’s going to use that one for the rest of her goddamn life and when Neil asks where the fuck she got that one it’ll be his fucking fault.

Susan’s face twisted up again. “Pope or no Pope, you have to look nice,” Susan insisted, looking tired of Max’s antics. He’s in so much fucking trouble. “It’s still church.”

“You know God says he’ll accept you as you are,” Max grumbled, lip jutted out.

“I’m sure he would, but the town won’t. So you will be wearing something nice.”

Billy followed after them, keeping his face blank. Susan let him slide with wearing the blue button he’s already got and bought him a new pair of slacks. He’ll need them for graduation too, she insists. He didn’t protest about them, what’s the point? Neil will think he’s an eyesore regardless and he could probably show up to church buck ass nude and God still wouldn’t care. God says come as you are, so fuck it. Those high school cows would be all over him though. He smirked, that’s real fucking funny and kind of sick. They’d be in a church.

“White!” Max screeched, pulling Billy from his thoughts. Making it feel like one or both of his eardrums just popped. Making it feel like someone cracked a pot on both sides of his head. “I’ll look like a ghost!”

“Black, then,” Susan replied irritably and clearly done with her stubborn thirteen year old daughter.
“I’m only giving you two options, pick one,” she said shortly.

Max didn’t look happy with that either, she crossed her arms and puckered her lips like she just bit into something awful. “Black,” she snapped, awfully pissy about the whole thing.

Susan grabbed them and handed them to Billy, it’s his job to hold onto all this crap. All this color coordinated crap since Susan wants them to be color matching. There’d be one big, happy, fashionable, color-coordinated family, including Max in her multi-colored Amish woman dress.

Max who was in no position to be making demands, started up again. “Can we eat here, please?”

The “mall” which is more like a few stores connected by one long concrete strip and a roof has two restaurants and a Dairy Queen. Some pizza place and a barbecue that Billy doesn’t know the name of either. “The food’s pretty good and it’s not that expensive.”

Susan sighed, “No.”

“I bet Billy’s starving by now, he eats like every two hours.” What a fucking gremlin. He slid a glare in her direction, she’s not bringing him into this.

He is starving and Susan is an awful cook, but that wasn’t what she wanted to hear right now. She wanted him to agree with her and curb Max. “We have food at home,” Billy said, probably with not enough enthusiasm to keep Susan happy, but right now both Mayfields can jump in a lake.

She huffed. “I just thought,” she annunciated while they walked up to the check out counter, “it’s been a really long day and instead of mom cooking, us setting the table, and then washing the dishes, and then drying them and then putting back. We could go to Pig n’ Poke’s and be done. No table to set, no dishes to clean, no food to cook. Easy.”

Which was a really compelling argument, Susan really can’t cook on a good and she’s marginally worse when she’s in a bad mood.

“It would be fun,” she sang. “We haven’t eaten out in a really long time.” Billy snorted, they haven’t eaten out in a really long time. Max is a bloodhound for fast food and those little twerps are always going places with Harrington who’s just as much of a fast food junky as they are. “And you’ve never taken Billy out to eat, it’d be a nice way to end our day.”

Max looked at her, she knows that face, she knows she’s caving. “And kids eat free today after four, no one will know I’m thirteen...I’m practically still twelve,” she volunteered.

Susan sighed, “fine.” This is the only time Billy’s fine with Max whoring him out for food. “We’re not staying long,” she insisted. She means she’ll have to make sure there’s at least food that they ordered on the table by the time Neil comes home, even Max knows that one.

“That’s okay,” Max chirped.

They paid and left the store, Billy was silently thanking God that today was speeding towards an end. He can feel a headache riding in on dark ominous waves, tugging and beating against his skull.

Steve rolled his eyes for the millionth time, he just sat through the stupidest movie he’s ever seen. Jesus. He remembered being thirteen years old and thinking he’s grown up watching a raunchy movie like that. They ate that shit up like candy thinking they’re so cool, even Will looked smug every once in a while.

Joyce and Jonathan are going to kill him if they find out. He’s pretty sure Mrs. Henderson
wouldn’t, she’d just be ‘disappointed.’

Somehow he got cajoled into taking them to Pig n’ Poke’s which is ridiculous, it’s all the way on the other side of town and they just ate a boatload of popcorn.

“Popcorn isn’t a meal, Steve,” Dustin insisted. At three AM on a Friday with no one over and no parents, it is, but Steve wasn’t going to protest. Nancy always hated that he never ate ‘real food’. “C’mon,” he pushed. “At least a semi-balanced dinner, if not for us then for you.”

He snorted, ignoring the concern creeping into his voice “that’s what you go home for.”

“Does your mom even cook dinner?”

Steve shrugged, “I think she’s on some kind of cleanse.” Which he knows is a lie, but he also didn’t want to say his mom hasn’t touched the stove in at least six years.

“It’s only five, we got at least two hours of daylight left. The day is still young,” he said. “And you need food.”

“Are you little shits just going to let him do all the talking for you?”

Mike scoffed. “I don’t even want to go to Pig n’ Pokes, we could just order pizza and you can drop us off at my house.”

“Well of course you don’t, you’re a hermit,” Steve groused.”

Mike glared at him, “I’m not a hermit, I hate country music.”

“And most people,” Will added.

“People suck .”

“Dustin’s like your kid anyway,” Lucas said. “It’s pretty much statistically proven if Dustin asks, you’ll probably say yes.”

Steve sputtered. “What?--I don’t!” He scoffed running his hand through his hair. Steve wanted to lower his head to the steering wheel, cheeks and ears a little too red to be anything but flattered embarrassment. “You know what? We’re going, you know why? So you all can stuff your cakeholes and I don’t have to listen to you anymore. You little shits are annoying.”

Lucas grinned winningly, “but Dustin asked and you still said yes.”

“Sinclair if you don’t shut up I’m coming back there,” Steve threatened.

Will shook his head quickly at the thought of being any more squished in the back seat than he already is. His eyes seemed to bug out bigger under the added pressure. “Please don’t.”

“Yeah,” Mike added. “You’d crash the car and kill us all.”

Steve wasn’t sure whether to snort, scoff, roll his eyes or just give up altogether. It’s not like he asked to have four and sometimes six thirteen year olds on his case all the time. “You’re all a bunch of dickheads, you know that?”

“O-kay Steve,” they chorused, sounding unconvinced.

Christ.
*Pig n’ Pokes* is the second smallest structure in Yorking Square Shopping Centre, smaller than any of the stores in the strip mall. It’s got Marco’s on the other end of the concrete walkway beat buy a few square feet, but both places are small. Steve likes the dimly lit little place, he likes the way the neon lights saying stuff like *Go Big or Go Home* and *Yippee Kai Yay!* illuminate the growing condensation around his glass of water. He doesn’t even mind the yawning sound of the country music between the shitheels arguing, he thinks, over some movie coming out soon that they want to see.

If it’s not the *Palace* they’re spending all their time at, it’s the *Hawk*. He can’t blame them. There’s an escapist appeal to spending hours watching movies, pretending to be somewhere else doing something else.

He had a lot on his mind, *you’re all keyed up and I don’t want to go home* first and foremost. Maybe Billy knew him so well because he was digging around in his head again, but it didn’t come out smug, it was genuine and poignant. He *liked* it. He’s pretty sure he likes him in general.

“Steve! Steve!” Dustin smacked his arm with the back of his hand repeatedly. “We got a problem!”

“Oh! What!” His head snapped up and looked around, the other twerps were fine. No one was choking, split their finger on a knife, or otherwise experienced near death in the last ten seconds. They’ve all got their heads turned away from him. “What!” He rubbed his arms sorely and scowled. “Hey, dickheads!” He looked at them, their eyes locked on something across the room like crows in a cornfield.

*Oh for fuck’s sake.*

It seemed when they noticed the Hargrove-Mayfield family, they noticed them right back. Steve could tell Mrs. Hargrove was scanning each of their faces with dim recollection in that ‘those might be Maxine’s friends, but they could just be weirdos’ sort of way. Max scowled, actually it was more than that she looked *furious*. And Billy...

Well shit, Steve wasn’t sure what face Billy was making but it didn’t look great. He doesn’t look great in any sort of way, but Steve’s palms feel warm and hot instantly. He was thinking about to see him even when his expression is stuck between the greatest agony of his life, murder, and something that said *I want to slip under the table and die*.

Dustin *waved*, motioning for Max to come over. Which really was like inviting death to their table in the form of either one very pissed off thirteen year old girl or her short-tempered step-brother. Dustin would look at a napalm bomb and think it’s a funny looking bench.

“What are you doing?” Mike screeched. He leaned into the table a little. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

“Obviously not,” Dustin turned over in the bench to look at him. “It’s here which means we get to observe,” he said like that was supposed to mean something deep and important.

“*It*?” Steve blinked.

“Billy,” they said in unison.

Steve rubbed both of his hands over his face, he hangs out with a bunch of thirteen year old nerds, it’s more disappointing he’s *not* shocked than anything else.
Max turned her head and said something to her mom, probably asking if she could go say hi to them. Billy looks like death warmed over which makes Steve a little glad she’s walking over because it means inevitably he will too. He’s lacking his usual flare, a warm henley over his upper half with his arms crossed on the table in front of him, slumped over onto the hardwood table, a frown so deep there are lines on his face. He looks tired and sick, sicker than usual.

Steve frowned too, he wasn’t alright when he last saw him but he was mostly Billy. Mostly a nuisance, mostly fun to be around, mostly someone he’s really starting to care about. Steve worried his lower lip feeling guilty, wondering if he tired him out. Wondering if he should’ve invited him to just spend the night if he didn’t want to go home. Wondering if this was all his fault. Steve’s not sure he just feels bad.

There’s no way he should be inviting Billy Hargrove into his house. Steve still frowned harder at the missed opportunity, he kept him company last night, it would’ve been the least he could do.

Max crossed the restaurant, her eyes were narrowed, nose scrunched up with a frown. She stopped a few inches from the table with her arms crossed. “I’ve been trying to reach you all day,” She snapped, it was harsh but whispered which somehow made it worse. They winced and Steve grimaced. “We have a problem with the AV project, a big one.”

Every straight line of Lucas’s face turned curved. “What AV project?”

“We’re not working on a project,” Mike hissed at her.

Dustin choked on his Dr. Pepper, “shit. C’mon, you know, the project that we’ve been having a disagreement on? C’mon buddy pull your heads out of your asses.”

“Oh, right, yeah,” Will grinned uneasily.

Steve watched them, he’s not an idiot. Steve is sure they’re speaking in code now. These little shits are up to something and it has nothing to do with AV.

“How big is the problem?” Lucas asked.

Max looked back at the table before cramming herself in with them. “Big. And bad, really, really bad,” she looked haunted, paler, and he knew for sure it wasn’t AV. It’s about the Upside Down.

“How big is the problem?” Will asked.

She shook her head, “memory,” she said gravely like that’s supposed to mean something to all of them. It does, Will went pale and Mike’s cheeks brightened to a lurid red and his eyes darkened into black inkwells.

“You’re sure it’s memory?” Dustin asked, serious and scared.

Steve doesn’t get it. He gets some of it, but nothing all at once.

“Positive.”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Steve interrupted. Those shits are definitely up to something. “What the hell is going on? I can tell when you dick heads have something planned.”

“Wow,” Mike seethed. He settled a glare at Steve over his untouched tater tots. “You can tell when we have school projected planned, it’s nothing.”
“Yeah?” He challenged. “Then what’s this school project about?”

“Space.”

“Computer science.”

Dustin and Lucas looked at each other like a couple of idiots. “It’s computer science in space,” Mike glared at the two of them. “You wouldn’t get it.”

Well that’s a crock of shit. Steve was going to needle them some more, he knows they’re making plans. Something roiled in his stomach, it coiled all his muscles tight. If they’re making plans that means it has to do with the Upside Down. If they’re making plans, it’s not over. “What--”

“Max,” Billy said in a low voice that rumbled in Steve’s ears, “Susan says let’s go.” Max went rigid, the entire table did too, except Steve who blinked, who felt stupid when the words wouldn’t come. Billy didn’t spare him a glance, bloodshot, glassy eyes narrowing on Max when she didn’t move. “I said,” he gritted. “Let’s go.”

“In a minute,” she hissed.

“Susan was being nice letting you talk to the nerd herd when we’re busy,” he said. “Stop being a piece of shit and let’s go.” Max looked up at him ruefully. She looked like she wanted to spit some awful words at him and instead pushed off the bench with that little irritating sound she does that makes his jaw go tight. “Yeah, huff all you want, s’not like you haven’t been a brat all fucking day,” Billy grumbled.

And she has.

He turned to leave, knowing his job is done, knowing he was a good enough big brother, knowing he didn’t act like a fag around Harrington and he can sit. He can sit before the world falls out from underneath him.

But God probably hates him a little for Pope comment and generally being an asshole so he can’t because Harrington has a look on his face like he’s upset and he’s going to actually say something about it this time. “Hey,” he stood, almost catching Billy by the shoulder to turn him around. “Are you okay? You...how’s your head?”

Like it’s been put on tilt whirl ride without the fucking seat belt, that’s how his head feels. Billy doesn’t say that because the geek squad is staring at him like he has tails for eyes and six noses protruding from his head and Steve’s brown eyes are all gooey on him like they’re the only ones in the room or something.

Now he just feels sick to his fucking stomach with either butterflies or soon to be upchuck.

“Christ,” Steve winced. “Did you break?”

Yup.

He doesn’t need the marshmallow-y concern padding every worry line that’s marking his face. He looks like a fucking Care Bear. Care Bear Steve Harrington that’s what he should call him. It makes his fucking stomach flutter. Billy’s bottom lip jutted out threateningly, “No,” he growled. “Can you fuck off with all that ‘are you okay’ shit? I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Steve said, agreeing.
Like, okay, I get it, Billy. I understand. There’s something wrong with you, you don’t have to say. Steve gets it. He understands him and he hates that. He’s close to jumping out of his skin everything is just that close to being too much and right now Steve feels like a lot, and he gets it. He isn’t supposed to. He isn’t supposed to understand so quickly and it only pisses him off more that they both know they’ve reached an understanding without words.

Billy glared at him, cold and sharp. He used to want to deck Harrington, in a moment like now he would, but he doesn’t want to. He just wants him to stop looking at him with those fucking Care Bear eyes. “If I have to remind you again, you lose a fucking tooth,” he doesn’t know what else to say to him. They both know he doesn’t mean it which just makes it worse, which just makes him wish he didn’t open his mouth at all. He shoved Max across the restaurant, away from Steve and the saucer eyes staring at him. He followed her with his knuckles jammed in his pockets so tight it was visible even in the dimly lit room.

“Wow, you guys must be best friends,” Mike groused from behind him like he’s the president of the peanut gallery.

Steve ran a hand over his face, he wanted to say ‘it’s complicated’ but he always says that. “Shut up, Mike.”

Chapter End Notes

The feel when you're not used to people caring about you let alone your crush so you stand there for over 30 seconds staring at them because they just asked you if you're okay and you don't know how to deal with that so you crash like an overloaded computer.
Way to go Steve, you broke him.
XVII. Houston, We Have A Memory Problem Part 2

Chapter Summary

The boys discover something pretty bad.

Chapter Notes

What is this! A chapter? On a...Wednesday? Yeah, it is! It's a little mini, but it's super important and there's 97% I won't be available all of Saturday and Sunday so here's the next little (very important) bit. Thanks for sticking with this monster story guys and as always Happy Reading! :)

They got ice cream on the way back for the exact reason Steve took them out the eat in the first place, to keep their goddamn mouths shut. Trying to have a long, heated conversation about anything with ice cream melting down your curled fists never works. He’s not sure who taught him this trick, he’s pretty sure it was Tommy. He used to always dump girls at the Dairy Queen.

They can eat their weight in ice cream afterward if they want, it’s a win-win.

Steve snorted, he’s disgusting but he might be a genius in the art of weaseling his way out of things. And with Tommy it was a fucking art.

They whined and moaned about it, but Steve insisted and really once you put ice cream in front of a kid how many of them actually say no? Steve more or less succeeded in shutting them up for the fifteen minute ride back to his house where their bikes were still parked in his garage.

The moment Lucas tried to say something they went over a branch and half his vanilla and rainbow sprinkles spilled on his shirt. At some point he'll have to really thank Tommy for that one, if he ever gets out of the hospital.

Steve pulled into his driveway and rubbed his hand over his face. ‘You got your movie, dinner and ice cream, get the fuck out of my car,’ but that sounded a little too much like Billy. He was trying to, but it’s damn near impossible to get him out of his brain. Besides, he wanted to end the day on a good note and duck back into his house before it wasn’t.

“Alright dickheads, I actually have to get home,” he said, “pretty sure my mom has plans.”

Which isn’t true, but depending on what mood she’s in when he gets back she might. She might just be passed out from boredom and wine, she might be redecorating. He prayed to God she isn’t in a redecorating mood.

“Sure, your mom,” Dustin said. The word was drawn out ridiculously long. He raised his eyebrows until they were hidden under his forest of brown curls and the bill of the cap.

“If you mean Billy, God no, I’m pretty sure he’s contagious,” Steve said, lying. “Now can you
shits get out of my car? It’s been, like, eight hours.”

“It hasn’t been eight hours.”

“I’m sorry Wheeler, you’re right it’s been twelve.” Mike huffed in the passenger seat next to him. “Seriously, march guys, I got things to do.”

“Yeah we get it, cry over the psychopath,” Lucas groused. To say that Steve looked at him like he was important would be an understatement, he’s pretty much the scum of the earth and Steve looked at him like the sun could shine out of his ass. It made him sick, it made things weird.

“I wouldn’t cry over Billy, Jesus,” Steve said. “Maybe if he died, I guess,” he amended. He’s supposed to be looking after him anyway, and it’d probably be his head exploding at this rate. He shook his head, hated the idea of Billy dying now that he thought about it.

“I’d cry tears of joy,” Dustin said.

Steve rolled his eyes from the front seat, a total of three weeks ago he would have agreed. Two years ago the kids sitting in the back of his car wouldn’t be there, and he’d probably stab himself with a fork before letting them get in the car.

Times change, but he doesn’t say any of that. “Yeah, I know.”

“You know what he did and you’re just okay with it?” Lucas hissed.

“What he could do,” Mike amended like Billy is currently up to something.

“I don’t know,” Steve said. Actually, he probably leaning towards no, he’s still not okay with what he did, but his dad’s always telling him to see the big picture. Billy feel’s like a big picture, too much to look at, too much to take in at once.

We don’t talk about it.

We have more important things to worry about.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. No, I guess.”

Lucas tried to get himself out of the car as slow as possible with all of Will’s weight falling on him and shoving him out. Will spilled out after him, all limbs numbed and jellied from being stuck in the backseat for so long.

“So, you’re not going to talk to him anymore?” Dustin asked hopefully.

“It’s complicated,” he sighed again, ridiculously complicated.

“That’s a no, right?”

“It’s a ‘it’s complicated’, ” Steve even wheeled their bikes out, mostly because he needed to give himself something to do. He didn’t really want to look at them. “Now get off my property, my mom doesn’t like children.”

Dustin flipped him off, grinning a little, “you’re a kid.”

“I’m eighteen, technically I’m an adult,” he said. “Wheeler!” Steve called. Mike’s head snapped up from the open door of Steve’s BMW. His eyes were wide. “What?” His eyebrows formed a crease between them.
“Nothing,” Mike hissed, his lips curled. “I just can’t believe you’re such an asshole! You’re the biggest asshole I’ve ever met!”

Steve’s eye widened a fraction, it leveled into a dark grimace. “Yeah?” He made a little noise that hissed like letting out steam between his lips. The unhappiest smile they’ve ever seen settled on his face. Dustin always thought it was kind of strange how Steve snarled and smiled at the same time when he got pissed off the most. “Congratulations Wheeler, you’re not the first to say it. Wanna know your prize? Make sure Byers gets home safe.”

He got up, slamming the door shut behind him. “Yeah, and I will,” he retorted. Mike stomped past Steve and Will, Dustin and Lucas watched him pull his bike up himself and march past him again. “C’mon,” he sneered. “Let’s go.”

Mike pedaled down Loch Nora approaching the infinite sky that collided with asphalt and trees like it screamed freedom. Will and Lucas reared up their bikes, giving Steve a worried glance.

“See ya, Steve,” Lucas said.

“Bye,” Will frowned, his eyes were a little big and shone. “Thanks for taking us out.”

“No problem,” he forced a smile. “Stick together, alright?”

They pedaled hard down his driveway to catch up with Mike.

Dustin sighed, “I’m concerned, I really am.”

Steve’s arms were crossed, he shrugged. “Don’t give yourself grey hairs, you’re too young for that shit.” He turned into the garage with his back turned him. Dustin wanted to argue that anyone with a functional brain is old enough to worry.

“Steve--”

“Go catch up with them Dustin, it’s okay,” Steve’s hand wrapped around the garage door handle to close it. He offered him the same tight lipped smile, “I don’t want any of you guys biking around alone.”

Dustin eyed him. He can’t just leave him like this even if he’s friends with the biggest asshole in town. “Billy’s a bigger asshole than you,” he said. “Scientificaly proven.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, tired.

“And uglier,” he said. “There’s a blonde New York rat sitting on his head.”

The smile Steve cracked was real, he really shouldn’t laugh at that. “You’re fucking weird, kid you know that?”

“I’m observant,” Dustin emphasized. He hopped on his bike, pedaling a little. He pushed around the Harrington’s mailbox and into the street. “See ya later, Steve!”

Mike, Will, Dustin, and Lucas made a loose circle with their bikes at the end of Loch Nora where Mike’s stopped.

“Okay Mike, Steve’s fraternizing with the enemy, which definitely sucks major ass,” Dustin said, trying to keep a level head. “But you didn’t have to explode on him, he took us to see a rated R
movie.” He’s pissed. Yeah, he’s pissed at Steve too for a lot of reasons, but he’s not going to yell in his face...again. “Steve doesn’t respond well to yelling.”

“He’s lying.” Mike vibrated. His fists curled up at his sides. “He’s been lying to us this whole time,” he didn’t look at any of them when he spoke, his long hair drew over his face putting in one dark shadow.

“What?” Lucas’s eyebrows rose. “His exact words were, ‘we’ll see,’ that’s not lying. Even if it does suck, he told us the truth.” A crow cawed loudly drawing their attention away except for Will’s, he nibbled his lip worriedly for his friends, for how things got sour too quickly.

“Mike--”

“He’s bullshit!” Mike jammed his hand into his back pocket and fished out a sheet of paper. His fingers scrambled to unfold it out to its full size. Clumsy, too thin fingers pulled it open ripping it a little with unfocused rage. Mike shoved the paper into Dustin’s face, forcing him to look at it. “He knew,” his teeth clamped around the words.

MAKE IT GO AWAY

“He knew the whole time.” The note slipped into Dustin’s hands. He flipped it over.

Come find me. Old Cherry Lane.

• B.H.

“He drew this,” Mike’s voice shook, explaining for Lucas, Dustin and Will who still hadn’t caught on or didn’t want to. “Billy drew this and he just did...nothing. He’s known about it the entire time.”

“No.” Dustin shook his head, pushing the note away for Lucas to look at. He didn’t want to anymore, it was an ugly twisted thing, the ugly demogorgon of some sort telling them that Steve betrayed them. “There’s no way he would do that.”

“Billy was in his car, it could’ve fallen out of his pocket,” Lucas tried. He didn’t want to believe it either, his attempt at not was half assed at best. “Why didn’t he tell us?”

“Because he didn’t know,” Dustin insisted.

Mike groaned, he pressed his palms to his face and groaned some more. “Dustin! He knows! I found it looking for a napkin in the fucking glove compartment,” he yelled. “He’s not our friend! He’s Billy’s friend, he’s with the fucking Mind Flayer and Billy is the Mind Flayer this proves it.”

Will looked at the picture, he took it from Lucas who didn’t really seem to want to hold onto it any more than Dustin or Mike. He shuddered looking at the blue pen ink scribbled in so dark it was almost black in some places, the mouth oozed that viscous saliva down the page around rows of a million teeth. He heard the low trilling, rattling noise in his ears and looked away. He remembered
the haze he was under with the Mind Flayer, it was like a cool fog that washed over his brain. He tried to fight against prodding his brain sharply to ‘get it down.’ ‘Get it down.’ ‘Get it down.’ Will knew someone had to see what he saw to understand.

“Maybe Billy needed Steve...to...to see it,” Will said quietly.

Six pairs of eyes turned to look at him. “What?”

“When I...when it,” he flipped the page around to look at the small message scrawled on the back. “I needed someone to see, words just didn’t help. No one understood until I started drawing pictures.” Will gnawed on his lip. “What if he told Steve and it made him promise not to say anything?”

“You mean like it threatened him?”

“Or us,” he suggested sagely.

“Is it smart enough to do that?”

He nodded. “It was after a while. When you...when you start to get weak,” Will was small potatoes in comparison to Billy as far as muscle power and meanness, but Mike was right, Will’s stronger than he is. He had more to fight for than Billy ever would. “He probably cracked up faster than I did.”

“We need to get Max and we need to make a plan,” Lucas said.

“We don’t need Max!” Mike snapped. “She probably knew from the beginning--”

“She was probably trying to tell us today, but instead went to go see that stupid movie!” She needed them and they weren’t there. She needed them.

Lucas glared at Mike, it always comes down to her being an outsider, he was an outsider once too and that’s without her safety and her psychopathic, Mind Flayer step-brother in the mix. “We can’t just leave her.”

“Dude,” Dustin said. “It’d be a death sentence.”

“She’d be safe with us at Castle Byers.” Will suggested, he didn’t want to leave Max either. He likes her even if he likes most people. “The only people who know about it are you guys, my mom, and Jonathan...maybe Nancy, but Steve definitely doesn’t.”

“It’d be a death. Sentence,” Dustin emphasized when Mike didn’t immediately agree. “You’ve seen him, he’s crazy.”

Mike scowled, “fine, we take her to Castle Byers tomorrow morning, we pick-up El, and we figure out how to burn the thing out of him.”

They nodded and pedaled away, minds stirring with anticipation.
XVIII. One of Those Nights

Chapter Summary

Buckle up, Buttercup

Chapter Notes

ALERT TW: This chapter is abuse heavy so tread lightly if you need to!
But anyway, wow...this chapter is a BIG DEAL...like...arguably the next for are gonna be but wow...WOW...I hope this is gonna be well worth the wait and thank you so much for being so patient and encouraging you guys are the absolute best (like omfg *vomits a fucking rainbow*) I really hope you enjoy this chapter! :)

I 100% apologize to mobile readers cuz this is hella paragraph dense...sorry :(  

“I think I’d rather you stay,” Neil said.

He didn’t like that work had picked up, but who has ever. He’s a busy, working man and this is his life. He didn’t like that work had only picked up two days ago and his ship had fallen to ranker.

The damn sea of life practically tore it apart in just a little over forty-eight hours. Maxine looks like someone else’s damn hippie daughter, Billy’s running off with a car he shouldn’t have, arguing, sleeping in late. The ships got holes blown right through it, the whole thing is taking in water, and he’s the only one that seems to care. Of course, Susan is doing her best, and Maxine is just a misguided little girl--she’ll be shaping up soon enough, but his son is nearly eighteen years old, an adult, and the biggest disappointment of his life.

“Sitting?” Susan asked. Her eyes flitted to the dishes, “I’d like to get these done, is that alright?”

He nodded his head, cutting into his burger.

“How was today?”

Susan smiled a little, “productive. It looks like I’ll have time to help set up the Easter egg hunt after all.”

Neil’s lips twitch into a smile. “That’s good to hear.” A productive day makes them both happy, the two of them go hand-in-hand after all.

“Both kids have clothes for Easter. I’m not so sure about Max’s dress, but Billy and Max agreed on it so,” she chuckled. “As they always say, whatever.”

“They agreed on it?”

Susan shrugged. “She picked it out and he said it looked nice enough. I think he was just desperate to leave the mall, but it helped.”
Neil didn’t say anything so she went on. “I think he’s going through some weird teenager thing right now, I guess, I don't know. I didn’t think being a teenager was so stressful, but you know, different generation.”

“A weaker one,” Neil said gruffly.

Susan’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Neil, he’s been acting differently.” She lost interest in her dishes, she just wanted...wanted to talk to Neil. It’s hard to reconcile that the man she married and the man who beats his son are the same person. The man who is with her is so much different than the one with Billy.

“I never want to get between the two of you, it’s not my place. I’ve just never seen him...the way he is now.” She set the plate she had down in her hands and turned to look at him. “I know it’s not my place,” she repeated, it’s not.

There are a lot of boundaries she’s not allowed to cross with Neil’s son, his son. She respects all of them, keeps her mouth shut. “You’ve been so busy the last few days,” she gnawed on her lip tentatively. She never wanted to sick her husband on her step-son, Billy doesn’t deserve what he gets most of the time. “I'm just...worried about him. I hear things around town, and that night... when the Chief of Police came by,” she took in a measured breath, shuddered it out.

Neil is giving her his full attention now, it’s terrifying, bone chilling, even though she loves him she could never stand the full weight of his icy blue gaze. Her eyes lowered to the suds in the sink. “He just hasn’t been the same since is what I mean...I know I don’t know him very well, but you...you sense those sort of things after a while...and he seems different.”

Neil listened to all of this carefully, Susan like any good mother is strongly invested in the home life of her children, and while he prefer the woman not to get too attached to his son, he understands. She’s warm and caring, if not a little vapid and superficial, she cares for her family. Billy is included. He brought the monster of a boy with him.

“I hear things,” she said. “I think he’s a little...” Susan gathered her words carefully, whispered. “Traumatized.” She frowned deeply, knowing Neil couldn’t see it, and for that she was thankful. “I don’t know how else to explain the way he’s been acting, it’s like he’s a completely different person.”

“A different person?” Neil repeated.

Susan nodded. “Like he’s been possessed, I guess,” she shrugged. “That’s a little dramatic, I know it is. I’m sorry, but you know what I mean...his clothes, his demeanor...it’s all different.”

“What about that boy, Steve Harrington? Why is he involved?”

“He felt bad and called the cops.”

“He was alone in the woods with you, why?”

“He tried to get me to calm down, stay in one place I guess. He’s one of those goody-two-shoes types.”

“You didn’t touch him?”

“No, sir.”
No, sir.

He told him.

No, sir.

He said.

He knew this day would come like he knows one day he’ll pass away. He told Lilly he would protect that thing, but he lied. He lied to a dying woman holding onto to very little, and he knows he’ll pay for that when the Lord greets him, but he also knows he looked after him longer than he should have. He tried his best, his hardest to give his abomination of a son a place to live. He tried to make something out of Billy, but it was like sculpting Davide from dry sand. Unnatural things like Billy don’t belong on this Earth, and he’s unnatural in more ways than one.

“Well,” Neil said carefully, he wiped his mouth. “I’ve been meaning to talk to him, he had the car without my permission,” he hissed. “Used Maxine for his benefit.”

Susan’s frown deepened. He did, and he came in the wee hours of the morning. “Tomorrow,” she suggested. “He’s asleep right now,” she said, as if to say ‘I told you he’s acting strange,’ normally Billy doesn’t know how to stay still. “As soon as we came home he went straight to bed, I think by time I had my heels off and put together your dinner, he was out. Maybe I should take him to the doctor’s office while he’s on break to make sure it’s nothing serious?”

Neil grunted. He kept his anger curled in tightly, felt his fists curl around the fork and knife he held in each hand.

“You didn’t touch him?”

“No, sir.”

He should know better than to trust a boy like him. You give him an inch and he’ll take a mile. “I’ll handle him,” he said. “I’m sure he’s just being dramatic.”

“Tomorrow?” Susan asked, her lips quivered. “He looked like he really needed to sleep this day off.”

“Tonight,” he said. “I’ll be leaving early tomorrow morning and it’s not good to wait on these things,” he said. They’ve agreed, productivity leads to happiness.

He lied to Lilly. He cherished that woman, but he never wanted that thing. He wanted a family, this that he has right in front of him--Susan and Maxine. They have their small misgivings, but when he looks at them at the dinner table every night he knows they’re worth something in their own right. Beautiful in their own right.

Neil recognized the truth and the error of his ways, no matter how much he wished he didn’t have to. He’s a man and to get to the things he wants sacrifices have to be made. He would have to face God and Lilly one day, he’s recognized this and made peace with it a long time ago. “It’s not good to wait on these things,” he repeated.

Susan’s lips pressed into a thin smile, tight with teeth. Always smile with teeth. “I understand.”
Billy didn't wake up immediately, but truthfully he never does. He's always been quick to fall asleep and slow to wake up.

“Get up,” Neil said.

Billy nodded. His eyes blinked in the low light of his bedroom. The tension’s already building in his muscles, coiled tight with anticipation and rage.

It's been a few days coming and he's been so busy with Steve he didn't give a shit about the other shoe dropping. He couldn't give much of a shit about his dad for the first time in a long time, sometimes it felt like the man stopped existing when he's with Steve--especially when he's Steve. Neil didn't make any moves when Billy stood, the man’s hands stayed clasped behind his back.

“I know I took the car--”

He snorted derisively. “Now you want to be honest,” he hissed. Billy swallowed, shut his mouth with a sharp click of his teeth. Neil still hadn’t made any moves towards him which never happens, there's a breath, a pause, or it's a lightning strike not this. “I want you to come with me,” he said sternly. Billy stooped to pick his shirt off the floor. “I didn't say that.” Billy froze. “I said I want you to come with me.”

“And where is that?” Billy said, digging his heels into the floor.

He was pushing it, he knew he was but he had to to break this facade. Neil is never this measured in the beginning. Neil almost laughed, his face breaking into a smirk. Billy’s recognized it since he was about ten, the ‘I raised a mouthy piece of shit’ look, a mix of amusement and anger. It’s smug on his face now, it’s something new that Billy doesn’t recognize.

“You come with me or I drag you,” he said evenly, slowly like he’s an idiot. “I’m giving you a choice to walk like a man, Billy.”

Billy swallowed, his dry throat clicked. He didn’t really feel his feet moving across the hardwood, he didn’t feel his legs move or much of anything except the air going in and out of lungs. He shuffled over to his father, his eyes trained on the spot where his hands stayed behind his back.

He tilted his head once out the door.

“Go,” he growled.

Except everything was screaming for him to run, to run as fast and as far as he can. Billy looked out into the dark hallway and understood why kids are so fucking scared of it. Neil shoved him out the room and kept up behind him, too close to do anything except walk.

Billy went into the hallway, memories of the house carrying him out. Neil’s a constant presence behind him and Billy doesn’t dare look back into the hallway behind him nor turn to look at him in the face.

“You couldn’t wait until they leave?” Billy finally spoke. “Is that what this is?” He couldn’t get it, it’s easier than ever to just tell Maxine to fuck off at one of her friends' houses, Susan has a million fucking hobbies--Billy knows his dad can get them to leave the house whenever he wants.

What did I do that just couldn’t wait? Billy wanted to ask.

By the time they’d walked back through the house they were at the yard door, smattered with raindrops coming down in fat dollops against the glass. “Out,” he said.
Finally, Billy turned to look at him. “What?” This time he said like really was slow, like this is the very first time he's hearing the word 'out’.

“Go, outside,” Neil hissed. He reached around to push the sliding glass door open. “Get out.”

Billy felt like a damn child all over again.

“It’s raining,” Billy said, voice thick, it feels distant.

“It won’t matter.” Neil gave him another sharp shove out the house, he almost expected him to slam the door shut behind him. It wouldn’t be the first time he found himself locked outside all night. He came out too and they stood nearly shoulder to shoulder watching the rain under the small awning above the sliding door.

The waiting was killing him.

That damn piano hanging over his head is about fall and he knows it, he’s staring at the damn den and there’s absolutely nothing he can do about except stand here and watch the damn rain. He watched his dad take a seat at the old glass outdoor set, it’s rusted and it came with the old house they just haven’t gotten rid of it yet.

When Billy moved to sit, he didn’t object.

Billy’s eyes landed on his gloved hands and his shirt tucked into them. His hands stayed clasped neatly in front of him. “I can’t take any chances with you,” Neil clarified. “I never should have to be honest with you.”

Billy swallowed and he still wasn’t following a damn thing so he squared his shoulders and kept his jaw clenched.

“I want to talk to you,” he said.

“Yeah?” He knows he’s pushing him, but he needs an action-- anything.

Neil scoffed, he unclasped his hands an reached behind his back again. Billy’s eyes followed the glint of dark metal and wood, catching brilliantly in the distance glow of the flood lights. His blood ran cold. “I’ve told you some things,” he said, showing him the gun and then placing it in his lap, “like that I didn’t have this anymore, that was a lie.”

Billy tried to open his mouth--couldn’t. He could feel how cold it was now, his cold feet against the cement and fat raindrops pelting his white knuckled fist.

Neil shrugged, “but you’ve told some lies too, haven’t you?”

*I’ll be more careful. I’ll make sure Chief Hopper won’t have to come here again, I’ll make sure Max is good, I’ll keep it under control.*

“I…” he wanted to look at the gun again. He wanted to know he wasn’t just hallucinating it, losing his goddamn mind. “I’m sorry, dad, but I haven’t--”

There was the lightning strike, the gong in Neil’s mind rung and Billy fell out of the chair onto the grass. Cold and wet seeped into his sweatpants, rain felt like needles against his skin and his teeth chattered instantly.

“No!” He roared.
He swung hard, kicking him and catching ribs with the heel of his shoe.

“No Billy, you have!” He yelled. “You did!”

I’ll be more careful. I’ll make sure Chief Hopper won’t have to come here again, I’ll make sure Max is good, I’ll keep it under control.

Billy rolled onto his stomach and Neil kicked him over again. There was no precision in his assault, where he used to be cautious—nothing that couldn’t be explained, nothing that couldn’t be hidden. This time he wasn’t.

That’s all Billy could think, he doesn’t care this time.

A no holds barred beating is what this is. Neil’s never forgotten to be careful or to pull his punches a little bit, and Billy always knew that. The man pulls his punches every time, never backs him into something sharp, and everything about his dad’s attacks even when they’re random feel just a little planned. The rage has never been the same since the first time it happened.

Nothing about this is measured.

Billy felt the weight of Neil sink on top of him, the thick garden gloves—Susan’s garden gloves—hit him across the face. wrapped around his neck and squeezed. His hands grabbed, clawed at his own skin to get free and like quicksand, Neil squeezed harder until Billy was sure his head was going to pop and splatter all over the yard.

“I’ve got twenty seconds to make something clear to you,” Neil said through his clenched teeth.

“I told you I’d handle you myself if you couldn’t keep your ability under control.” Neil’s voice was distant and clear like a pin dropping in a long dark cave—piercing the sounds of strangled noises escaping his throat. “I think you needed to be sure I wasn’t playing games with you, boy. That I wasn’t lying to you.” Black crept into his vision, building into a thick blank wall at the peripheral of his vision. “One more time, Billy. Just one more time, I swear on it. Any mistake and I finish this.”

Neil let go, rain and air rushed into Billy’s lung so hard he coughed—couldn’t stop coughing. It doesn’t mean he didn’t want to take a fucking swing. Because he had to, because fear was coiled so tightly in his bones he couldn’t do anything but swing back at Neil just as hard as he hit him. He felt the crunch of Neil’s jaw on his knuckles and the man’s teeth through his cheek.

He hasn’t ever landed a hit on him.

He’s taken a swing loads of times when he was just a dumb kid, but it was more different than he could’ve ever imagined. It didn’t feel like power, like taking anything back for himself, it just felt like calloused survival and he knows that feeling.

Neil collapsed on his back—didn’t move, Billy knew a good punch to the jaw could do it. He sat there breathing in air that felt stolen, watching Neil’s body like he was waiting for something to happen.

His dad didn’t care this time.

He’s expendable, just one more slip-up and that’s all it’ll take for him to take him outside and end him just like this all over again.

For a moment he thought about the gun, thought about ending Neil and living on the run or going
to fucking prison and just rotting there. He thought about Susan going in the backyard to find her husband’s pale corpse with a bullet hole in his head and her step-son gone.

He didn’t think it’d ever end like that.

Billy was realistic, there wasn’t gonna be a big fight. Max wasn’t going to remember the day her step-brother left as anything special, he was gonna just pack up and leave on his birthday. Maybe now he would tell Harrington where to find him, maybe, but that was gonna be it.

He thought, maybe, his dad knew that too.

Things weren’t ever supposed to explode no matter how ready he pretended to be for it.

He was just going to run.

Run.

Run.

Run.

His legs spring into action, arms helping him off the ground too and then he ran, got the fence around yard and hefted himself over it. He fell hard on his arm on the other side. He didn’t care. As soon as he got his legs underneath him again bolted. His bare feet touched earth and cement, sparks of memories and knowledge humming over his buzzing skin as he ran.

Billy ran as fast as he could from Neil’s body laying flat in the yard, from the house with Max and Susan all the horrible things he wanted to forget. Billy kept running and running letting his legs carry him somewhere away, somewhere safe.

The house was quiet like his morher wasn’t even here; the only thing that reminded him he wasn’t alone was the constant plea his nightmares will be subtle tonight. His mom has asked without really asking, more so commenting on the fact that he should do something about them than actually being worried. His father isn’t around at night enough to notice, and if he is, he’s downstairs in his study with the thick wooden doors locked from the inside.

Steve laid on his stomach with a bowl of popcorn and M&M’s nestled in the dip of his body. This is a usual night for him even before he dated Nancy and the Upside Down ever came into the picture. He laid down with a snack and watched TV, hours of TV. On VHS even when the stations started to sign off for the night.

Nancy was a little worried by the amount of TV he could consume without moving. ‘Doesn’t that bother you, just….not doing anything?’ and Steve would shrug a little, he’d hand her popcorn without M&M’s and he’d say ‘it’s nice sometimes.’ He’d pull her closer and that would be the end of it. They didn’t watch a lot of TV together, in fact, it only happened the one time. She could only really stand movies, and they had to be ones she picked.

He shoveled a handful of popcorn into his mouth.

Knight Rider, a shadowy flight into the dangerous world of a man who does not exist. Michael Knight, a young loner on a crusade to champion the cause of the innocent, the helpless, the powerless in a world of criminals who operate above the law.
He remembered reading somewhere KITT’s a 1982 Pontiac Firebird, with $100,000 worth of customization for the show; he’s still a little shocked it didn’t cost more. His dad could probably put together a car similar to KITT if he wanted to.

It’s not that his brain shuts off like Nancy believed, although it sort of does, his brain just isn’t involved with what he’s thinking. His brain is wrapped in colors, David Hasselhoff’s leather jacket, how that was definitely a crash dummy in that explosion. His brain isn’t off, it’s just not in Hawkins, Indiana in April of 1985. If he was reading that stupid electric sheep book or journey to the center of whatever Nancy probably wouldn’t have cared so much about his ways of escapism if he didn’t ‘atrophy his brain into submission,’ which were Jonathan’s words.

Steve poured more popcorn into his mouth, licked the green off his fingers absently while his mind ‘melted.’ He could atrophy his brain into submission if he wanted to for a little bit, Steve wanted to. Billy’s been on his brain since he left Pig n Poke’s, no, since he woke up this morning. He woke up with Billy seared into his mind and quickly finding home there.

Something about last night.

Salt and grease caked his lips, he licked at them again. He’d never really looked at Billy in the face, but he wanted to. He wanted to learn him like a map. His eyes, his too red lips, that one curl that almost always dangles in front of his forehead.

Steve’s lips pulled, he tried not to think about it too much. It’s probably revenge in a way, to know Billy inside and out, the way he knows him. Billy can probably point out the moles under his clothes like fucking constellations. Steve wanted to do the same, bury himself in the other guy’s skin or something like that.

He grabbed the can off the coffee table and chugged all of its contents. That was a bad thought in his opinion, Jonathan said it was something like an intrusive thought or whatever. The guy probably has enough to be an expert on them. His nose wrinkled and he rubbed at his own eyes.

No one’s burying anything in any other guy.

It was just a poor word choice.

Although he’s pretty sure Billy’s the one buried in his brain. This must make them even, Steve snorted, that’d make him real happy--being even for what he did to him or whatever, for not listening. For helping him.

They were taught to care about other people in kindergarten for fuck’s sake--or at least Steve was, technically. He’s not the idiot here. Someone tries to extend Billy an olive branch and his first instinct is to set it on fire. He snorted again, opened another can and made a mental note to pitch the pair of them into the woods before going to bed. God forbid he act like they have something like a friendship going on, God forbid he act like that friendship gets a little stronger every day.

Because it fucking does, Steve’s stomach squirmed at the thought of it. The quarry, sticking it to Nancy and Jonathan, the diner last night. Steve is the only person Billy has that can try to understand what’s happening to him. He’s his Mike. He sighed, putting the popcorn down. He hates that analogy, but it’s probably true. He wasn’t even looking at the TV anymore, Steve’s eyes bore into the vaulted living room ceiling, mind bristling with sensation and new memories.

They mean something to him.

*One man can make a difference, Michael.*
KITT drove away from the sunset zooming towards the television screen like the suped up car might plow right through it into Steve’s living room.

*Michael Knight, a lone crusader in a dangerous world. The world of the--*

**Thud!**

**Thud!**

**Thud!**

Steve jolted up from the couch, his knees nearly hit himself in the face. He grabbed for something in defense out of habit, the three loud thuds he can now register as someone knocking on the front doors wasn’t a demodog trying to bust through.

He lowered the pillow feeling stupid and got up from the couch, shaking off crumbs and rubbing the grease from his lips with the heel of his palm.

**Thud!**

**Thud!**

**Thud!**

It’s a good thing pills and wine make his mom sleep like the dead. She’d be down here faster than he could get off the couch. She’s privy to telling people who bang on the door (like Dustin) to politely find a way off her property. *If they’re not civilized enough to use a doorbell, Steven, they don’t belong here.*

Steve rolled his eyes, their doorbell’s been broken since December.

**Thud!**

**Thud!**

**Thud!**

“Okay!” Steve yelled. He got a handle on one of the double doors and pulled it back a crack—just to make sure it’s not an axe murderer. To make sure it’s not some Hawkins Lab goon coming to wipe his existence off the face of the Earth. Even Dustin would’ve come around this late at night, especially in the rain.

“Billy--?”

Billy muscled past him, pushing the door into his face right into the curve of his forehead. Steve fell flat on his ass, he lost his balance on that dumb, ugly blue rug his grandmother bought for the house. The back of his head stung just as much as the front.

“*Ow,*” Steve grunted. He let out a pained hiss from between his teeth, his poor nose throbbed angrily. “So much for no more dents in my face.” A door slammed loudly somewhere in the house. He grimaced and rolled over onto his hands and knees, a drop of blood spilled onto the floor.

“Always the fucking face.”

He stood up. At least his nose doesn’t feel broken. Steve reached for the light switch and flipped it on. A line of blood spilled onto his bottom lip, he wiped at his face again and turned.
He’s not a fucking idiot, sure, he almost got KO’ed by a door twenty seconds ago, but logically speaking, the bloody footprints seeping into his grandmother’s carpet and trailing across the tile floor weren’t just from his bloody nose.

That’s impossible.

That’s not from him.

Steve’s hands felt cold, the same cold trickled into his stomach and made his breath shaky from his lips. “Shit,” he hissed. “Billy?” He followed the footprints past the kitchen. “Billy!” He didn’t give a shit if he woke up his mom at this point. All he can think about is how the 9-1-1 operator is sure as hell going to listen to a rich, hysterical middle aged mom quicker than a random nineteen year old with a bloody nose.

Steve got the door and tried the handle, locked.

“What the hell! Unlock the door!”

Steve waited, his own bloodied hand sliding down the glossy wood. Forget pitching the beer cans into the woods before he goes to bed tonight, he’ll have to mop the entire bottom floor.

“Bad idea,” he heard Billy say hoarsely.

“What’s happening then?” He asked. He tried the locked door again. “You’re freaking me out, alright? C’mon,” Steve leaned his head against the door. “Just say something, please.”

“It’s happening again,” Billy rasped. Steve could hear his shuddered breath as if he were sitting just on the other side of the door too. His inhale rattled dangerously, he spoke again on his exhale, “sorry.”

Steve’s lips tugged into a smile against his will, “pretty sure you broke my nose.”

“I did?” he asked, only speaking on exhales again. “Sorry.”

“Are you okay?” Steve had to ask. He looked at the bloodied footprints again. He listened to his strained, rattling breath like it’s hard for him to breathe. “Is that your blood?”

“M freezin’,” he said, ignoring him. “Was in the rain.”

“Blood, Billy, on the floor. Is it yours?” He was secretly praying it was someone else’s, better yet, he wished Billy had just walked straight through a crime scene by accident.

“Yeah,” there was a pause on Billy’s end. “S’not that bad.”

Billy’s definition of ‘not that bad’ and everyone else’s are usually on the opposite end of the spectrum. Steve felt frigid himself like the blood that reached his fingertips and toes were dipped in ice. “You’re gonna catch a cold if you don’t unlock the door, man,” he warned. “I can bring you a blanket, towel, dry clothes, something y’know?” He waited, prayed, he’d just let him help him for once in his life. “Let me in.”

“Stuff first,” he wheezed through the door. “White knight,” Steve could hear Billy’s laugh catch in his throat and turn into a dry, pained cough.

Steve let out a sigh, tense and relieved all at once. “Sure thing, damsel.”

“Fuck you.”
Billy waited until he couldn’t see the shadow of Steve’s feet by the door, he waited until he couldn’t hear him anymore before letting out a shuddered sob. His merry-go-round brain was spiraling the drain and he knew it. He’s damn dizzy and the adrenaline is wearing off. He’s starting to be able to feel his feet screaming with pain again and the scrapes around his neck stinging with collected sweat and rain, burning the wounds--feels like a choker of thorns. He didn’t want Harrington to come in, to find him lying on his bathroom floor like an OD’d rockstar, gasping for air like a fish out of water.

Billy stared down at the tile floor and thought of rain covered backyard where he almost died, where Neil said he would really kill him if he slips up one more time. A shudder raked down his spine, shivered on the floor like he might just die here and now--save Neil the trouble of one more slip up. His major regret would be dying at Steve Harrington’s house, even though he says Barb died somewhere else it’d be bad news if they ever try to sell the place, he thought. Two dead teens in one place is spooky. And they’d both weigh on Steve's conscience, if Billy died now it’d probably fuck him up for life.

Billy heard Steve try the door handle again. He wasn’t jiggling it, he was practically trying to tear the damn thing off. “Open the door,” he demanded.

Steve’s already fucked up for life in his equally fucked up opinion.

Billy laughed while the room spun. He would tell him to kick the fucking door down if he’s that anxious, but breathing is hard and talking is even harder. He didn’t know how to tell Steve he’s too tired to lift himself off the floor to unlock the door in the first place.

“I won’t touch you, that’s literally the last thing I want right now,” Steve’s voice filtered in. “Whatever it is, we can figure it out. I said I was gonna look out for you asshole, okay, so just open the door. I swear to God, Billy just say something so I know you’re not dead. ”

“Hi, princess,” he finally managed.

He could hear Steve sigh on the other side. “Thank God.”

Billy’s lips pulled into a wry smile Steve couldn’t see. “Got a key.”

"Yeah," Steve responded immediately.

"Use that."

“Christ,” Steve grumbled. “You’re not bleeding out in there, are you? Please tell me you're not.”

Billy looked down at himself as much as he could and figured, no, he’s probably not. He’s just so damn sapped. “No.”

There was a pause. “Good...I’ll be back in a minute, okay?” Nothing. Steve needed to hear his voice over the loud unpleasant sound of strangled breathing. He needed to hear something that made him think of him safe. “Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be right back.” The shadow of Steve’s feet disappeared again.

Billy thought about moving, he wanted to move so badly. He wanted lean against the cabinet or the toilet so he doesn’t look so damn pathetic, so it doesn’t look like he collapsed as soon as he locked the door. He can’t though, his shivering hand makes aborted grasps at the cabinet door handles, he
sees five of them. His right hand is swollen like something might be broken, his left arm is crushed underneath him and he can’t fucking move.

Not even when he really, really didn’t want Steve to see him. Because he doesn’t, he really really really doesn’t.

Tonight wasn’t supposed to be one of those nights. He didn’t want to have any more nights where things felt big and awful. Billy pulled in a shuddered breath--it hurt to breathe in that hard--and waited for Steve to see him.

Steve didn’t say anything, except all the stuff he had in his one hand cradled against his chest dropped to the floor, including the tiny metal key that clattered loudly on the tile floor.

Clattered and clattered, it hurt Billy’s ears and rang out in Steve’s horrified silence. He looked sick, really, like he might actually vomit.


It’s that bad, Billy said it wasn’t, but it is.

“S’not--”

“Shut up.”

Steve kneeled down so fast his knees banged against the floor, he didn’t even notice. He didn’t even notice the pain that would reverberate up his legs when he saw Billy. The bruises forming across his body, the sun sapped right from his too pale skin, goosebumps were raised across his shivering body like he really is freezing to death. The shredded skin clinging to bottoms of his feet, marked with dark bits of mud and asphalt smeared blood on the floor.

The hands around his neck, the clawed out skin around them like he was fighting for his life. His own blood caked into his fingernails.

“ Oh my God .”

Billy noticed Steve though, how could he not when he’s seeing multiple of everything including Harrington’s pale face, big brown doe eyes, and the halo of light catching around the shaking ends of his hair. Care Bear looking, wide eyed Bambi looking, angelic looking pain in his ass.

His goddamn guardian angel or something.

“Steve, your no--,” Billy felt himself being pulled.

“Stop talking,” he said sharply.

“You wanted me to,” Billy answered, surprisingly honest. “Are you wearing oven mitts?”

“I can’t touch you,” Steve answered quickly. He tugged Billy up, clothed hands grappling for purchase on his cold clammy skin. Steve wrapped him in the blanket he left in the threshold of the bathroom, swaddled him like a goddamn toddler after a bath.

Billy was pliant, mumbling about him being some sort of angel, a Care Bear or something, and Steve tried hard not to listen. He’s sick to his stomach, thinks he might vomit on Billy. When he’s completely wrapped in the comforter he brought from upstairs Steve didn’t let him go.

“What are you doing?”
“You said it wasn’t that bad,” Steve was pretty much speaking into the crown of Billy's head. It was weird, they’ve never hugged before, Steve’s pretty sure all their touching happened on the court and it was nothing like this. It was never ever something this close or something that made his heart feel like it was going to fucking expand to the size of Texas, but Steve couldn’t really bring himself to care. “You asshole.”

“S’not,” Billy wheezed. “What are you doing?”

Steve pulled away, his cheeks felt flushed. "I’m hugging you, asshole, because you’re shivering and bloody and you said it wasn’t that bad.”

“Oh.”

He tried not to look at the dark, red bruise lined around Billy’s bloodshot eye, right below that dumb curl he always has. “Yeah. Oh.” Steve pulled him into a hug again, a tighter one, so much that it almost hurt in more ways than one. “Jesus, man,” he sighed out, relieved. His hot breath plumed against the cuts on his neck. “You scared the shit out of me,” he said.

Steve kept Billy’s head cradled in his mitted hands to keep his head from falling. Steve’s lips pressed into a line. Billy wheezed air, tried not to think about the fact that Steve is so close to him he’s practically breathing in his exhales and that’s probably why he’s feeling a lot more lightheaded than he was. It has nothing to do with the fact that it’s Steve, just his air, just that he’s too close for comfort.

“What happened to you?” Steve asked. His eyes turned dark, big black holes of rage, Billy’s pretty sure that’s what they are and he knows Steve’s feeling dangerous. Lethal. “Who did this to you?”

Except his dad is more lethal than Steve, Billy felt sick to his stomach.

One more time, Billy, I swear on it.

Billy swallowed weakly, “I don’t remember.”

Steve’s eyes softened, lines now grew on his forehead, lips almost pouting. He's closer. “What do you mean you don’t remember?” He shifted Billy’s head in his hands, it was hard to resist the urge smooth his hair out of his face like touching him even more gently might bring something back. “You don’t remember anything?”


Care Bear Steve came back instantly. “Your head always hurts, you know that right?”

“Yeah,” but it really hurts right now. He imagined it’d hurt less if he wasn’t so goddamn dizzy. “M’ dizzy.” If Steve were to hold up two fingers, Billy’s pretty sure he’d be seeing them upside down.

“I’m taking you to a hospital.”

“No.”

Steve huffed. “Yeah, that’s not negotiable. Are you still...is it still…”

No, his skin stopped buzzing when the adrenaline rush wore off and the pain started to come back. Billy looked away from him, “fuck you.”
Well, that answers the question. Steve let Billy’s head fall back to his chest and slipped off the oven mitts. “I can’t just not...take you to the hospital, okay?” He said. “That’s insanity. Except he’s fucking terrified of doctors so they’re probably going to have sedate his ass immediately either that or he’ll freak out again and no one will be able to get near him.

“I’ve got a doctor,” he said. “In my head. No hospital.”

Steve lifted his head again, “yeah, and any normal doctor would tell you to go to the fucking hospital.”

“I know what to do. I’ll tell you what to do,” Billy ignored him. It’s like a really fucked up trust exercise, Billy thought. “Like Operation.”

“Like Op...” he shook his head in disbelief. “Unbelievable,” Steve huffed again. “You’re unbelievable.” He fixed the blanket around Billy’s shoulders where they started to slip. Steve stood, “there’s only one reason I’m even entertaining that idea.”

“Pray tell?”

“Because someone’s out there obviously trying to kill you,” Steve said. And he’s watched enough crime shows to know if he were some psycho killer he’d be looking around hospitals for a kid like Billy, and honestly, he’s not hard to find.

Billy didn’t say anything.

“If you get any worse, I taking you to the hospital, alright?” he said. Steve’s hand rested on his chest, warm, reassuring. The warmth spread from his palm all over Billy like that’s what he was trying to do, like he’s the one with magic hands or whatever. “Just try and stay warm.”

“You know I run hot,” Billy smiled weakly.

“Stop smiling,” Steve bit back his own. “I can see the blood in your mouth.”
Steve put the First Aid box on the coffee table and rifled his way through it, plucking out everything he needed or at least everything he thought he’d need, or at least everything he’s seen them use on St. Elsewhere. Crime shows were one thing, explosions, car chases, drug busts, those are simple. Hospital dramas are a whole other thing and he hates gore. The sight of bone makes him feel like he’s going to vomit, he’s worked hard to stop it whenever blood’s involved.

And here he is, playing ‘Operation’ with Billy Hargrove’s body. “Jesus Christ,” he scrubbed a hand over his face and stood over the fireplace. “Okay,” he breathed, his eyes grazing on the flame. “No big deal.”

Steve threw in Raiders of the Lost Ark, he needs the distraction, the sound of something else going on besides the squelch of... flesh. He shuddered, he fainted when they dissected frogs in freshman year. It didn’t even bleed like a living thing, stunk of formaldehyde, thinking about it still makes him gag a little.

Billy bleeds like a human.

Billy feels pain.

“Oh,” Steve ran his hands through his hair again. “No big deal,” he said. The couch is covered in the same mulch plastic they keep in the garage which only makes the room look more surgical, more like a future murder scene or like he’s going to be selling Billy’s body parts on some seedy back alley. “Yeah,” Steve looked away from it all. “This is fine. Oh God. No, this is just...fine.”

He’s pale, hair drying slightly, and he’s wheezing loudly. His eyes fell on the hands around his neck and Steve winced, at least he can wait to help Billy get to healing. He can't wait for the marks on his skin to be gone. He’s either asleep or unconscious, Steve wouldn’t be able to tell for the life of him. There might not even be a difference, he wouldn’t know, he’s not a fucking doctor. He really, really isn’t a doctor.

“Hey,” Steve lowered himself down next to him, tapped his cheek a few times. “C’mon, wake up, man.”

Nothing.

“Jesus,” Steve ran his hand through his hair. “C’mon, Billy,” he tapped him again. “You gotta wake up. You gotta wake up so we can fix you, man.” Steve shook him gently, too scared he’ll injure him more if he tries to be any rough than he already is. "Wakey, wakey Hagrove."

Billy’s brows pulled together, red lips that’ve turned dusty pink pouted, his long lashes fanned out his cheeks open up to blue and red eyes. Steve never realized Billy has freckles, they stand out on the muted skin of his cheeks--everything stretching with his scowl. “I hate whining,” he hissed groggily. “Did I ever tell y’that?”

“I’m not whining,” he intoned. “I’m trying to wake you up.”

“You're lovely at it.”
His lips pressed into a tight line, his cheeks burned red. “If you didn’t wake up after that I was gonna call an ambulance, so just be glad it worked,” Steve said. He shifted, stood over him, “is there anywhere there isn’t a bruise?” He asked.

_A nywhere there isn’t a bruise_, he hated that question. It burned like a lump of angry coal in his gut, filled his lung with smoke. “Fuck you,” he hissed.

“Billy.”

“Fuck. You.”

Steve straightened up, ran his hand through hair again and groaned. “Oh my God, I’m trying to help you. Did you get kicked in the head?”

Billy smirked up at him, he’s not seeing double right now. Not as dizzy as he was, everything _hurts_ like hell though. He liked Steve like this over Care Bear Harrington, before he looked at him with too much revelry, like he’s actually something more than a burden to him. Steve looked down at him now like he’s really goddamn tired, like he’s thinking about leaving him here and Billy wouldn’t stop him.

At least his old man would be happy about it.

“Is this funny to you?” Steve’s eye twitched.

“No.” Billy couldn’t talk slowly, curl his words like he usually does. All his words are coming out out in one haggard breath.

“Great, fantastic actually,” he said tightly. “Because this isn’t funny to me. You are scaring the shit out of me, okay? I’m scared shitless because...like fifteen minutes ago I thought you were fucking dying or...or whatever or something.” He paused. “I want this night to be _over, _” he slowed down, less tight. Billy could see the softness returning to his eyes, the fear and caring that made Billy advert his own eyes from him. “I know it’s gonna sound weird, but I wanna put you actually clothes and put you in bed and tomorrow we’ll figure something out.” Steve slumped against the sink and Billy finally believed he’s as exhausted as he says he is. He kept one hand braced against it while the other rubbed at his eyes. “Don’t you ever want a night to just be over?”

_Fuck._

All the time, Billy thought. Steve didn’t get anything from Billy except a long petulant glare.

“Well, I do,” he said carefully. He looked a little hurt. “C’mon.” Steve bent low again, a hand scooping underneath Billy’s knees and around another around his back and shoulder.

Billy kept the pained whimper bubbling up his throat in. His squeezed his eyes shut, to fight it.

“What are you doing?”

“You know what I’m doing,” Steve gritted, picking him up off the tile floor. His back curved back to accommodate all of Billy’s weight. “If you get blood on the carpet my mom will kill me.”

“And this is your solution?”

“Didn’t want to drag you,” Steve said.

_You come with me or I drag you._
Billy’s fingers dug into Steve’s stupid Hawkins Walk-a-Thon shirt and clung on to him. “Yeah, don’t.”

Steve carrying him like he really is a damsel in distress has to be one of his life’s lowest points. He thinks it would be except Steve’s warmth is all-encompassing and he smells ridiculously good. “I swear to God if you drop me.”

“Shut up,” he said tightly. “I need to concentrate.”

He carefully put Billy on the couch, with so much care that Billy didn’t know what to do actually. He didn’t know how to think with Steve’s hands leaving soft, warm trails across his body. Harrington had all the lights on in the room, the TV and the fireplace going. A lot of loud, a lot of light, the only thing he really appreciated was the warmth pumping from the crackling hearth.

“You’re heavy,” Steve said. “Fuck, I did not see that coming.”


“Sure, that would explain it,” he grinned. The grin slid from his face looking at Billy. “What?”

“Your nose,” Billy said, a furrow formed between his eyebrows. Steve wasn’t expecting the concern that was so obvious on his face or the way his hand twitched like he thought about reaching out. “And your shirt.”

Steve already knew there was dried blood under his nose and maybe even on his lips. He looked down at his shirt and the wide red stain in the heather gray fabric. “Oh Christ,” he said, feeling nauseous. “This is you again, you’re bleeding somewhere.”

Billy guessed it’s his back because it stings like a bitch.

Steve flopped down himself next to Billy, the whole couch crackling loudly over plastic. His mouth felt dry and his hands shook a little, “this is why I don’t do doctor shows.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and tried not to think about it. “Oh God, I hate blood. I hate this, oh my God.”

Billy tried to snort. “Yeah? I hate bleeding out.”

Steve turned to look at him with his wide doe eyes, his mouth formed into a small ‘o.’ “Sorry,” he muttered, keeping his eyes down. “I’m being selfish.”

“Just don’t vomit on me, pretty boy.”

“I hate that this actually has to be a concern,” he muttered, rubbing his hands over his eyes. He’s seen him with a shirt a million times, but on the basketball court and alone in his house are two different scenarios. “I started the fireplace so I could...uh...take the blanket back.”

Billy winced, sitting up to pull the blanket off of himself. He was cold and shivering all over again, instantly. Steve gave him sad eyes, pitiful eyes, full of so much of something that it made him shiver even harder than he was before. Billy knew it looked bad, knew he was shivering like a dog left out in the cold.

“Take a picture,” Billy hissed. “If you're so fucking fascinated.”

“I…” Steve’s mouth opened and shut. “That’s not what...I’m just…” Steve couldn’t think because there was a bruise eerily shaped like a shoe on his torso to match the hands slowly turning purple around his neck. “Sorry. Yeah...I’m sorry.”
Billy rolled his eyes derisively, he snorted. “Whatever.”

“I’m sorry it hurts,” Steve kept going anyway. “I wish there was a way to get rid of it, like…” Like the snap of a finger. Billy used to wish the same thing. He’s just gotten used to the process, the pain fading into the anger, the bruises changing color while everything else stays the same, he’s used to it all by now.

Billy only tried to snort again, he didn’t meet his gaze either and Billy does that sometimes, now that Steve thinks about it. He turns away from him like he’d rather get beat to hell twice than look at him in the eyes. And that was before Lori’s party and he could see through them.

Steve reached out slowly over the inflamed, puffy skin of Billy’s wrist. When he didn’t pull away Steve rested his hand atop the skin and pulled it to him carefully, slowly-- asking for permission to do something about without words.

“This first,” Steve said. “I think I saw a wrist wrap in here. It’s not perfect, but it’ll help, right?” He grabbed an ice pack off the coffee table and popped it, shaking it a few times so it could get cold faster.

“Yeah,” he said, sticking the ice pack on him. Steve handed him a cup of water and Billy spit bloody, muddled pink water back into the cup. “It’s just my cheek,” he said. “All my teeth are still there.”

“Great,” Steve said, digging through the First Aid box for the wrist wrap. He grimaced at the sight of the cup, “gross.”

“Could be worse,” Billy said grimly.

“You could be missing front teeth,” Steve muttered. “You’d have dentures or some shit.”

“Dentures at seventeen?” He turned to look at him. “I’d off myself. “Indiana Jones?” Billy didn’t dare try to look at the screen, he’s pretty sure his brain would melt instantly but he recognized the music.

Steve shrugged, “the distraction makes things easier.”

He nodded once, slowly. “kay.”

“He’s pretty hot,” Billy swallowed. “Just saying...with like the whip and shit.”

“Yeah,” Steve choked back his laugh. His lips split to give way to a bright smile. That’s the last thing he thought Billy would say, it was actually pretty funny coming from him. “Yeah...did you say something about the whip?”

Billy tried to shrug, “it’s hot.”

“Jesus.”

Billy grinned almost lazily, he opened his eyes and turned to Steve. “Just saying,” and somehow in his scratchy, injured voice, he found a way to at least attempt at curling his words with some meaning Steve knew he couldn’t get.

“O-kay,” Steve snorted. “Did you get hit in the head by any chance?”

“No,” he answered. “I got punched though... a lot.”
“Just…” Steve’s eyes roamed over him carefully, a little amused. “Okay, yeah. Just making sure.”

They didn’t talk for a while, Steve slipped the wrist splint comfortably onto Billy’s wrist and wiped the blood from his face with a warm rag and a soft hand. He wasn’t even aware of the movie anymore. A sinkhole had opened in his stomach, and maybe it’d been there for a while, ever since he started to really worry about Billy. Looking at him now there’s protective swell in his chest, screaming never again. Never again. Never again. Never again. And it’s impossible to ignore.

“You know at the mall today?” Steve asked softly after he put the bloody rag down.

Billy croaked out a humming noise and turned to look at him.

“I was gonna ask if you wanted to come over after the gang left,” he admitted. He should’ve. If he had this wouldn’t have happened. “I should’ve…I just…with them around…and you were so angry. I thought if you were over here and sometimes happened…I don’t know.”

You wouldn’t be alone.

It’s not like he thought Billy couldn’t take care of himself, despite his current situation, but he knows what it’s like to be sick and alone. He knows what it’s like to be in pain and still have to do everything for yourself.

Steve shrugged. “And if nothing did happen we’d just hang out like yesterday,” he said. “If I had asked--”

“Doesn’t matter,” Billy blurted out. “I’m grounded.” If he had the air to say it he would tell him it doesn’t matter, he still would’ve had to say no, he still would’ve blown up on him because Steve Harrington asking him if he wants to hang out alone in his swanky mansion is too much for him to take. None of it really matters.

“S’not your fault.”

“But--”

“S’not your fault.” Billy turned to look at him. “It’s not.”

Billy wouldn’t even call this his fault. He’s just beyond fucked up, beyond worth saving at this point—that’s what it is.

Steve nodded, turned to grab the antiseptic and a few cotton balls off the table. “This is probably gonna sting.”

“It already stings,” Billy said.

Steve watched his face when he pressed the cotton swab against the ripped skin of his neck. A small twitch in his cheek. His thumb wiggled and Steve smiled a little because his face might be still, but the thumb working on rubbing a hole into upholstery tells him it hurts—a nearly unnoticeable fissure is Billy’s facade.

“Sonny Crockett,” Billy blurted out again.

“You think he’s hot too?”

Billy would’ve turned to look at him if Steve’s hands weren’t working deftly over his neck. “You do,” he said pointedly like he’s never been surer of something in his life.
“I mean...well,” Steve felt his face go hot. He coughed a little, choked on spit. “Yeah. He’s like...he’s not ugly.”

Billy tried to snort, with the way he’s breathing it didn’t really work. “Yeah, okay.” The blonde hair, the blue eyes, the righteous sense of duty and devil may care attitude, Steve likes it a lot. He’s got a whole thing about blue eyes, Billy thought with a little smile. “You’ve got a thing for blue eyes.”

“What…” Steve chewed on his lip. “No I...Why does it matter anyway, he’s a good looking guy.”

“Laughed at me,” Billy said childishly. “Laughing at you.”

Steve rolled his eyes so hard they could’ve fallen out of his skull. “Oh my god, so I think Crockett’s hot--”

“And Tubbs.”

“Get out of my head,” Steve huffed.

“Both of ‘em,” Billy looked up at him with a little grin. “Crockett’s just a little hotter though, isn't he?”

If he wasn’t already so hurt Steve would shove him off the couch, “you’re such a shitheel.” Billy smiled and Steve knew it was a genuine, it’s one that reached his eyes and made them bright and bluer than usual.

“You like it,” Billy said with the same assuredness. “I know you do.”

“Are you going to spend the whole night in my head?” Steve asked, trying not to really look at him even though he knows Billy’s smirking, knows he sort of just confessed to liking Billy’s shitty attitude.

“Distraction helps.”

“Yeah, okay.” Steve pulled away from him, the smile slide from his face. “I don’t think I can just put band-aids on it.”

“You should cover it,” Billy muttered.

He didn’t want anyone else giving him the look Steve’s giving him right now anyway. He hasn’t even seen himself yet but Steve won’t look at it so it must be bad. They’re fucking human hands anyway and the last thing he needs is some asshole sticking their business where it shouldn’t be. In a small town like Hawkins people talk.

Hell, anywhere, someone would say something.

“What a fashion statement,” Steve said, he whistled lowly looking at the bandages.“ Wow.”

“Shut up,” Billy glared at the ceiling. “Asshole.”

“No, I’m serious, they look edgy. I mean...it’d be more you if it were in black…” he trailed off.

“White’s a little...pure for you but it’s not like they sell black bandages so....”

“You’re fucking delirious.”

No, Steve thought, I’m trying to make you feel better. In all honesty, he would think himself
delirious if he was told he was going to try to cheer Billy Hargrove up about anything. “I’m serious, Billy, it’s not that bad.”

“Yeah?” He yawned. “You think you did a good job, Nurse Harrington?”

“It’s too late for this,” Steve immediately snapped. “Stop it.”

Billy laughed, “nurse Harrington,” he crooned. “Fix me up, nurse Harrington. Make me feel all better.”

He looked at the clock on the VHS player. It’s past three in the morning. Steve rubbed his face. “Fuck, it’s so late. You’re probably the one that’s delirious” The faster they get to a bed the better, at this point Steve knows he’s doing him more harm than good keeping Billy awake.

“I’m not,” Billy said. “I just got a sense of humor.”

He snorted, “I’m so glad I finally get to see it. You’re so funny Billy har-di-har-har.”

“Damn, right I am,” he said proudly which turned into a hiss when Steve dug into his foot with the tweezers.

“You had a big splinter,” Steve said.

“Sure, I did.”

“You did.” Steve pulled back, sat up and the smile slid from Billy’s face. “Your left foot’s kind of swollen,” he pointed out, and ripped gauze away to start wrapping it. “How come you didn’t have on shoes...or a shirt?”

“I was taking the trash out,” Billy mumbled, his eyes not meeting his.

Steve’s nose wrinkled and suddenly the storm outside sounded louder. It had to at least be midnight when Billy went out, and it’s pouring rain loud and hard enough that no one should ignore it. “At this hour? In this weather?”

“It had to get done, ain’t got a maid service, princess.”

Steve glared at him. “You could’ve put on a coat? Shoes? You’d be able to walk right now if you did.” He was careful with his left foot, swollen at the heel. The right wasn’t as bad at least, it was barely bleeding anymore. It’d didn’t make the rapid thumping in his chest any softer, it’s going to be hard to get him upstairs or get him anywhere, and they both know it.

“Pity is for idiots and starving children,” Billy said coolly.

Steve looked at him with his bruises that covered his face, the bandages around his neck, and thought otherwise. “Yeah...yeah, I know.”

“Act like it,” he hissed.

He nodded, lowered his other foot. “We’re friends so...it’s kind of hard to,” Steve figured now would be a good time to start, but he couldn’t. He still doesn’t get it, really, with someone like Billy you extend them an olive branch and their first instinct is to set it on fire. Compassion is knives to him, and he doesn’t get it. “You were worried about me, y’know? At the quarry? You didn’t really say it, but I knew. And if you were worried, you have to care about me.” Billy turned to look at him and his face so damn unreadable Steve didn’t really know what to think. “And I
care...about you now so...uh...” he scratched his neck, and focused on the TV screen. Indiana Jones and his whip. “So now I worry...because like I said...I care about you.”

Billy still had on that unreadable face, except his eyes which are stuck on his and then he’s stuck too like Billy has a freeze power he decided he wasn't going to mention, like they’ve been shocked and jolted into place by something heavy and heady and completely overwhelming. He doesn’t think he’s looked at anyone for this long, this close since Nancy and that is weird. It does weirder things to his chest, weird things to his head and weird things to his eyes like making hallucinate for a second that Billy was staring at his lips.

Billy’s lips pulled into a slow grin, “you’re such a fucking fag sometimes, you know that?”

Which, normally Steve would snort at, but it was weird so he doesn’t and he can’t. All he can do is feel the blush creeping up his neck and across his cheeks. “Just shut up and roll over so I can see your back.”

“Aye aye,” he wheezed.

Steve slid from the couch to the floor and Billy laid back down on his stomach, revealing the ugly red gash across his back.

“Oh God,” Steve squeezed his eyes shut, nausea overtaking his embarrassment. He's actually happy about it as opposed to what the air felt like before. “Did they have a knife?”

“A fence.”

He winced, face contorting and turning pale. “Jesus, ow.”

He really wasn’t thinking about it, at the time he couldn’t think about it and even now he’s too mesmerized by the thrumming sensation of Steve flowing through. All this fucking time and he never realized Steve’s eyes are a little green too, a little gold, in all of that warm brown.

“I didn’t notice,”

“I heard adrenaline will do that,” Steve said. Jonathan told him that once, about his fists after that night in the alleyway.

“I’m aware,” Billy groaned. “That’s why it hurts like a bitch now.”

“So what do you want me to do about it?”

“The gauze and tape,” he mumbled. “Clean it, first.”

He let out a soft sigh, “yeah, I had a feeling you were going to say that. I had a feeling I was gonna have to keep looking at this thing?”

“Gnarly?” He asked.

“Very,” he said. He prodded it lightly, “I don’t think it’s really bleeding anymore though, I think it was just after I tried to pick you up.”

He got to work, trying to ignore the fact that Billy feels like a human furnace. He can feel the warmth seeping into the pads of his fingers splayed across Billy’s back. Steve bit down hard on his lips trying to will away the image in his head. It’s not like he hasn’t seen Billy without a shirt. Everyone’s seen Billy without a shirt before, he’s grinded up against shirtless Billy in basketball.
But there’s a difference between being locked up against him in gym surrounded by a bunch of other sweaty high-schoolers and being alone in his house.

“I shouldn’t have let you lie down,” Steve said after he was finished cleaning the wound. He rubbed the blood from his hands on the rag until he couldn’t feel the stick anymore. Until he didn’t feel all that nauseated. “You’re falling asleep.”

“I’m awake,” Billy mumbled into the arm he was using as a pillow.

“Yeah,” Steve huffed. “Sure, you’re wide awake, Hargrove.”

*Raiders of the Lost Ark* went off about 20 minutes ago and now it’s just soft white static and the crackle of the fire, if Steve wasn’t concentrating so hard on staying awake he would be asleep too.

He taped down the last side of the rectangular patch and pulled away. “I’m all done,” he said.

There’s little left to do except getting him upstairs and cleaning up downstairs. He can’t imagine what time it will actually be by time they’re both in bed.

Billy hummed instead of answering, which only reassured him that it’ll only be a matter of minutes before he’s asleep.

“How’s your head?”

“Is this about the whip again?” He slurred into his arm.

Steve made a face. “No, God, I'm trying to put that out of my head. I’m just asking, you’re looking pale again.”

“Thanks,” he intoned.

“So?” He trailed off. "Are you okay?"

“M’ fine,” Billy lied. He knew he didn't sound find anyway, speaking into his arm, barely having the energy to even *look* at Steve. It started pounding again, worse maybe than before, but he can’t really tell when everything is starting to run together and everything is starting to *hurt*. His eyelids feel weighted and the night’s finally catching up with him.

Steve gnawed on his lip, fought off the inkling feeling it still would've been better to bring him to a hospital, fought off the feeling of helplessness overcoming him now that he can't do anything for him anymore. “C’mon, man,” Steve started to stand, “we should get you upstairs, you’re white as a sheet. You need to sleep.”

“M’ fine,” Billy insisted.

"You're not fine," he said, eyeing him, "and you can’t stay on the couch all night, my mom’s home and she’ll definitely see you in the morning and she’ll definitely overreact about it. She'll probably call the cops.”

If she doesn't take a purse and beat Billy with it herself first.

He rolled his eyes, *at least it’s genetic*. He was pretty sure he saw her silver Mercedes on the way in. He didn’t have the strength to think much of it. “M’ fine, just wanna stay here a few more minutes.”

“Are you dizzy?”
Yes. Very.

“S’ fine.”

He frowned. “That’s not an answer, I was thinking like a ‘yes’,” he shrugged a little and eyed his
own sock clad feet, a toe winked up at him. “Maybe a no?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Billy muttered.

Steve didn’t look at him, not when he could feel his face heating up again thinking of the last time
Billy told him not to worry about it, not to pity him. “Yeah, okay,” he sighed, too exhausted to try
to do much about it. “I’ll get you upstairs, get you in a bed.”

“Thanks,” Billy muttered. “I owe you, Harrington.”

“Don’t worry about it, Hargrove,” he said. “All you had to do was ask.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, Steve's honestly and obviously catchin feelings but like more
importantly...squeamish Steve which I love and is canon in my mind forever and ever
amen so....
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for being patient with me and my MONTH LONG hiatus (jfc). My health is pretty much restored which is great! School’s a little harder this semester than I thought it would be but I’m learning to manage. I’m so excited to back at this fic omfg you don’t even know! I hope you all are too :) Without further adieu...I present Chapter XX.
PS. I don't what day you all think is Steve's birthday but I headcanon that it's September 23rd. Did I plan my hiatus to end on that day on purpose? ....No

Steve didn’t try to carry him again, not up the flight of stairs—especially not up his floating stairs—that only spelled disaster for both of them. Steve kept his arm slung over Billy’s upper back, they went slow with Billy’s bandaged feet, with his fucked up head, with the way he kept grumbling about having to be helped up a simple flight of stairs they had to go slow.

Steve reminded him they wouldn’t have to worry about any of this if he’d just let him take him to the hospital every step of the way, almost as often as he assured him he wouldn’t let anything else happen to him.

He flicked his light switch on and helped Billy into his desk chair.

“I’m sleeping in your room?” Billy asked. He didn’t try to hide his confusion, eyebrows furrowed while his eyes following him intently. “Where are you going to sleep?”

“In my room, where else would I be?” Steve snorted. “I’m not letting you sleep alone, Darth. Not when you sound like that, what if you stop breathing in your sleep?”

Billy didn’t really know what to say to that, he hadn’t thought about that. He had even less of an idea about what to do when Steve was making a weird face at him—big, watching eyes that take him in carefully, tongue poking out between his teeth like he’s got something big on his mind.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he shook his head. He started walking to the dresser in the corner, no longer anchored by whatever trance Billy had put him in. “I was just thinking. I’m exhausted, don’t fall asleep in the chair by the way,” he rambled and shook his head again.

If he had the energy he might’ve tried to wiggle the answer out of Harrington with a few barbs and well-placed questions and the sharp gleam of his teeth. The idea made him yawn out loud, back arched with it. It ached in protest.

“Don’t fall asleep in the chair,” Steve repeated while rummaging around through his dresser. “Do you want a sweatshirt or something?” he asked. “My room is an icebox at night.”

Billy’s lips hooked to one side until it was a bemused smirk and then straight glee. “Sure, Harrington” he all but purred. “Do I get your letterman too?”

Steve scoffed loudly to hide the way he choked. He kept his face hidden while he dug through his
clothes. “You know, I’m pretty sure you have to earn it. It’s like a step,” he said, pulling a blue sweatshirt out. “And if this is my letterman jacket we’re talking about, we’d have to be ‘going steady’ or whatever they used to call it so...that’s a whole can of worms you don’t want to get into.” He kept his head in the drawer, searching for a second sweatshirt.

Billy swallowed hard.

The more he thinks about it, he kind of would like to get into that can of worms.

“And if this is my letterman jacket we’re talking about, we’d have to be ‘going steady’ or whatever they used to call it so...that’s a whole can of worms you don’t want to get into.” He kept his head in the drawer, searching for a second sweatshirt.

Billy shrugged, still grinning, “I don’t know, Bambi, you tell me.”

Steve whirled around, wide-eyed and cheeks flushed a soft pink. “Bambi?” He scoffed. “No, no, The cartoon deer? How am I Bambi?”

“Big eyes, nice long legs,” Billy said. “That deer in the headlights look you get whenever you see me coming on the court.”

His blush deepened, “you look like you’re trying to kill me.”

“Usually I am,” he said darkly.

“Christ,” he rubbed a hand over his face, gobsmacked. “You’re—”

“It was a joke. I do that every once in a while,” he teased.

Steve blinked, once then twice. “God,” he said. “You know you’re really not funny,” Steve was smiling anyway. “Jesus, I swear to God. Har-di-har-har Billy. Dropout of high school and become a comedian, why don’t ya?” He went back to rummaging through the drawer, “and you keep calling me morbid,” he grumbled. He chuckled at Billy the large yellow sweatshirt he pulled out, the one he’d clearly been searching for. “I don’t mind if you get blood on this, there’s no way I’m going to the University of Michigan and I’m not really a fan of yellow.”

Billy stooped carefully to pick the thing up from the floor. It smelled like him, just like everything in his room does. It’s overwhelming and heady, the rush in his chest makes his face and chest feel warm as he slowly slipped it over his head.

“Yellow’s a shit color,” he said through the thick fabric covering his head. “But I like it.”

“I thought you said your favorite color was red?”

He did say that when he was fucking with him at Beatrice’s, he hadn’t even thought about the lie. He didn’t really think Steve listened to him. Billy pulled the shirt over his head, stared at him. “I didn’t think you’d give actually give a shit and remember.”
Steve was over by the bathroom with his toothbrush raised. “I…” he lowered it, “I mean...you knew mine so...and it’s kind of weird of you to assume I wouldn’t care if you told me. I ask you questions, like, all the time. It’s what friends do...so yellow…?”

“Is my favorite color,” Billy finished. “Not…red.”

Steve face twisted into a soft smile. “Cool, mine’s still pink apparently,” he stuck the toothbrush in his mouth. “You can keep the sweatshirt, as I said, yellow’s not really my color.” He shut the door behind him.

Billy looked down at shirt, on Steve it would be just a little too big, on Billy it fit well enough that it didn’t really feel like he was borrowing it at all. He absently ran his hand over the emblem on the front, and in a way, he isn’t borrowing it. Steve said he can have it, it’s nice too—probably expensive—college merchandise always is. He slouched in the desk chair, let his head drop onto his shoulder while he waited for Steve. He kept his hand over the design on the front of the shirt and rubbed the soft fabric underneath as a distraction from his pulsing head and wounds.

Nancy occasionally borrow his clothes, it was the one thing she liked, actually. All girls like wearing their boyfriend’s clothes, it’s pretty much a law. Not that Billy is Nancy or anything like Nancy, he just seemed happy to have that’s all. And Steve was happy to give it to him, there’s nothing wrong with that. Billy needed it. He needed Billy to need just so he could be a little better off, so he could do one more thing for him

He looked down at the stain on his shirt again, now a deep burgundy closer to brown. The sick feeling in the back of his throat felt worse than nausea, it felt like fear.

_He could’ve died._

Maybe Billy’s just happy to be alive or he’s too exhausted and his head is too fucked up for him to realize it, but Steve’s got nothing keeping him from thinking it. He was cold, bloody and wet and if he hadn’t answered the door he would’ve caught death.

By weather or by wounds he would’ve died.

He could’ve died.

His fingers curled into the edge of the sink. His eyes slammed shut and his throat felt tight. He ripped the shirt off over his head and threw into a wastebasket, the red-stained across his stomach felt like a damn brand, a reminder of what could’ve happened. Billy might not be the greatest guy he’s ever met, he’s temperamental and argumentative and tough to handle sometimes, but they’re friends. Steve would call him his best friend.

He rubbed a rag against his skin until it smeared, until it was gone, until the skin underneath turned pink and then red from all the abuse. He has a right to be freaked out. He has a right to be scared. Right now Billy could be choking to death because he doesn’t have his eyes on him.

He’s so fucked up.

Nancy fell off a ladder taking down the lights that winter they were together; the winter she took him back inexplicably and everything seemed alright at least for a little bit. He remembers seeing her fall and not being able to do anything, he remembers the plummet in his stomach and his skin going so cold it felt like liquid nitrogen was pumping through his veins. He remembers taking her to the hospital, his palms fucking sweating against the steering wheel. He remembers they kept her for a few hours. He remembers Mrs. Wheeler sending him home, he remembers beating himself up.
about it, but he ate, he fell asleep that night.

He could function.

He can barely breathe right with Billy it feels worse.

So much worse.

He splashed cold water on his face and pulled on a new shirt.

He needed to go back out there to make sure he’s okay.

“Hey,” he called out. Billy’s eyes were half-lidded at best. He’s wheezing still while his hand rubbed the front of the sweatshirt almost with some sort of reverence. “Billy, can you hear me?”

He grunted softly. “M’ awake.”

Steve eyed him. He stood so close he almost reached out to touch his too pale face, the bruises seemed to scream out against it. “I’m gonna go clean up downstairs, okay?”

“Do you want me t—”

Steve’s soft laugh was enough to get Billy to stop. “No, man, I want you to sleep.” He turned on the bedside lamp.

“Fuck off,” he said. “I’m just being helpful. I’m a helpful person.”

“Yeah. Okay. I think your delirium’s making you think that.” Steve rolled his eyes. He pulled out the chair and pushed it like a wheelchair to his bed. Steve yanked the covers back and stepped away, “bed’s here as soon as you’re ready.”

“If this is what being old is going to be like, I’m killing myself at forty-five,” Billy grumbled. “If I even make it to forty-five.”

Steve would have a joke about that usually, he can feel it on the tip of his tongue. It’d be something like ‘with the way you drive, we’ll see,’ maybe, ‘if the sex, drugs, and rock’ n’ roll don’t kill you first.’ They fall dead there, making the anxious swirl in his stomach roil. “I’ll make sure you make it to forty-five.”

Billy didn’t say anything for so long Steve thought he fell asleep. He could hear Billy swallow, his throat clicking, “okay.” There’s no sharp curl to it like he’s been entertained. Steve didn’t mean it like that either. He meant it.

His hand slid from the back of the chair, Billy’s curls tickling his knuckles, as he rested his hand on his shoulder. He ignored Billy shivering underneath him, his fingers curl just trying to get closer. Steve felt words on the tip of his tongue: “I should’ve been there.” “You’re going to be okay.” “I’m right here.” None of them feel right and then he’s letting go again.

Billy isn’t shivering anymore though.

He coughed to loosen the lump in his throat. “Try to sleep.”

“Okay,” Billy mumbled.

The walk away from him hurt. “Good night, Billy.”
“Night, Harrington.”

For the first time in a long time, the dark scares him. It had nothing to do with the fact that Steve hijacked his mind, but Billy wishes it did. Then he could blame that he’s so damn grateful he left the lamp on on Steve.

He’s afraid the dark will swallow him.

He’s afraid of the quiet too, he’s afraid to shut his eyes. The last time he did, he saw Neil. He felt the rain on his skin and the man’s hands around his neck—his wedding band digging into the flesh of his neck.

Billy shuddered.

He only slid into the bed when he realized he couldn’t stay in Steve’s chair and curl into himself comfortably, his feet and back hurt too much.

The bed smells like Steve, but stronger. He can’t really help burying his head in the boy’s pillow and breathing in deeply. It’s his fancy ass cologne or something that puts him at ease. Maybe it’s the association his brain makes with it that makes him feel a little better; he doesn’t want to think about. He’s alone now and his mind hums like he needs it, like he needs some part of Steve. His blankets are heavy over him, has to use his good arm to get under all his expensive sheets but it’s worth when he does.

Billy curled up under the covers as tightly as his back could manage and went a little further until the bruises on his abdomen started to sear. He curled almost to his forehead touching his knees and tried not to close his eyes.

Neil would kill him given the chance. Tried to kill him. He was numb to that fact at first the same he really didn’t start to hurt until now...

*Any mistake and I finish this.*

He breathes wrong and he dies.

He could die for forgetting to help Susan with the groceries, he could die for looking at Neil the wrong way, he could die for being late to pick up Max.

The answer is clear, he can’t ever, *ever* go home.

His life is *over.*

The weight is heavy on him, makes him feel like he’s going to sink right through the house into a very deep grave. His pillow and his hair and the front of his sweatshirt is damp with tears instantly. His chest aches with bruises and grief.

Mourning his dumbass life. And his piece shit dad. And his future. Billy rubbed at his eyes.

*You think those people are sorry for what they did to you?*

No.

He knows they aren’t. They moved on, they had to. Those people turned him into a freak of nature, destroyed his life before it even started, and then they forgot about him like an outdated machine.
And he’s got nowhere to go.

He’s too tired to feel angry, too sick to hate the world. His eyes fall shut more against his will than anything else.

He doesn’t want to see Neil again, he wanted to wait up for Steve to come back.

Billy jolted when he felt things shift underneath him, things that aren’t his. Isn’t his bed, isn’t his room, not his ho—

“It’s okay, it’s just me,” Steve said in the dark. His warm hand was pressed between his shoulder blades firmly. He can see the sky turning a purple-orange through the blinds in his room, the vague outline of Steve hovering over him like a guardian angel. “Go back to sleep.”

Billy tried to shift to look at him, a small whimper escaped his clamped teeth when he tried to twist his stiff body toward him. “What are you doing?” Billy rasped.

“Why do you keep asking me that?” Steve huffed.

“You’re in bed,” Billy tried to turn again. “You’re in bed with me, Harrington.”

He could hear him snort loudly, “my bed, my rules. There’s enough space for both of us and I need to make sure you don’t die in your sleep.” Steve pulled the covers around himself and turned over, their backs facing each other. “Go back to sleep.”

Billy wanted to actually, but he couldn’t now that he could feel Steve’s body heat radiating on his whole backside. His body is alarmingly aware he’s here with him, it makes him shiver without being cold.

He felt the hand press between his shoulder blades again. “Before you ask, you calm down pretty much every time I touch you,” Steve explained. “That’s what I’m doing.” His hand felt grounding there, warmed him all the way to the top of his head down to the tip of his spine. “Are you cold?”

Billy gnawed on his lip, wondering if he should tell him the truth. “Yeah.”

Steve had time to think downstairs, he didn’t like it, but it took his mind off the blood. He thought about Nancy and Billy again, how different they are, how they’re kind of similar. He’s ended up being fiercely protective over both.

“Do you want me to get another blanket?” He asked.

Something heavy hangs in the air, with his hand splayed across Billy’s back he can feel it. He feel the muscles shift underneath, feel them press back like Billy’s secretly aching for it.

“It’s fine,” Billy mumbled.

“Do you… want me to come closer?” It hangs in the dark cold air for a long time, for so long Steve thinks Billy did just fall back asleep, or he didn’t hear him or he’s ignoring him because he knows it gets under his skin. Maybe he thinks he’s a huge fucking queer; he thinks he might be just a little if his thoughts downstairs and in the bathroom were anything. “I mean, you’ve been through a lot and you hug people when bad things happen to them, so I was just sugge—”

“Just don’t pop wood alright?” Billy said
He really hopes that never happens.

“I’m just keeping you warm.” Steve said more to himself.

“Exactly,” he agreed.

“And comforting you.”

“I don’t need it,” he added.

Steve pushed himself closer until he was aligned with Billy, effectively spooning him. If someone told him he’d be spooning Billy Hargrove he’d call them insane especially with the choice details that Billy’s the fucking little spoon in this equation and neither of them seem to be upset about it. In fact, Billy’s tense muscles uncoiled immediately. God. If someone told him that a month ago, he’d drive them to hospital for psychiatric help.

“This is just a one-time thing because I thought you were dying,” Steve felt himself rambling like he’s nervous, like he would if Billy were a girl and they were both thirteen. “And I’m really worried about you and you’re my best friend, I mean…unless you sleep over again which is totally fine because I think I almost had fun except the blood. I prob—”

“Stop making it weird,” Billy cut him off.

“Okay,” he mumbled, the tendrils of Billy’s hair tickled his lips. “One more thing?”

“What?”

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

It took Billy a long time to turn over, every movement sounded like it hurt. When he was on his other side again Steve could feel his breath across his lips, he can’t tell if it’s intentional or if, in the darkness, Billy can’t tell how close he truly is.

“I’m not,” he whispered. “Just so you know.”

Steve didn’t say anything.

For all the times he’s asked Billy if he’s okay, he tells him he’s not unprompted. That’s exactly what he would do. He was careful pulling him closer, it was weird feeling a bulkier body trapped underneath his, how Billy’s familiarly soft in some places and sturdy in others.

“I know,” Steve said. He rested his chin atop his head. Maybe it’s a softer version of ‘I told you so’ or maybe he can pick up on the shuddered breath he exhales into his chest. Billy’s fingers curled into Steve’s sweatshirt and shut his eyes.
XXI. Little Savages

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is really late :(  
Fun fact: I’m only calling this Little Savages because writing the Party is hard and it makes me cry internally lmfao

The boys met over the Wheeler’s in the early hours of the morning, just as Mr. Wheeler was having his morning coffee before work and Nancy left for driving practice with Jonathan. It’s as early in the morning as they could possibly manage, they have a lot to accomplish and a lot at stake.

Everything has to be perfect.

“First, you two get Max,” Mike said. “She’s our decoy, you guys take her to Castle Byers and—”

“She’s going to kill us,” Dustin groaned. “I could put a million snacks in there and she’d still kill us.”

Mike was ignoring Dustin, he’s digging through his backpack again counting about a million things he and Lucas think Max might need. Mike knows they don’t have a chance, they’re gonna have to outrun her.

“Ditch her there,” he finished. “She’ll be fine.”

“What if something gets her?” Will asked.

Mike paused, was tempted to say like what? The Gate’s been closed and it’s staying close when he looks at them though he knows he isn’t allowed to play fast and loose with Max’s life. “You can stay with her,” he suggests. “She might not notice anything is wrong if you wait around with her.”

“Why does he get to?” Lucas said.

“Because Dustin can’t keep a secret and you tell her everything,” Mike looked at Lucas for a long as humanly possible without blinking. “No way. Will’s the only one that knows how to stay cool.”

It feels like being benched, but Will is happy; he’s been through and seen too much. He doesn’t want to have to watch them pull the Mind Flayer out of Billy, he already went through it himself.

“A half an hour after we’ve got Max, El and I will be at Hopper’s old cabin, we’ll make a phone call to her house saying we were out playing over there, and Max really hurt herself and—”

“He’ll come,” Dustin agreed. “He’s crazy protective over her.”

“More like just crazy,” Lucas muttered.

Mike gave them both a look, unimpressed. “We know he’s crazy, he’s the freakin’ Mind Flayer.”

He went back to the paper in front of him, a journal with most of its pages torn out in missing, no doubt used to send messages to El. “El will knock him out, we tie him up and burn it out of him.”
“I think this is easier said than done,” Will finished sagely. “Maybe you should call Hopper after you knock him out, he’ll want to know about this...and we are using his cabin—”

“Without his permission,” Dustin added.

“We should get backup,” Lucas agreed.

Mike did too. He’s seen the power the Mind Flayer has and he got a front row seat to the ‘Billy demolishes Steve Harrington’s face show’; who knows what the two of them can do relying on each other. They can’t underestimate him, not even a little.

“We get him and we tie him up first,” Mike said. “That’s the number one objective, but first...” They all looked at each other glumly, they know what they have to do first. They shared a look between each other

“Max,” they groaned in unison.

ONE HOUR LATER...

Max has her own problems, lots of them. Finishing middle school, keeping her first-place rank on the Dig Dug leaderboard, her mom, Neil, shady government labs, the second dimension she’s pretty sure is trying to swallow the whole world, Billy.

Especially Billy.

Billy is a constant problem, especially when something in her gut feels wrong and most of the time when her gut feels wrong it’s because of something he did. Her mom made breakfast today, which seems normal except it’s not. She doesn’t make breakfast before work on the weekends, most of the time Billy does. She pushed runny eggs around on her plate and barely touched her toast.

She’s alone for the first time since her mom met Neil Hargrove and the house feels haunted.

It’s not like Billy hasn’t disappeared before, he does from time to time. She has no clue what he does, and she’s never really thought to care. At least in California, she always assumed he went to the beach with people from school for a day. The thing is, he always drives his own car and he always takes his cigarettes and his lighter—even her mom should know that.

She drained the remainder of her orange juice and pushed back from the table. Something happened to him, something went wrong—it’s a feeling she absolutely can’t shake. She just doesn’t know what, how or when... yet.

She flopped down onto her bed, there was nothing but the sounds of the wind rustling the trees and birds chirping outside. Inside the house is entirely quiet, the quietest it’s been since they moved in usually there’s the metallic sound of weights, the TV going, the radio in her room or the one in the kitchen.

Her walkie-talkie crackled loudly, it’s Lucas. “Max! Max! Are you there? Over.”

She grabbed at it, pulled it close to her immediately. She really hates the ‘over’ part, it’s corny and it’s cheesy, but she’s been reprimanded enough about it. She’s learned not to care too much about it when it’s preceded by yelling.

“I’m here. Over,” she said.

“We’ve got a problem,” he said. “Dustin and I are coming to pick you up, we’re going over to
Will’s. Something’s wrong. Over.”

Max nibbled on her lip so hard it hurt until she could feel the skin peeling underneath her teeth. Something is wrong on this morning, on this day, when she woke up with the sickest feeling possible in her stomach.

“What’s wrong?” She paused. “Over.”

“We can’t tell you over walkie,” Dustin came in. “It’s serious.”

“Can you sneak out and meet us? Over.”

Max nibbled on her lip, looked around like Billy might just appear. It’s a habit to be that way now. “I won’t have to, no one’s home. Over.”

“What do you mean no one’s home? Over.” Dustin said into the walkie. Max could imagine him snatching it from Lucas and she doubts he’ll get it back any time soon. “Where’s Billy? Over.”

She’s been asking herself that all morning.

“I don’t know. He wasn’t here when I woke up, but his car is. He probably went out jogging or something,” she told them, the same thing she’s been telling herself all morning. The same thing that’s losing out against the ‘something is very very wrong.’

“Over,” Dustin added.

“Shut up, Dustin. Over.”

“So he’s gone? Over,” Lucas’s voice came flooding in, his eyebrows probably furrowed, she could almost hear it in his voice.

“And you have no idea where he is? Over,” Dustin chimed in again.

“I have some idea. Over,” she said, even if she doesn’t. She has to tell herself something. “As I said, he probably went jogging. Are you guys coming here or what? Over,” she snapped.

“Yeah,” Lucas paused. “Yeah, we’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Over and out.”

“I’ll walkie you if he comes back. Over and out.”

“Son of a bitch!”

Lucas put the walkie-talkie back into his backpack, grimacing the same way that Dustin is. He isn’t exactly mad Max couldn’t find Billy, it makes things easier for them in his opinion. It’s getting him over to Hopper’s cabin, that’ll be a hassle— that they’ll have to do together and he’s not mad about that either. There’s safety in numbers.

“We still have to go get her,” Lucas said. “He could come back.”

“I hope he doesn’t,” Dustin added, voicing what they were both thinking.

He’s not like Will.

Everything would get better if he disappeared.

They started pedaling down the road towards Old Cherry Lane.
Max doesn’t go into Billy’s room often. It smaller than hers, way smaller actually, it reeks of cologne and hairspray and teenage boy, and Billy’s normally in there. It’s his domain just as much as her room is hers.

She normally wouldn’t step foot in it, normally he wouldn’t up and vanish at 7 a.m. without wolfing down breakfast and making as much noise as possible first.

Billy mentions running away a lot, not to her or her mom, but sometimes he does to Neil. She can hear them arguing from time to time, the walls carrying their voices straight to her and she hears him threaten to do it more often than not.

He wouldn’t run away without his wallet.

She found that in his room still.

He wouldn’t run away without his less than half finished pack of smokes.

She found those in his room still.

Billy doesn’t seem like the type to leave a note, or maybe he would but there would be very little on it. Something like ‘Fuck You. From, Billy.’ or ‘I hate you all. Goodbye forever.’ He wouldn’t run away without his car either. She’s pretty the car is the only thing he loves.

Max paused, standing in the heart of Billy or what’s left of it, everything he cares about is in here. Her hands sat on her hips, stared at the awful, lewd picture of some blond in a bikini. She knows he uses it to cover the hole he put in the closet door. The blond babe smiled back at her, eyes winking without closing and Max frowned at her.

Disgusting.

She turned with a huff, the room gave her answers but it posed enough questions. Max tripped over Billy’s shoes, sent her flying almost braining herself on the doorframe. She caught herself and glared down at the ugly boots in question.

Boots.

They’re both short in the shoe department. Her mom made a note of it while they were Easter clothes shopping, Max has three pairs of shoes and Billy has three. His boots, his gym shoes and a pair of shitty dress shoes. She thinks maybe he could leave without his wallet no matter how tough it would be, he could leave without his cigarettes, his car, and everything he’s collected in the museum of a room, but no one leaves without shoes.

She stared at the shoes, one overturned practically staring back at her.

He wouldn’t leave without his shoes.

A shuddered breath left her lungs.

Thud!

Thud!

Thud!
Max whirled around at the sudden sound just as loud as her banging pulsed.

Thud!

Thud!

Thud!

It’s amazing how quick she forgot that Lucas and Dustin were supposed to come to get her, how small their emergency seems when she knows something happened here. She left the room into the hallway that suddenly felt too tight and too long and thundered her way through the house the front door throwing it open.

“Max—!” Lucas’s face shifted. “What’s wrong?”

Her gaze shifted between the two of them, it’s still earlier in the morning than she would’ve thought. She gulped in a breath, “something happened to him.”

“What?” Dustin blinked.

“Wait. Wait.” Lucas cut in because the two of them can hardly ever let the other speak without chiming. “What do you mean something happened to him.”

“He’s gone,” it spiraled in her head as she spoke. “He’s gone, like, gone-gone.” She let them in, didn’t wait for them to follower back to Billy’s bedroom. A part of her thought of how much he’d kill her for letting those two in his room.

Lucas’s face contorted, “his room stinks.”

“That’s not the point,” because it isn’t, nothing in this room really matter anymore except those shoes. Her eyes shifted down to them, one of a few things you can’t leave well without “Look.”

“They’re shoes.”

“The only shoes he wears” she explained. “I thought he might’ve gone jogging, but his gym shoes are still at school.”

“Okay,” Dustin said, looking at the poster of the mostly naked woman on the closet door. “So...he went somewhere without shoes.”

“And his wallet, and his car, and his cigarettes,” she continued. “Where would you go barefoot? Why would you go anywhere barefoot?”

“The beach?” Lucas and Max both glared at him. “It’s true.”

“So you’re trying to say Billy walked to the beach barefoot?”

Dustin opened his mouth and shut it. “Okay, unlikely.

“Something happened to him,” Max repeated.

“When was the last time you saw him?” Lucas asked like he’s a missing item.

“Last night when we got back from the mall,” Max recalled. “He...I don’t know I guess he didn’t feel good, he went into his room as soon as we got home.”
It was a normal night other than Billy staggering to his room like he might die if he didn’t go lie down somewhere. Even then Max didn’t really take note of it, she was glaring at her Easter Sunday dress ruefully most of the night, trying to find a way to get out of wearing it for the other half.

“Didn’t Steve asking him if he was sick?” Lucas recalled.

“Yeah,” Dustin agreed. “Right before he almost pounded his face in for the second time.”

Max gnawed on her lip. Yeah, she kind of wants Billy to end up dead in a ditch most of the time, but not today. Not when the guys are pretty convinced he’s the Mind Flayer, he could be the Mind Flayer.

“Shit,” Dustin’s eyes widened, almost like he was suddenly catching up on Max’s thoughts. “What if he’s gone full vessel mode?”

“Full vessel mode?” Lucas repeated.

“Yeah, like, he’s just a walking meat suit for the Mind Flayer?” Dustin said. “He wouldn’t care about shoes or his wallet or any of that stuff.”

“Did you have to call him a meat suit,” Max’s nose wrinkled.

“It’s what he is!”

Max grabbed the jacket wrapped around her waist and pulled it on. “We have to find him, Mind Flayer or not,” she said. “He could hurt himself or somebody. Can this emergency wait? They might be related,” she looked at Dustin and Lucas hopefully.

The two of them looked at each other with oblong glances, it’s not like they can say no. They can’t trap Billy if they can’t find him. “Yeah,” Lucas nodded, smiled assuredly. He’d rather not look for Billy at all, truthfully, especially when he could be the Mind Flayer’s slave. “They might be related.”

A look of relief crossed Max’s face. “Okay. We should check around the house first. He’s not in my room, his room, the bathroom, the kitchen or the living room. That really only leaves the closets, my parents’ room, and the basement.”

“I can check the closets,” Lucas said because he would really hate to go down to their basement.

“I’d rather do my parents’ room,” Max added.

They looked at Dustin expectantly.

“No…,” he groaned, looking at them. “Son of a bitch! Are you serious! I have to do the basement?”

“It’s Neil’s office, and like...storage,” Max sighed. “It’s not scary.”

Dustin pouted and groaned, for a moment he almost looked like Steve. “But if I were a Mind Flayer I’d hide in the basement. It’s, like, the prime horror place.”

“The basement isn’t scary, it’s furnished. Just do it,” Max hissed. “He might be sick still which means he’ll probably be pretty weak.” She doubted though, doubts highly that Billy’s still in this house. She hopes they’ll find something that will point them in the right direction.

“And if he’s the meat suit?” He yelped.
Lucas groaned allowed, and pulled his wrist rocket out of his backpack and a handful of rocks, “feel better now?”

No. No, he did not feel better, but he officially doesn’t have much a choice. He gulped, glared at them both.

“Son of a bitch, I really have to do this?” he hissed. “You’re not getting any of the goodies I have in my backpack now.”

They didn’t even look apologetic.

Unbelievable.

“Meet back in the kitchen in a few minutes,” Max said. “Scream if you find anything.”

“I’ll be honest,” Lucas said. “I’m gonna scream if he falls out of one of your closets.”

Max thought about mention that she has found him sleeping in some pretty odd places since she met him, but she thought better of it. Those times were different than this, they didn’t leave her with something sick in her stomach. She and Lucas set out immediately, leaving Dustin alone in Billy’s room. Billy’s room, the boy that pounded Steve’s face into a crater. He let out a heavy breath. “If he’s a meat suit, I’m a dead-man.”

He left the room and figured he’d have to find the right door the basement. Max’s house is smaller than his with only so many doors that can possibly be the basement. He went back out to the front of the house by way of the long hall that lead to Billy’s room and eventually Max’s. His eyes shifted, he’s never actually been inside Max’s house—wouldn’t dare it with Billy around.

There are a lot of seashells, jars of seashells on shelves and the TV stand and the coffee table. He imagined Max probably picked them all carefully. He stopped at the sliding screen door that led outside, it’d stormed last night with hard rain that beat against his window almost like hail but it wasn’t windy.

It wasn’t windy enough to knock over a metal lounge set or shatter the glass across the cement.

That’s different.

“Max! Lucas! I think I found something!” Dustin hollered out. He pulled back the sliding door and looked out into the dewy grass probably still a little damp from last night’s rain. His shoes crackled over the broken glass. He followed the direction of the furniture, one chair tipped back and the table and chair knocked over the other way.

Yeah, the wind wouldn’t do that.

Max bustled through the door if her hair wasn’t in braids he would’ve imagined it came with her in a furious red blur. “What—?” Her mouth shut abruptly as she stared down at the lawn furniture in question. “Did you do that?”

He shook his head, “I found it like that.”

“What?” Lucas bounded in almost the same way. He did the same thing she did, his eyes falling down to the broken set and directly down at the shattered glass he stood over.

“This wasn’t like this yesterday,” Max said. “My mom loves this set, she would’ve noticed.”
“So he was in the backyard,” Lucas finished. “He was here...and he tripped over it...leaving out this door.” Almost instinctively they fanned out across the fenced in yard.

“He must’ve hopped it.”

“He has a car,” Lucas snorted. “Why hop over the fence?”

“His car starts loud,” Max suggested. “If he wanted to be quiet he wouldn’t.”

The smell of wet grass and warm spring permeated the air, the sounds of cheerful birds filled the silence and it all felt wrong. Lucas made a narrow sweeping motion down the yard to the fence and stopped at the bright shimmering in the grass.

“Hey Max,” Lucas said, stopping. He scooped up the torn silver chain, almost let the pendant slip back into the dirt. “Does Billy...wear a necklace?” He thinks he’s pretty sure he’s seen him with the same necklace on all the time but he can’t be sure, he thinks it was dangling in his face that night he held him up against the wall. He thinks he remembers the tarnished silver briefly catching his eye.

She stopped walking, whirled around, “yeah, all the time. It’s his mom’s, he never takes it off.”

Lucas stood, turned around to meet Max and Dustin quickly meeting him. He held his palm up. “Is it this one?”

Max stared down at with wide eyes. “He never takes it off,” she repeated over the sound of her heart. She swallowed.“It’s the most important thing he owns.” She scooped it out of his hand stared at it. “He wouldn’t leave this for the whole world.” She stared down at it and knew it was true, meat suit or not Billy would fight to keep this on him. She held it up and almost did the same as Lucas. “It’s broken?”

“Like it got yanked off?”

“He could’ve done it himself,” Lucas said.

Max shook her head, “he wouldn’t. He just...he wouldn’t.”

“Who would then?”

_He tried to cut my head off._

_He?_

_Dad._

Max pushed through them, followed the line to the edge of the yard and breathed, kept fight to breathe through the thought. Neil wouldn’t, no matter how sure Billy was in his sleep, Neil wouldn’t do anything to hurt him physically.

“Max?” Lucas approached her carefully. “What?”

She shook her head, she’s not daring to say it out loud. “Nothing...if he’s...if he’s out there and he isn’t a...a meat suit...where would he be?” She needs this. _Something_. The same way you need to tell the kid Fido is taking an eternal walk in the park when Fido’s actually dead.

“I don’t know,” Dustin said. “It’s not like he has...” The three of them looked at each other, Dustin groaned.
“Steve,” they said in unison.

Dustin and Lucas looked at each other. It’s bad enough that there’s a solid chance Billy’s with him, it’s even worse that it throws a wrench in everything.

“Give a second,” Dustin said, grabbing Lucas by the hook of his backpack.

“What?” Max said.

“Nothing, we just need to talk for a second...about Steve,” Dustin added quickly. “Y’know... guy stuff.”

Max’s nose wrinkled. “What?”

Lucas nodded, “don’t worry, it’s just guy stuff it’ll only take a second.”

Max almost started to wonder what guy stuff really even means, she quickly realized she didn’t want to know. There’s a probably a reason she shouldn’t know and it probably has to do with guy stuff.


He started pulling him over to the far corner of the fenced in yard. Dustin took a careful look at Max she was looking at Billy’s necklace. “What are we going to do?” He hissed.

“Walkie Mike,” Lucas said. “In the bathroom. I guess...we could still bring her to Will.”

“And got to Steve’s alone?” He whisper yelled. “Are you crazy?”

“You’re the one that kisses the ground he walks on, maybe he won’t be a total slave.”

Dustin snorted. “I think you overestimate how much he actually likes me,” he said. And underestimating how much he likes Billy.

“You’re like his little brother,” Lucas said. He looked over at Max, “we can’t bring her, Billy will go haywire. We can’t just let him go either, we have to stop it here and now.”

Son of a bitch.

“Alright,” Dustin sighed gravely. He scratched his head through his cap and trudged back over to Max with Lucas.

“We’ll take her to Will’s house first,” Lucas said.

Max’s eyebrows pulled together, her lips pinched up and she glared at them. “ Why?”

“It’s the emergency, we have to go to Will’s.” There was no room for questioning it in his voice. Maybe it’s because she’ll never forget that Halloween night or that time in the field outside of Hawkins Middle, but when it’s about Will, it’s important.

“Fast,” she said.

“Yeah, but um...Can I use your bathroom first?”
XXII. Don’t Be Afraid (Of These Thunder Clouds)

Chapter Notes

It's late in the p.m. but this chapter is very important ;)
I PROMISE I will start responding to comments again soon. I feel awful not doing it right now, it just takes *a long time* because I try to give authentic responses. I read all of them (sometimes multiple times) and I appreciate all of them.
Also, it's starting to be midterm season so if the grammar is really bad on this blame my history essay
Thank you!!! and enjoy!! :)

Will heard voices over the crunches of twigs snapping under their feet. He heard Max's voice first; a nervous jolt made his stomach roil. Who knows how long it’ll take them to subdue Billy if he really is infected.

If he really is infected.

It could be hours, and Max is bold. She won't believe him for very long, he really wished he didn't know the plan at all. Will pulled open the pack of crayons he had with him and played with the lid. He's not proud of lying to Max this way.

Compartmentalize.

It was El's word of the day a few days ago which seems fitting. He's pretty sure Lucas and Dustin aren't too ecstatic about stranding her here either.

“What's Mike doing?” He could hear her loud and clear now.

“Him and El have their own mission,” Lucas snorted, almost a little too perfect. “You know how they are.”

And Max fell for it, she snorted too. “Yeah, of course, they do.”

“You just sit tight here with Will, alright?” Dustin said. The trio stopped in front of him. Lucas and Dustin flanking Max almost protectively, like escorting very precious cargo or the president.


He feels bad. He wondered where her step-brother is too, Will could see the subtle worry lines in her face. It gets like that when she’s been worried about something for a long time. They just don’t vanish.

“Hi,” she said quickly. She turned back to Dustin. “Why?”

“Well, you see” Dustin stumbled over his words.

“Because--”

“Dustin and Lucas are getting supplies,” Will threw in. “We might have to help Nancy and
Jonathan hunt monsters. We’ll all meet here when everyone’s ready.” He paused, thinking. “We have a lot of unknowns right now.”

Max scoffed. “Yeah, like my brother.”

“Step-brother,” Dustin corrected for her.

“Does it matter?” She snapped, her face going a little red.

Will winced.

He has no idea how he’s supposed to occupy her. He’s tough...he thinks he sort of might be, but Max is tougher.

“No,” Lucas answered quickly. “We’ll find him. I’m sure he’s fine.”

It’s like talking about a lost dog, like that time Chester up and disappeared for four days. Will wondered if people talked about him like that. He sort of hoped not.

“Just stay here.”

She glared at the three boys, lips pressed so tight against her teeth that the pink skin of them blanched white. “Fine,” she huffed.

“We’ll tell Mike to hurry up for you,” Dustin offered.

Lucas nodded adamantly.

“We got this is,” they both gave her two thumbs up. “We’ll be back in no time.”

Max eyed them. Her bottom lip jutted out. “Fine,” she said. “But if you’re not back here, I’m coming to get you.”

Will bit his lip.

He wished Mike had let Lucas do this now.

“Noted, we’ve gotta get going,” Lucas said.

Max watched them vanish with her lips still jutted out critically. She turned around to face Will, her whipping wildly. “What are we doing?”

“Waiting. We’re gonna work on where the traps should be,” Will mumbled. He’s improvising now and praying. The plans have changed, Mike and El are meeting them over at Steve’s. It’s better for them to travel in a pack; the wrist rocket won’t do much against the Mind Flayer.

They’ll try to keep him posted for now. Until then, he’s on his own.

Steve startled, body flying upward, hands raised, his breath caught somewhere in his lungs. He thinks he might’ve had a nightmare, he looked around his room—the thudding continued.

Not a nightmare.

“Steven!” He heard through the door. “Vieni da me arrivederci!”

Okay...sort of a nightmare.
He stared at the door, vision still a little blurry, mind still foggy. He palmed at his eyes and stretched his back until it cracked. He heard another sound from beside him, a little whimper escaped Billy’s mouth as he curled in on himself.

“Shut her up,” he begged into his pillow. “For the love of God, please, shut her up.”

Oh yeah. Billy Hargrove is in his fucking bed.

With his mom on the other side of the door.

Because that’s exactly what he wanted to deal with at...9:27 in the morning.

He swiped his hand down his face and winced at his sore nose. “Christ,” Steve grumbled. “In a minute, mom!” Billy moaned softly into the pillow. He grabbed Steve’s and threw it over his head and groaned again. “Sorry,” Steve whispered. “Just stay quiet, alright?”

He got up grabbing his robe and throwing it on like if he kept himself covered he’d successfully hide Billy from her. His mom’s not like his dad, she’s only willfully ignorant when she wants to be—with a strong emphasis on when she wants to be. He doesn’t even like saying goodbye to her anymore, doesn’t really see the point of it. But if there’s any detail she has to remember about him, it had to be how much of a brat he used be when she forgot to say goodbye.

That’s the one detail she actually remembers.

He pulled the door open enough to slid out and closed it behind him.

She looked over him from his toes to his head. One of her eyebrows arched high, “what happened to your face?”

“I fell,” he said quickly.

On top of that, he knows he looks ridiculous in sweatpants, socks, a sweatshirt and a robe in the middle of April. “I,” he said, sweating. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I think I’m coming down with something.”

“Is that why the entire house smells like lemon Lysol®?” She asked.

Oh God, it does, of course, it does because he had to wipe down every surface Billy walked on or touched. He winced, “uh...yeah...I uh...I got sick and...then it...got...uh...on the floor? So...Lysol®.”

Her lips curled, a noise disgust coming from her red lips. He knows that he’s lying through his teeth but it still hurts that she doesn’t care. If he really was sick she’d still leave him, probably wouldn’t even think twice about it.

“I’ll make sure that you see someone then,” she said slowly, eyeing him. They don’t hug, they never do but she’s even more reluctant to come near him.

“Bye mom,” he always says.

“Til later, angelo,” she always responds and then she leaves.

He’s happy to see her go this time though, happy because she hadn’t asked too many questions. Telling her he vomited in the fucking living room was probably enough to get her to bounce immediately.

She was halfway down the stairs when something crashed loudly from behind his bedroom door.
Steve winced, then paled. He looked at her with wide eyes, too wide to be anything but shock and horror and probably that look he gave her when he cracked the glass on her side mirror by accident.

“What was that?” She said slowly.

“The drawer,” Steve answered instantly. “You know how it um...how it falls out when I leave it open. I think there are too many clothes in there or the hinge is busted or something. Don’t worry about it.”


Steve nodded. He held his breath and waited for her to turn around with her suitcase and everything and bust into his room.

He wouldn’t even know how to explain a boy in his room or the fact that said boy is beaten to a bloody pulp and he’s wearing his clothes and they slept together the entire night and it felt so damn good.

It was the best sleep he’s had in months.

He wouldn’t know where to start.

She glared at him with hell in her eyes and his heart sank. He’s probably going to have to find a way. “Mom, I--”

“My flight is in less than two hours, *saccente.*” Steve winced. “If it weren’t,” she hissed. “I storm up there and throw her out myself.”

Her.

He could almost fucking laugh if it didn’t bring tears to his eyes first.

*Her.*

God, that’d be easier to explain. His mom probably thinks he’s into some really kinky shit between the Lysol® and the giant cut on his face. if this were just some lay he wouldn’t even fucking care. He’d let her walk out mostly naked if she felt like it.

“I’m sorry,” he said feebly.

“You’re going to be,” she said. She never stomps, but there’s something in the way she walks when she’s angry at him, at his father, it’s like she’s trying to stab the heel of her stiletto straight into hell. He’s sure she’s imaging he’s underneath it.

He kept his mouth shut with his hands jammed into his pockets. He watched go all the way out into the door because he knows the only thing that’ll actually dismiss him is the door locking behind her.

His mind was racing with what that sound could have been and all he can think is *Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy.* Until he wasn’t sure if he was even thinking a word, let alone a name.

The door slammed shut, he heard that click and he was gone.

“Hey,” he said bursting through the door. Eyes searching, heart all the way up in his throat like the thing is trying to choke him. “Billy? Billy, can you hear me?”
He could see his head on the other side of the bed, ass flat on the floor with one of his arms partially slung over the bedside table like he didn’t fall minutes ago, but seconds. “I tried to stand up,” he swallowed. “Forgot about…” He trailed off to look down at himself and all the bruises that covered him underneath his sweatshirt.

“Jesus,” Steve said.

He took Billy underneath the arms, he still feels sleep warm and his skin is soft. He really wished they could have laid around a little long, wished this didn’t suck so much. Steve put him back down on the bed gently.

“I thought I heard…” Billy chewed on his lip. “I don’t know, I heard someone talking to me. I swear .”

Steve let go him, his eyebrows furrowed. “Heard someone talking?”

His hair is smashed on one side of his face, eyes a wild, bloodshot red. He looks a little crazy, a little out of it. “I’m going crazy,” Billy rubbed two hands over his face, he stiffened at his palm touching his swollen right eye. “I think I’m going crazy.”

“Hey,” he still had his arms around him, he tightened the hold a little. “You’re just recovering alright? You probably heard me and my mom.”

“She heard didn’t she?”

Steve bit down on his lip, he nodded.

“Didn’t mean to get you in trouble with her,” Billy actually mumbled, he didn’t meet his eyes. “I know how much a bitch she can be.”

Steve shrugged. For one moment his hand twitched with the idea of taking Billy’s messy blonde hair and tucking it behind his ear. He’d rather have a chance to look at the side of his face that isn’t mottled with bruises. “Don’t worry about it, she’ll take some valium, drink a bottle a wine and knock out. She probably won’t even remember,” he said. He reached up, taking the blonde strands and did just that.

Billy caught his wrist with his hand. Warmth encircles it, vibrating a little. He stared at him with an unreadable expression

Okay.

Steve swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing. Granted, no one really tucks someone else’s hair behind their ear unless they really like them. It’s an excuse to get closer; it’s textbook flirting 101.

And his dumbass did it anyway.

He kept his wrist in his hand, lowering it.

Steve stared back him, his bottom lip slid between his teeth. His face felt hot under Billy’s gaze. He was kind of wondering that since that night at the diner, Billy hasn’t left his head once since Lori’s party.

Because he was drugged.

Because he has his memories.
Because he’s worried about him.

Because he cares a lot about him.

Steve’s hand folded into his, Billy looked down at it wordlessly. He’s not used to him being so quiet. He doesn’t like it.

“Hey,” Steve said softly. “Hey, it’ll be okay.”

“I--” Billy tried to say ‘I know that, asshole.’ He tried to lie through it but the words were stuck in his throat. He’s an awful liar. He has to go away forever, doesn’t he? Run away from Neil and Hawkins and maybe even the fucking government.

“You’ll be okay,” Steve said. “I’ll...I’ll make breakfast, I’ll check out your wounds and then you can stay over here if you want. As long as you want.”

Billy nodded. He wondered what Steve would say if he said he never wants to go back home. If he said he can’t go home. He gave his uninjured hand a soft squeeze, Steve’s smile was fragile but hopeful.

“I could even try and make one of those strawberry smoothies you like?”

“No,” Billy finally said. That’s too much trouble. “I’m not--”

“You’re eating breakfast, you need it.”

He doesn’t feel hungry, just sick. “Fine, no weird shit.”

“I kinda only know how to make an omelet,” Steve admitted. Billy looked at him with his bigger and dopier, bashful smile and tried to place the memory of it in his mind. He could map out Steve’s moles like constellations on his skin, knows his worst birthday gift and the way he likes his bacon but it doesn’t matter when he can have the real thing in real time.

He has to go. As soon as he can he has to leave for good. Maybe he’ll disappear somewhere like Miami and think of last night. Billy thought of last night when he was in too much of a daze to really think. He doesn’t remember half of it, but he remembers his eyes dropping down Steve’s pillowy lips.

Steve’s eyes followed his, he swallowed. His throat clicked. He wasn’t hallucinating last night, he knows he wasn’t. “Billy,” he whispered. He wasn’t exactly sure, and if he’s wrong he’ll probably try to kick his ass. Steve’s hand felt to Billy’s hip, pulling him closer. Billy watched while the tips of his ears turned bright red.

He didn’t have to do anything else.

Billy yanked him forward--lips slotted together like two magnets clicking into place. The taste is stale from grimy morning breath and all of last night’s panicked breathing but neither of them mind especially as Billy’s tongue parts Steve’s lips. His arms looped around his waist, pulling him closer. Billy watched while the tips of his ears turned bright red.

It’s dizzying how needed Steve feels all of a sudden. He hasn’t felt this needed since he was down in those tunnels, no, before that. Before the Upside Down and Jonathan Byers and all the stupid shit he did in the fall of 1983.

He almost sighed, half of a sound that Steve swallowed hungrily. It’s been a long time since he
kissed anyone and not since Nancy has his heart pounded so hard. Steve’s hand shifted underneath him to cradle the back of his head, his fingers curled deep into Billy’s matted blond curls. His other hand snaked underneath Billy’s sweatshirt to rest over his sleep-warm skin. Billy let out another choked sound, not like the sigh he let before or really like anything good.

Steve pulled off of him, “shit, shit, shit. Sorry.”

Billy’s eyes were screwed shut. “No,” he waved his injured hand blindly. “It’s my head again.” He sat up with his palm pressed to the side of his head. “Hurts again,” he grunted.

Steve bit down on his lip. It’s still tingling from Billy, all for Billy. “Are you sure you’re not gonna have an aneurysm?”

“It’s not like you can tell,” he gritted. “I j-just...stop talking.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Billy glared at him. He’s gone pale again, his eyes rimmed red like it hurts that bad. “Okay, I’ll be quiet.”

Both of Billy’s hands slid over his eyes. “C-can you shut th-the blinds?”

Steve got up and immediately closed him. If it hurts this bad and that fast, he thinks he should probably be calling 9-1-1 before Billy really has that aneurysm. It’s different when it’s a cut, this is his brain.

That’s the everything a person is.

“Steve!” That can’t be Dustin, yelling his fucking head off. “Steve! Buddy, are you here!”

Except it is so he has to deal with that on top of this.

“Shit,” Steve groaned. He's going to have to childproof the house. His mom wasn't even around to let him in this time. He got up again. “Just stay in bed, okay? Try to get it to stop.” Steve couldn’t really look at him without thinking about the fact that they’d just kissed and now it’s turned into this. “I’ll get rid of them and then I’m taking you to the hospital.”
XXIII. Friends Don't Lie

Chapter Summary

El comes to rescue and Max is really, actually gives a shit about Billy. Like...really.

“Steve!” Dustin called out.

It’s not his fault El can easily unlock the back door, not his fault that they’ve got him cornered like an animal. It’s for his own good, you know, just in case Billy is here. El’s hidden in the kitchen and Lucas and Mike are in the coat closet by the stairs.

First, they were going to make him go down to the basement, now he’s got to be the one to do this.

“Dustin!” Steve yelled, he stomped down the stairs like it was a chore. To Dustin, it just means Steve’s in a pissy mood, and not much has changed in last twenty-four hours. He walked right past the kitchen, right past the coat closet and into the living room. He didn’t even notice El hiding under the table. “Look,” he said wearily, coming into the room and around the corner. He looks pale, there’s a large bruise over his nose. Something’s wrong. Dustin can feel it, he knows it.

“Dude, you can’t be here right now.”

Dustin looked around nervously, he caught El peering out and waiting with a bold look to her usually soft brown eyes. They’re just putting him to sleep for a little while. Steve needs to sleep, he’s sleep deprived all the time. This will be good for him. “You know, I’d totally agree with you, but Tews got out and my mom is gonna lo--”

“No,” Steve cut him off. “I can’t drive you anywhere, I can’t help you look for your cat. I can’t do anything,” he hissed. “Go home.”

Okay.

It’s not like Steve is always warm and bubbly, but he’s been a bit of a douche lately, and there’s really only one person he could blame for that. “Why?” Dustin asked. “Is he here?”

He was hoping for ‘no, Dustin, I’m grumpy and I’m tired and your cat fucking tried to claw my eyes out,’ which Tews kind of did to be honest. He didn’t get that though, he got Steve sputtering for a moment, too long. Like every time you ask Lucas if he likes Max even though they kissed at the Snow Ball he starts sputtering, it’s just like that.

“What?” Dustin snapped. “Go home, I’m serious, Dustin. Please.”

Which really isn’t a ‘yes,’ but he sees Mike and Lucas silently scamper up the stairs behind Steve’s back. It might as well be the signal. Dustin sighed, he’s going to feel bad about this until he dies. “I wouldn’t do this unless you were pretty much like my brother,” Dustin said.

It’s not like in the movies where the crazy powered person says sleep and they keel over, the person usually keeling over is the bad guy. Dustin doesn’t even see El do it, he just knows when Steve’s pissed expression goes slack and his eyes roll into the back of his head that it’s been done.

Dustin tried to catch all of Steve’s weight or at least keep his head from slamming onto the coffee
table, that would kill him and that would suck. “I’m sorry,” Dustin repeated. “I’m gonna buy you a million KFC buckets when you wake up, buddy. When this is all over you’re gonna get like, like...so fat from all the KFC I buy you. I promise.”

Of course, Steve didn’t respond. With his eyes shut and his mouth open and slack he really did look like he’d just fallen asleep on the floor. All he needs is some drool.

El came over to stand beside him for a minute. Dustin eyed her, “what? What’s wrong?” He feared maybe she accidentally made his brain explode instead.

Her face twisted, eyes sad. “Something’s wrong here, but it’s not the Gate,” she gnawed on her lip. “Mike, he said ‘maybe’ but I know it’s not,” she said with that quiet certainty she has about most things. “I would know.” Dustin couldn’t really argue with that, she would know. She looked around Steve’s grand living room, the large couch, the TV, the bookcase and the sliding door to the pool where Dustin had come in, all like she was looking for something specific. When she didn’t find it she turned back to Dustin, “something is still really wrong.” She can feel it like little shivers over her skin.

Dustin’s eyes looked upward, “is it just me or have they been really quiet?”

~oo0oo~

“Gross,” Mike gagged, standing over Billy’s body. “Why does he look like that?”

Lucas did the same, he shrugged. His foot pushed Billy's body a few times, when he didn’t respond he did it even harder. “I don’t know, but he’s out cold.”

Billy’s head rolled over revealing red, ears stained with blood that matched the blood dripping from his nose. He was kind of hoping his eyes would stop flickering under his eyelids if he pushed him a little, it didn’t.

It's a sick sight.

Mike kneeled down and swung his backpack down to the ground with him. He wasn’t expecting to do this at Steve’s house, but Steve’s parents are hardly ever around and the house is pretty empty for now.

Besides, it’s Steve’s fault for getting himself captured by Billy the Mind Flayer. He’ll understand when he wakes up and everything is back to normal. “You know, we better explain to Max he was like this when we found him,” Lucas said, eyeing his bruises. Whoever he ran into, whatever he did when he snuck out of the house must’ve been serious.

The funny thing is that he looks like he lost.

Mike pulled out a roll of duct tape, cutting off a long strip with his teeth.

“You think this might be just a little messed up, right?” Lucas voiced his thoughts aloud.

Mike snorted. “yeah,” he said. “But what choice do we have? He’s asleep, maybe he won’t even remember it.” He wished Will didn’t. If he and Billy could switch places it would probably be a lot fairer, but he doesn’t have time to think about that.

“He’s unconscious, there’s totally a difference.”

Mike looked up at Billy and grimaced, he looks gross. “Are you going to help me or what?”
Lucas groaned snatching the ripped tape from Mike’s hand and getting to work. “You know how far it is from Max’s house to here?” Lucas asked.

“Far,” Mike said. “Like, across town. Steve probably picked him up,” Mike tossed back while taping his feet. “After a bigger douche beat the hell out of him.”

“Well, Max thinks he walked.” He ripped more tape and handed it to him.

“No way! That’d take forever.”

“He wouldn’t care if he’s a meat suit,” Lucas said.

“Meat suit?”

“Dustin came up with it,” he clarified.

Mike rolled his eyes.

“And besides why would the Mind Flayer walk to Steve’s?” He asked. “He could just call him. And who would get in a fight and win against Billy and the Mind Flayer?”

“Max doesn’t think he’s the Mind Flayer, that’s what I’m trying to get at,” Lucas said.

“Wh--”

“Because he isn’t,” El said from the doorway of Steve’s room. “You didn’t say it was Max’s brother.”

“Step-brother,” Lucas, Dustin and Mike corrected in unison.

She glared at them. “It doesn’t matter. Put the tape down.” In that moment the boys realized how far El had come linguistically and just how much time she spends around Hopper.

Okay, granted, El’s a gentle soul most of the time. She knows and hates when things aren’t fair, she’s loyal especially to her found family, her friends. That’s not a question, which is why the boys look at her now like she has eight heads and a tail. “Huh? Why?”

She looked at Billy with the same sad eyes she looked at Steve with.

“We told you, ever since that night in the woods he’s been weird and he’s only gotten worse he knows about the Upside Down,” Mike said. “He might know about you, he could hurt you.”

El would like to see that, she didn’t think he would at all. Billy was too curious and desperate the time that they might to do anything except listen to exactly what she was saying. She understood, she felt the same way when she learned about Kali and even more so when she met her.

The boys don’t understand, they’re just being protective of her. They’re all protective of each other. “He wouldn’t,” she said. Lucas and Mike both snorted. “No, I met him. I see him in the static. We’ve talked.”

Talked.

Like he didn’t just stride up to her, nostrils flared with his fists at his side and yelled in her face? The way El just looks at him a little sadly again makes it sound like they sat down somewhere or they really did meet within the static and talked like Billy isn’t just a gross, Neanderthal with a short fuse.
The boys blinked.

“He sorry, he’s learning to be sorry,” she said. “Steve’s been helping him because he’s like me, we promised not to tell anyone.” El looked away from them, keeping information from them feels like lying but Hopper taught her to be quiet about these things until she can’t anymore or until she’s sure. She’s not stupid. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Like you?” Mike yelled. He was quickest to connect Billy’s bloody nose with what El meant. She knows when she’s overworked herself her ears bleed too.

“So he...he can...?” Lucas turned wide-eyed. He whirled around to look at Billy. “He can--”

“You mean this son of a bitch can move stuff with his mind?” Dustin pointed at him. That’s totally unfair, he’s so undeserving of it. “How come he didn’t use--”

“They can’t all move stuff with their minds, Dustin,” Mike interrupted. “Kali makes you see things that aren’t there,” he said. “He can...,” Mike shut his mouth for a second, wasn’t sure how much the two of them talked. He still really didn’t like that. “Did he tell you?”

El shook her head. “I saw. He steals memories.”

“He steals memories?”

El nodded, always directing with her head first before thinking. That’s not quite the right word and she knows it. Her nose wrinkled. “Sort of, halfway steals them. He doesn’t keep them.” Which is *borrowing*. “He borrows them.”

The boys shared looks, Lucas nodded slowly. “Right.”

“How come he doesn’t have a number if he’s like you?”

She wasn’t sure what Billy might’ve been before, but it helps to know. The old ones, the forgotten ones don’t have numbers on their arms. The files make her sick to her stomach. They’re failed, with a large stamp she imagined was one red if they weren’t all black and white copies. “He’s older,” she said finally. “Older than me.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s hurt. He’s mal...mal--”

“Malfunctioning?” Dustin asked.

She nodded.

“What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” Lucas snapped.

“I mean in context,” Mike argued. “Malfunctioning could mean anything.”

It’s a side effect they were so young and small, and there’s only so much their minds and bodies could take. El and Kali don’t have to, although El briefly went through a period where she thought that. No, they’re fine. Billy isn’t, she’s not sure what will happen to him. “He’s sick.”

“Like he’s dying?” Dustin said.
“She said he’s sick, he’s not dying.”

El bit down on her lip. She’s not so sure. She didn’t know he was so old. She knew how lucky she and Kali turned out to be with what small lot they had. Her eyes welled. It feels sick all the way down to her toes calling herself lucky, but when she looks at Billy she knows she is.

“Oh God! Is he dying?”

“El,” Mike said softly. “Is he?”

“The old ones do sometimes,” she said. “I don’t know.”

They stared at Billy, unconscious or as sleep or whatever they each wanted to call it, dried blood on his lips and crusted in his hair. His eyes keep doing that ugly looking thing of flickering underneath his eyelids like REM sleep.

“So what do we do with him?”

“Uh...how about get Hopper, now? Like we should’ve before,” Lucas said.

“It’s not like we knew before,” Mike said. They thought they could handle, they had El and they were prepared but not for this. “I would’ve...I could’ve.”

“Should’ve, actually,” Dustin finished. He was agreeing with Lucas. They’re in way over their head.

The four of them were careful at taking Steve’s body upstairs. They couldn’t leave him lying on the floor and El was insistent they couldn’t leave him on the couch that he was lying right next to. El said it would be better for both of them if they were together, none of the guys understood but they weren’t protesting the spark of certainty in her eyes.

Steve looked different than Billy. Steve really did look asleep in comparison, Billy looked unconscious like he was the one that had been knocked out by El and Steve was the one they found in the bed. They wouldn’t believe it was the other way around if they hadn’t been there before.

“What do we do now?”

“Get Hopper,” Mike said. “We can’t tell him what’s happening over the phone, we just have to hope he takes us seriously.”

“He will,” El assured him. “He cares about Billy too.”

Dustin wrung his hands nervously, he coughed a little. The others turned to look at him, “what?”

“How are we going to tell Max?”

The group froze. “Together,” Mike said. “We’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”

~oo0oo~

“Max! Max! Wait!” Will ran after the blur of red hair, locks bending and bobbing with every stomp of her feet.

“No! You’re hiding something from me,” she snapped. “I know it. You assholes always do stuff
like this to me." Always the last one to know, always left out of things. It’s bullshit.

Will followed after her. He couldn’t hear the walkie crackling in his backpack calling his name. “No,” he said. “No, this time we’re trying to keep you safe.”

She scoffed. “Did Lucas come up with that one? Is that your nice way of saying you want me out of the way.”

“We found a note from Billy!” He said, finally getting Max to stop. She whirled around with her face screwed up, tears in her eyes, daring him to lie to her again. “He knows about,” he caught his breath. “About the Upside Down. When we went out for ice cream after we saw you at Pig n’ Pokes, Mike found this note in Steve’s car. He wrote it to Steve. He was afraid of the Demogorgon and…”

“What? ” She hissed. “And what?”

“Will! Do you copy, Will!” Mike muffled yell came through Will’s backpack. The look Max was giving them he thinks he’s seen his mom give people she’s beyond done with.

“Give me the walkie, Will,” said.

“Code red! Something went wrong!” Mike’s voice called from the backpack.

He froze.

Code red.

Oh no.

“Give it to me,” Max’s eye burned and in that moment he could believe that she and Billy are blood relatives. “Right now, Will.”

He has to get it anyway, it’s code red. Something went wrong, Billy could be anywhere or worse something went wrong with getting the Mind Flayer out of him. It could’ve, Will shivered, it’s like severing a limb. He could feel it being ripped from every one of his systems, could feel the heat and its pain. So much could’ve gone wrong. Will slung his back to the ground and pulled the walkie out, put it close enough that Max could hear and he could respond too.

“This is Will. Over.”

“Is Max there? Over.” That was Lucas asking.

Will looked up at her and waited for her to signal with what he should say. When her upper lip stiffened and she glared at him he looked down at his walkie. “N-no,” he said. “I walked away when I heard you. Over.”

There was a long beat of silence, nothing on the guys’ end and nothing but the sound of nature and the leaves on trees rustling.

“You can go get her, she needs to hear too,” he said.

Max snatched the walkie from Will. “I’m here now. What did you do to my brother?” She yelled into the walkie. “Assholes!”

“We didn’t do anything!” Dustin said. “We found him, he’s at Steve’s like we thought he would be.”
“Steve’s?”

“But he’s hurt,” Lucas said. “Like, really hurt.”

Max’s stomach plummeted. Her throat felt tight, she managed to squeak out a small, “what?”

“We can’t explain everything over walkie,” Mike was back. “Just get here ASAP.”

Max thrust the walkie into Will’s chest. He swallowed, kept his sage, wide eyes on her. He knew he shouldn’t have done this. They shouldn’t have done this. “Max—,” her head was down, her fists balled at her sides.

“This wouldn’t have happened if you just,” her fists loosened and clenched. She whirled around again, stomping through woods. “C’mon, we have to get to Steve’s.”

Will trotted after her, he gnawed on his lip. “Jonathan might be home, we can ask him for a ride. It’ll be faster.” He thinks all he can do right now is be helpful, he’s done too much already.

“Fine,” she said coolly. “That’s fine.”
“So, ham and cheese?” Jonathan teased.

Nancy sat at their kitchen table, her nose wrinkled, a bright sparkle in her bright blue eyes. “No, God,” she snorted.

“Then, what?”

“PB&J?” She asked, one tricky little eyebrow raised. “And…,” she thought for a moment.

Jonathan stood looking in the fridge, most of the time half full leftover potluck and not much else. “Pretty sure we’ve got, uh… grapes? We have chocolate chip cookies in the pantry I think.” He pulled back from the fridge, head poking over the door to look at her. “Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect,” she was in the pantry holding up the opened box of chocolate chip cookies, some off brand stuff that Dustin turned Will on to. His mom thinks they’re crap, but honestly, Jonathan kind of likes them too. Nancy reached into the cabinet and tossed him the jar of peanut butter. She dug out a cookie, sticking it between her lips and plopped back down in the seat.

“So, parallel parking,” she said.

Jonathan laughed nervously, “I really think someone more qualified should teach you that.”

“Well, as far as anyone’s concerned, Ted Wheeler is my driving instructor,” she said. “And it’s on the test and Hawkins is ninety percent parallel parking, I’m sure you’re fine at it.”

“Nancy,” he said. Not that this hasn’t been a lot of fun actually because watching her go from thinking 20 miles per hour is fast to being comfortable at 60 has been. But it’s not safe, and fuck Mr. Wheeler for putting them in that position. He sighed, “I don’t know if I know how to teach someone that, I mean, you’re right, I’m okay at it, but it’s different telling someone how.”

Nancy seemed to follow, she shrugged. “I think it’s cute when you don’t think I’ve already read about something and tried it out for myself,” she said.

“Oh.” Jonathan flushed.

She laughed, with her not quite head tilted back all of the way but enough, eyes shut and a light smile.

“Jonathan?” Will’s voice called from the back of the house. He figured Will wouldn’t spend all day with Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, they left really early in the morning. He was getting ready when he was out the door to pick up Nancy for their lessons and that was really early. He could hear something wrong in his voice, something hesitant and fragile that made him wish their mom was home too.
“In the kitchen!”

Will came from the back door. The last thing he expected was Max Mayfield with him in toe, red-faced and teary-eyed. Will’s eyebrows shoot up to too when his eyes land on Nancy.

“Can you take us to Steve’s?”

“Steve’s?” They say in unison, a little incredulously, and definitely worried.

It’s not like they only start hanging around Steve when something’s wrong, but that’s exactly what normally happens. If the look on Max’s face isn’t anything to go by already, something is really wrong.

“Can you?” Max snapped, hands clenching and unclenching at her sides. “I need to get there.”

Which is weird considering, John assumed Will was going to ask if he could give Max a ride home. She looks like she needs it.

“What’s going on?” Nancy asked.

Max snorted sharply, her voice was mean. “Oh? Will has a story for you.” Her eyes electric light blue and burning slid to the boy beside her, glaring daggers. They snapped back to the two of them. “If you can’t, just point me in the right direction. I’ll walk there myself.”

The sentence, ‘just walk through the woods until you find a swimming pool’ hung on Jonathan's tongue, but the easy look in Will's eyes and the fierce one in Max's and the fact that they're trying to go to Steve's house tells him he shouldn't.

He should give them a ride.

“No,” he said. “No,” he repeated, sharing a glance with Nancy. He put the peanut butter jar on the table. “I can take you there, just give me a second.”

Max’s fists clenched and unclenched again, fingers pressed against her thigh impatiently. “Okay, fine,” she paused. “Thank you.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan’s eyes went to Will. “No problem,” and then he was gone grabbing his jacket without really thinking and his keys. Nancy was standing, he wondered if he should take her home, but it’s Steve’s house so she probably won’t let him.

They pile into Jonathan’s old Ford LTD, they were only in a less than half hour ago. He was with Nancy and they were arguing about the Ramones and laughing. Will was sitting in the back seat now, shrunken down as small as possible can be, hands pressed between his thighs. Max’s arms crossed over her chest, a stubborn tear tumbling down her increasingly red cheeks again.

He put the car in reverse back down the road again. “Okay, what’s going on?”

Max’s eyes shifted to Will again he shifted. “Billy’s really hurt, he’s at Steve’s.”

“Then why is Max here?”

She snorted.

Not that she couldn’t be, not that Will doesn’t like Max, he seems to like her, but most importantly, he’s okay with her. Will’s okay with a lot of people, but that doesn’t mean he’d be out with any of them.
“Dustin and Lucas went looking for Billy because they couldn’t find him this morning and...they told Max to stay with me,” he bit down on his lip. “I was supposed to keep her distracted.”

A whole lot of good that ended up being.

Nancy and Jonathan shared a look, they’ve officially come full circle. Billy makes things full circle, for whatever reason. Because a few days Billy was really chummy with Steve and now the Party is more concerned with him than they normally ever would be, and he’s ‘hurt’ apparently.


“Something bad,” Max answered hollowly. His necklaced weighed in her pocket. He would never break it off himself, he’d never just leave it in the yard.

“Like a demogorgon attacked him? Or--”

“They just said hurt, okay?” Max snapped. “Lucas said was that he’s really hurt, and that’s it.” She huffed, her arms recrossed. “You couldn’t just leave him alone.”

Will didn’t know what to say to that exactly. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions he supposes there has never been a more perfect example than this.

“What do you mean ‘y couldn’t just leave him alone’? What is going on?”

“They think he’s the stupid, friggin’ Mind Flayer,” Max said. “And I believed them too for a little bit, but he’s not, something else is wrong with him.” For Jonathan and Nancy, it’s like deja-vu, a few days ago Steve was saying the same thing. That there’s something wrong with Billy, that Billy’s acting weird, he tried telling them.

Annoyingly enough, as Steve often does, try telling them stuff.

Try being the keyword because they didn’t listen.

A feel of dread sunk low in their stomachs. Jonathan bit down on his lip. Nancy turned around in her seat to look at them, “what made you think he’s the Mind Flayer.”

“He was in the woods and then he starts acting weird, and he gave Steve this note about the Upside Down,” Will said. “I don’t...they were certain and I...I was just so scared.” That’s what he was. He was scared of the risk, what if it was? He would rather be safe than sorry, so sorry. Saying out loud it didn’t sound like even enough proof to do anything, but Mike, Lucas, and Dustin were worried and he was so scared that that thing could come back.

That it would come back for him.

“You found a note?” Max’s head whipped around to look at him. “What note?”

“It was this note, it told Steve to come meet him or something, and on the other side...it was just...scribbles, a Demogorgon mostly. He was afraid.”

Max’s eyes were just as big as Nancy’s and Jonathan’s, “what?” She screamed. “You didn’t tell me?”

“It was after we saw you at Pig n’ Pokes, it was in Steve’s car,” Will explained. “And we thought...we didn’t know, but he knows something about the Upside Down and... and...,” he wasn’t sure if he wanted to say anything else.
They jumped the gun, that’s what they did.

Nancy took a deep breath, she was catching on. “Do either of you know why Billy was in the woods?”

The two of them were silent. Will shook his head.

Max shrugged. “He just ended up there, and then Steve followed him.”

They shared a look. Nancy bit her lip.

“Some jerk at school pranked him,” Jonathan said. “They put something in his drink, and he started acting weird and ran off into the woods. Steve saw him run off and tried to stop him before he could get hurt.”

Will and Max blinked with large, round eyes, both too young for high school parties and people who think that kind of shit is funny.

A prank?

Something in his drink?

“Maybe it was more than a prank,” Max said.

“It was April Fool’s weekend,” Nancy said. “It was definitely a prank.” Not that she doesn’t believe some horrible science fiction nightmare could’ve happened, it was more about stopping Max from thinking it did. “Someone played a mean prank on Billy, Steve tried to help him out and I guess...after milkshakes or whatever, they’re fine with each other. I’m sure they’re both fine.”

Except Lucas said he’s really hurt.

“Mike told us to come ASAP,” Will muttered. “He sounded worried.”

Max nodded, knuckles pressing into her legs.

Steve’s house was at the end of Loch Nora’s neighborhood, back near the woods. They recognized the bikes thrown haphazardly on the bushes at the front of the house and then Hopper’s car, which didn’t bode well. Nothing has seemed like it’s going to end well since Will showed up with Max.

“Why is Hopper here?” Max asked, sitting up in her seat.

“Steve’s parents usually aren’t home,” Nancy explained. “They probably just needed an adult.” And with their mom at work, who else was there really left to call?

“But his mom was here yesterday,” Will said.

“And then she left,” Nancy said simply. “That’s what she does.”

They stopped behind Hopper’s car and got out. Max’s eyes went to the house, more like a castle than an actual house. She was first up to the red double doors and froze, Will, Jonathan, and Nancy did the same at the sound of one loud voice hardly muffled by the door.

They all traded looks between each other.

“I don’t think I’ve heard Hopper yell that loud,” Nancy said.
Max felt just a little justified if anything.

Nancy tried the door, it was locked, which they were really hoping it wouldn’t be so they could just slink in unnoticed without interrupting anything, without being caught in the wave. Her fist pounded on the door, repeating over and over until it finally opened.

It was instinctive, their shoulders raising, taking a step back without even really thinking. “Oh great,” Hopper said, not really at them. It’s not at them. He rubbed a hand over his face, “let me guess--”

“We don’t think Billy’s the Mind Flayer,” Will said.

Hopper scoffed. “Great,” he said gruffly. “That’s great, kid.” He pulled away and let them inside.

Max’s first instinct was to go punch them all in the face, and scream and yell because that wasn’t fair. Not even close. It’s what she wants to do, but first. “Where’s Billy?” She asked.

Hopper’s expression changed then like he’s registering that Max is there for the first time since the four of them appeared. “Listen,” Hopper started. Which is possibly the last thing she wanted to hear because ‘listen’ is usually followed by something bad. “He’s sleeping, alright? He’s sleeping, so we’re all going to stay down here and wait for him to wake up,” he said with so much emphasis she knew to read between the lines, he’s saying she can’t see him.

“Where’s Steve?” Nancy asked.

Hopper rubbed a hand over his face again. “Also asleep.”

To be truthful, they may not be able to wake up Billy, but Steve is different. They just don’t want to wake up Steve yet for the same reason he really wished Jonathan and Nancy hadn’t shown up with Max. He’s not sure how to tell them, and God forbid one of the goddamn kids even attempt to explain it.

“Why haven’t you woke him up?” She asked.

“Because…,” he paused. “Look, there are some things I have to explain to you and him, so we’re all going to just take this one thing at a time, alright?” Which sounds bad, like Hoppers only leading up to bad news.

He turned to look at Max specifically, “you think you can sit in the same room as the others and chill while I try to explain?”

Max gnawed on her lip, thought for a moment. Nodded. “If I get answers, yeah.”

“Okay, kid,” he said. “C’mon.”

The boys were sitting on Steve’s couch in the living room, with making arms crossed and pouts. Nancy was just relieved to see Mike not covered in tunnel goo or demodogs blood or something worse. El was in the big chair by the bookcase with hands folded in her lap, an uneasy look on her face. No wonder Hopper was so pissed.

“Nancy?” Mike yelped.

“Max--” Lucas started.

She flipped them off, making herself comfortable next to El in the big chair, and would count them
all lucky. She had to keep her fists jammed in her pockets to keep from crying or kicking them, probably both.

“What we’re not gonna do right now is talk,” Hopper ordered. “We’re all going to sit and listen while I clear some stuff up and when I’m all done, like the rest of this stuff, we’re going to keep our mouth shut about it, understand?”

They nodded.

Hopper dragged a few chairs in from the kitchen and Nancy and Jonathan sat down in them, Will had managed to cram in with the other boys on the couch.

“We’re going to start back a little before we closed The Gate, alright?”

Hopper then reached for the manila folder sitting on the coffee table in front of him. He pulled out a picture of one girl, nothing like El in appearance but when he held up her picture her eyes fell to lap and Max could hear her quietly whisper the word ‘sister’.

She’s 008. She’s Kali and she can make people see things that aren’t there.

And if there’s 008, there’s 009, and 010, and 007, and 006, and 005, and so on all the way to 001 and maybe even before that; and when he pulls out a newspaper clipping about a baby boy in San Diego, California presumed dead that showed up on his parents’ doorstep two years later something clicks for her.

Not everything, but enough.
Chapter Notes

This is a little bit late, but I’m not gonna lie the end part is one of my favorite parts I’ve ever written for this fic so I guess that’s kind of a trade off :)

There was a little baby in San Diego, California. His parents probably thought him dead, or maybe they knew better. They could have known where he was all along, Terry Ives did, or least she discovered the truth. Or maybe they were so happy to have their baby back the circumstances didn’t quite matter.

Except the circumstances must have mattered because the baby was labeled and studied like a rat. His parents brought him back for questions, for experiments, for answers and there were notes until 1975. At the end of 1975 the notes end, they were filled with theories and far from inconclusive. There were reports filled with ‘latent abilities, possible’ ‘Potential reached at maturation,’ and finally ‘1985.’

In 1985, they would check on the baby, eighteen years old by then; and if his full potential wasn’t reached by then, then they would do the same in 1993. The baby was, so far, considered a success, but a long-con. A waiting game with amazing results if they’re successful.

They created someone that could learn anything in an instant. With one touch. Their creation could make use of all the empty recesses of the human brain, all the untapped potential and fill it to the brim.

A touch, they documented, on one hand for approximately 45 seconds was enough at the age of five. They hypothesized by maturation all he would need to do is brush them in passing, a bump on the street would be enough, possibly even with a thin clothing barrier. There would be no person in the United States, Russia or China more powerful. A hacker, a mercenary, and a soldier in one body with the ability to steal information with a single brush of skin.

It was ambition at the time of 1967, but no more ambitious than a little girl that could move things with her mind or make people see things that aren’t there. By then there was no ‘long-con.’

When Hopper finished explaining the silence within the space of Steve Harrington’s living room, of all places, felt heavy and dense with questions and realizations. Billy Hargrove is hardly a mercenary. He isn’t a spy and he isn’t a soldier, he’s a small town, high school bully at best.

But he could be.

He could be whatever he wants to be if he wants to be it.

“Holy shit,” Dustin breathed first in the silence. A somber silence that clearly wasn’t ready to be broken yet, Lucas smack his arm with the back of his hand. The silence continued on and on and on and on...

Nancy chewed on her lip. It’s different with El, or maybe there’s something about knowing the sage little girl that makes her believe it’s different, that makes half the room clearly believe it’s
somehow different. Everyone’s gaze keeps switching as if Dustin hadn’t said anything at all, like that was hours ago.

Nancy took in a breath, Jonathan looked at her. She gnawed on her lip, opened her mouth again. “Should we eve--”

“What we’re not going to do is jump the gun on any more decisions or leap to any conclusions,” Hopper said, eyeing her and then the boys.

Nancy shut her mouth. Paused. Thought and couldn’t conjure up a single decent memory of Billy Hargrove. Not one. “It’s just that--”

“No,” Hopper spoke over her again.

Max sunk low into her seat. The files were detailed, Hawkins lab and the government had plans and ambitions for her brother of all people. The government doesn’t make plans for just anyone, not a small town bully, that’s for sure. Like Hopper and pretty much everyone else, Max has got a grasp on what Nancy is thinking.

*Should we even let someone like that walk around?*

And like, yeah, she understands it.

People thought that about Billy before they found out he has powers. *She has-- had* all the time, up until recently. There are a lot of reasons to want to throw him in a cage, but what he can do isn’t one of them. She gnawed on her lip, only keeping her thoughts to herself because she understands what Billy’s like as a person. Which is *bad*. He’s bad and what he can do is worse. The only reason she keeps her mouth shut is because she doesn’t know what to do.

“What we’re going to do is sit here and wait and see what happens,” he said. “I think an important lesson for you all is getting enough facts before we make any decision. I know someone whose job is to handle stuff like this.”

“Like an agent?” Jonathan asked.

“Yeah,” Hopped said gruffly. “Something like that I guess.”

“Dean is nice,” El added, soft voice and an even softer smile.

“You know him?” Mike gasped.

El nodded enthusiastically and smiled as if her time spent with a ‘secret agent’ wouldn’t be big news, especially as if the boys didn’t find any news around her important. “You’ve been hanging out with a secret agent!” Lucas chimed in similarly.

*Christ.*

“And you didn’t tell us!” Dustin added. “The foundation of our group is falling apart,” he said slapping a face over his head dramatically.

El rolled her eyes again, shaking her head adamantly.

Hopper ran a hand over his face again. “Keyword there being secret, kids, so if you could not run around town screaming on your walkie-talkies about a secret agent. I think we’d all appreciate it.”

“We’re not stupid,” Mike hissed.
Will eyed him.

Max snorted in her seat next to El, “okay,” she intoned.

Mike rolled his eyes. Will, Dustin and Lucas looked down into their laps, she doesn’t even know they were going to try to burn the Mind Flayer out of Billy, and they don’t want to tell her either.

“This house is so damn big.” Hopper said looking around. He grabbed the pen and paper off the coffee table, honestly, in a house this big there has to be one in pretty much every room. “Rule one,” Hopper said.

El rolled her eyes.

“Let’s keep the arguing to a minimum,” he said. “I didn’t come here to listen to you all scream at each other, I came to make sure this doesn’t get any worse.” He wrote as he spoke. “Rule two, no one is allowed upstairs. I’ll be going up there to check on him periodically, but you all stay down here is that clear?”

He was looking at Max specifically, he knows out of everyone she’s technically closest to Billy and no matter what their relationship is like she’ll want to see him at least out of morbid curiosity.

The others nodded.

“What about Steve?” Lucas asked.

“Same thing,” Hopper said. “The upstairs is off limit.” There wasn’t a Rule three or a Rule four, but it was heavily implied that more would come when they needed to. Hopper stood, chinos straightening themselves out and threw down the notepad with their rules on top of the manila folder containing all their notes. “I’m going to go do that now, what are you all going to be doing?”

“Sitting,” Mike grumbled, his chin resting on his fist.

“Not arguing,” Will added.

Hopper nodded, approving. “That’s right.” His eyes, blue, weathered and trained, switched from El at one end of the room to Jonathan at the other. “Sit tight.”

His footsteps thudded up the stairs and then around on the upper floor, a door shutting lastly.

Max slumped back in her chair, feeling a little stupid for thinking she had troubles before. The morning feels like it was days ago. Nancy and Jonathan had no clue what Max was thinking, but they agreed, sharing a look like they always do at times like these, their morning drive felt like it happened last year.

“Holy shit,” Dustin said.

“You already said that,” Mike intoned.

Dustin had been, mostly, quiet, but he was thinking--primarily about Steve because he’s very, very worried about him. He has to be. Steve, in his mind, is no different than Will, Dustin, Lucas, Max, El or Mike. He ignored Mike and stood that he could pace at the front of the living room.

“Holy shit,” Dustin repeated.

“What?” Mike and Lucas said.
He was thinking about how none of this would have happened if Billy hadn’t picked Steve up at Old Cherry Lane. He still wasn’t sure why they had to meet in the first place, or what they were doing in the woods.

*Why* they were in the woods.

And then his brain started filling in some gaps. He couldn’t help himself with it, even if he had heard Chief Hopper tell them to stop jumping to conclusions. He can’t help it if his brain makes leaps! He was taught to make leaps!

“Holy shit.”

Nancy and Jonathan looked up.

“What?” Came a chorus of voices.

“Holy shit.”

“*WHAT?*”

“I’m just…” He could hear Hopper specifically telling them not to jump to any conclusions, not to make any more mistakes. He ran scratched at his head beneath his cap. “Oh boy, you know, it’s just a hypothesis. A *guess*.”

“Spit it out already,” Max snapped impatiently.

“What if,” Dustin paused again. “I’m just *wondering*, what if Billy did it to Steve? You know…” he flailed his arms around a little, “sponged him.”

“*Sponged*?” El’s eyes widened.

“Yeah, he’s pretty much a giant brain sponge,” Dustin said. “Technically this specific power is called psychometry, but it’s easier to say sponged.”

“It would explain why they’re suddenly friends and like inseparable,” Nancy said. She scoffed. “Milkshakes my ass.”

Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“And why Steve was super worried about him yesterday,” Lucas said. “Like... *really* worried.”

“He’s his Mike,” El said smiling in that slightly oblivious way that told the others she wasn’t aware exactly of what she said.

Mike choked. “What?”

She’s gotten good at reading faces and tones, just as much as she has at speaking full sentences. She reads the room’s easily with their scrunched up noses and eyebrows, even Mikes. *Especially* Mikes. “Found him…,” her nose wrinkled. “He found him in the woods, scared and alone, he helps him be good, wants him to have friends, wants to keep him safe from the bad men, likes him.” She shrugged in a way that said ‘isn’t it obvious?’ “Like Mike and me,” she repeated.

Nancy’s lips pursed. “That’s…” they all looked at each other. “El, it’s a little different.”

She shook her head, “very same.”
“Does it matter?” Dustin chimed in again. “What if he sponged Steve in the woods?”

“Why would he do that?” Jonathan asked.

“It was an accident,” El said sagely.

Lucas’s head whipped around, “how much do you know?”

“Lucas--” Will started.

Hopper told them not to argue.

“She’s answering all these questions like she was there or something!” He said. “I’m just curious.”

El didn’t look offended, her expression darkened with guilt. “I watched over him in the static, I said that before. I was asked to.”

They blinked. “By who?”

“A nice lady,” El said. “I don’t know her name.”

Nancy grabbed the notepad from the table, ripping off the sheet of rules haphazardly before scribbling again. “Okay hypothesis,” she wrote the word in her cursive scrawl, underlining it in the blue ink of the pen. “Hypothesis,” she repeated.

Because this is only a hypothesis.

“Billy accidentally sponged Steve at Lori Vaster’s party,” she said. Her eyes shifted over them. Wrote it down. “Billy--”

“Started acting weird, sort of nice,” Max said. “He wouldn’t stop apologizing to me.”

“Steve is apologetic,” Dustin said.

Jonathan snorted.

Dustin glared at him, “most of the time.”

Max rolled her eyes. She’s not really in the mood to kiss the ground Steve Harrington walks on considering he’s part of the reason they’re all here.

“Billy starts acting weird,” Nancy said.

“Which is kept telling us about at school,” Jonathan added. “And after he talked to me in the darkroom was the day they got milkshakes.”

“What day was that?” Max asked. “Tuesday?”

Jonathan thought for a moment, he paused. “Yeah, I think so.”

“That was the same day Steve picked up Billy.”

“So they went out that Tuesday,” Nancy continued to scribble. “Wednesday, they started hanging out.”

“That’s probably when he gave him that note,” Will said.
El nodded, confirming it. “He told him.”

“And since then Steve’s been with him,” Max said.

El nodded again. She bit down on her lip and rolled it between her teeth, Mike is not quite like Steve. Mike never had to take care of her when she got sick and she doesn’t get sick the way Billy’s gotten sick.

He defends him in different ways, but still the same.

Still good.

Nancy ripped the sheet from the notepad and re-read it. Of course, they weren’t sure if it was the truth. This was only a guess, but they had seen some of it themselves and El could confirm other parts of it.

They were sure they had something like the truth. They won’t be sure until Steve wakes up.

---

Steve woke up slower than he thinks he ever has, or at least not since he had his face pounded in, but this felt slower too somehow. He wasn’t even sure where he was until the distinctive plaid of his bedroom walls formed, blurry and then together again. His mouth felt dry and grimy, most of his limbs feel numb and tingling like he fell asleep in the worst position humanly possible. He sat up, unable to feel his fingers rubbing over his face and into his hair. His stomach dropped as if his brain was truly catching up with him, that same feeling of falling back asleep after your alarm and waking up again but worse.

Billy.

He was going to take Billy to the hospital and then Dustin showed up, and then he was asleep. He rubbed his hand over his face, there’s no way he’d fall asleep on the way to taking Billy to the hospital. So, he probably dreamed that part, and it’s not like Dustin could get into his house. He was so worried about Billy he managed to give himself a nightmare.

He turned on his side expecting to find Billy passed out, his head hidden underneath one of his pillows because his mom is so damn loud and he’s grumpy and kind of dramatic like that. He froze at the blood on his face, from his nose onto his lips and chin staining the dark blue pillow underneath him a burgundy-plum color. Too pale skin contrasted horrifically with all the blood, his eyes moving on their own orders underneath his eyelids, making his long, dark lashes flicker sporadically.

Steve felt a scream caught in his throat.

“Jeezus,” he heard Hopper say.

The scream died there, caught somewhere in his wide open mouth. He whirled to look at Hopper, eyes large and wide. His brain isn’t fast enough for this, and he can’t figure out why he can’t remember anything or why he called Hopper. If he called Hopper. If Dustin really was here asking about his damn cat.

It didn’t really matter.

His eyes flicked back down to Billy.
“B--”

“He’s okay,” Hopper said. Steve watched the guy, the Chief of the fucking Police, sit down in Steve’s chair which was positioned at the side of the bed Billy was on. “He’s okay-ish.” Hopper picked up a bloody rag, he wrung it out into the pinkish water and wiped at Billy’s face with it. “Damn kid won’t stop bleeding.”

Steve didn’t realize he was breathing so loud and fast until Hopper looked up at him. He tried to steady his breathing, but he feels sick enough that he might vomit. “H-he won’t stop?”

“No for now I guess,” Hopper said, unfazed.

“Why you in my house?” Steve asked next, better yet. “Why isn’t he at a hospital?”

Hopper sighed, rubbing the back of his wrist over his forehead. “They’re not going to be able to help him.”

Which would be fine coming from a nurse or a doctor or something, but it’s Hopper. His face goes red, “how the hell would you know?” He snapped. “How’d you get here? What the hell is going on?” Hopper moved to wipe at Billy’s face again only for Steve to swat his hand away. “Hey! What the hell is going on!”

Hopper scowled at him, and Steve thinks maybe he looks a little surprised, but only in a bad way. “I’d love to answer when I can get a word in, kid,” Hopper said. “I know because I’ve read about this before. Unless your average Hawkins General doctor used to work at Hawkins Lab, they’re going to do zip for him except run a bunch of tests and wait.” As opposed to mopping blood from his face and waiting, it wasn’t much better, but he wasn’t about to bring Billy to any hospital with what he can do.

He watched the teen deflate, big brown eyes going sad and falling upon Billy almost too dramatically. He was hoping when Steve woke up he wouldn’t have gotten so attached to Billy, it seems it’s the exact opposite.

“You--you read,” Steve bit his lip. “What’s wrong with him?”

“I planned on explaining it to everyone when you woke up,” Hopper explained. “I’m not too fond of the idea of explaining it twice.”

His head snapped up. “Everyone?”

“Yeah,” the chief averted his eyes. “Things got complicated while you were asleep, kid,” he said. “The kids had this notion Billy got grabbed by that same thing that grabbed Will that night you were out in the woods with him.”

“They what ?”

“It was stupid,” Hopper said. “You can yell at ‘em all you want, I already did.”

Steve thought about it, if they’re downstairs, marching right up to them and yelling the way his mother can, which is loud enough to pop eardrums when she’s mad enough. The thought didn’t stay with him long.

He knew they were up to something, he could’ve said something, they’re stupid fucking nerd kids who take everything to serious. He’s the one that’s supposed to be keeping them from doing dumbshit like this. He should’ve--
“Don’t beat yourself up about any of it,” Hopper said. “They should be smart enough to know not to pull stunts like that.”

Steve didn’t say anything, he only nodded.

They both know the kids sort of think they’re invincible, it’s a side of effect of surviving so much. Except Steve feels the exact opposite. He watched Hopper mop up the blood at Billy’s ears too, he’s using one of his mother’s cloths from Italy.

Billy didn’t so much as twitch, but his chose rose and fell just as rhythmically as ever wheezing too. Steve felt some of the tightness in his own chest unbunch. “Can I?” He asked tentatively.

Hopper was looking at him again, a little surprised and something else. “You two really get along now, huh?”

If by really get along he meant not-so-casually having Billy’s tongue in his mouth than sure, they really get along. Steve felt his ears cheeks burn and his stomach flip. “He’s my friend.”

Hopper eyed him for the longest time before dropping the dirty rag into his hand. “Be my guest kid,” Hopper said. He stood grabbed a wad of paper towels off of his nightstand and dried his hands. “Don’t stay up here too long, alright? We’ve still got some stuff to cover and I’ll need you there.”
XXVI. More like a Sci-fi Horror

Steve turned back to Billy, he mopped at Billy's face once and wrung it out until it was no longer dripping with muddled blood.

*When did this happen?*

He figured it was after he was knocked out. His fist curled tight around the rag. No matter how fucked up that is, because it is fucked up, about as fucked up as Nancy training a gun on him, he should've done something. Something like, like *damage control*.

But it’s different.

El’s just a kid and parents don’t pay attention the way they should, with the people he hangs around it’s no surprise things got out of hand. He’s paranoid, they’re paranoid, Billy’s probably paranoid if he’s still got any of his personality left.

They're all just fucking nuts.

And *this* is fucking nuts.

No one as vigilant as Hopper and Mike or Lucas, Max and Dustin or even Nancy who’s so scrupulous now he barely even recognizes her, would let him disappear into the woes of Billy Hargrove’s life so easily.

And he was so ready for it too, and Billy was technically more accepting of him than he thought he would be. He was the one that gave him the note after all, he’s the one that said ‘you’re all keyed up and I don’t want to go home,’ and he’s the one that put his lips on his first.

For all the shit that comes out Billy’s mouth, his actions sure else speak clearer than he normally does. And he was so ready for it.

The bleeding slowed and Billy hasn’t moved except to twitch his fingers, mostly, and his eyes darting back and forth underneath his eyelids.

Steve smiled humorlessly, he folded the rag over the lip of the basin. *What a fucking mess they’ve gotten into*. Everything about their lives is a little messy, fuck 1984 and fuck 1985 too. He sighed, sitting up in his bed, a little cramped with Billy’s body haphazardly thrown around it. He sat with his knees drawn up to his chest.

He glanced at the clock.

12:36 p.m.

He decided at 12:40 he would go downstairs. Steve rested his chin on his knees and ran his fingers through Billy’s curls, he’s got nothing else to do and he remembered how easy Billy got when he touched him and how the tension would fade a little.

“I’m sorry.”

He figured if Billy were awake he’d say some shit about not being a big baby over it, he’s not even that hurt, pity is for idiots and starving children or something and he’s *neither* so he should just shut the hell up.
The fact that Steve doesn’t actually hear it though, that he’s still entirely silently, makes the black hole in his stomach open up wider instead of clench shut.

Steve looked up at the clock.

12:39.

“Just wake up, please,” he whispered. “Seriously, I know you don’t like being told what to do, but you have to wake up.” His thumb absently traced over his lips. What’s even the point of figuring out if he wants this, wants him that way if he dies? He liked the chance to at least be able to panic over it. He at least wants a chance.

It was stupid and cliche, but he grew up on dumb Disney movies and fairytales that his mom used to put on for him just to keep him quiet and out her hair. He pressed his lips to Billy’s softly before pulling away.

Maybe he’d wake up sooner that way, Steve doubted it though. He’s no prince charming and Billy is by no means a princess, and this isn’t a fairytale, if anything, it’s a sci-fi horror flick, and they’re not “in love”, but Steve still cares about him like he might be able to one day so he thought it’d mean something to do it anyway.

“I’m sorry if you wake up alone,” he said. He’d hate to be alone right now. “I’ll be back as soon as I can!”

He stood then. Steve did bother fixing much of anything as far as his face or clothes except taking a precursory glance in the mirror. He looks like shit, he looks the human embodiment of ‘fucked up and then some.’ He ran his hands over his faces and through his hair, grimaced at his own ghostly reflection and headed downstairs.

If anything, it’s a step closer to getting everyone out of his house and returning back to his bed. Steve ambled downstairs, walking slower than usual for no other reason than that being knocked unconscious, funky mind powers or not, does something to a person. Maybe it’s the sight he woke up to that makes him feel grouchy...

Cranky.

He’s fucking cranky, that’s what it is.

He rubbed his hand over his face again.

He’s not really a coffee person, but he’s sure his mom is and there’s probably some of that fancy cappuccino shit left because she has no idea how to clean up her own messes anymore.

He’s getting coffee first before Hopper sits him down with the others to ‘explain somethings.’ The last time they were all gathered together they were taking down monsters from an alternate dimension, which isn’t anything good. They don’t ever meet when anything good is happening, so he can’t imagine Hopper’s waiting until they’re all together to explain anything pleasant.

“So what’s this guy supposed to do?” Steve heard Jonathan ask. He had to wonder why the hell Jonathan’s here, and if he’s here than inevitably Nancy is too.

He stopped before entering the living room to listen to Hopper.

“Well for starters, he’s can handle anything she deals out, and it’s pretty safe to say that we can’t always, so there’s that,” he said.
Steve heard El. “He’s good. He’ll help Billy too.” At least he thinks it’s El. He’s not too familiar with the sound of her voice, he’s only met her a handful of times and most of them were very brief. She seems like a nice kid, even she honestly creeps the hell out of him. “He moves mountains,” she said.

“Apparently,” Hopper added. “The guy gets anything he needs in the snap of a finger.”

Steve came in at this point, he’d never heard of this guy. For once he had to agree with Jonathan’s suspicious tone. “Who is this guy?” He asked, finally taking the few steps forward to be seen.

“Steve!” Dustin hopped up. “Oh thank God.”

“We told you he was going to be fine,” Mike said.

Lucas and Will looked equally happy without even saying anything.

“If you hug me I’m ending you, Henderson, you got that?” Steve said. There is not nearly as much heat in his voice as he wishes there would be. He tries to narrow his eyes on the boys in

Dustin beamed. “I’ll take it,” he said. “Sorry. Did you hear me promise to be you KFC?”

Steve snorted. “No,” he said. He appreciated the sentiment, he wasn’t happy about it, however. “I was too busy being unconscious, dickheads.”

“Sorry,” El muttered, sinking into the big chair by the television.

“Is Billy up?” Max asked from beside her. Unlike El, she sat up straight, on the edge of the chair the two of them were sharing with big eyes.

Steve made the mistake of looking down at his hands, they were bloodless, but he didn’t think they were. He didn’t know what to say. He looked at her with her big imploring eyes and shrugged.

“Sorry, no, he’s still asleep.” He really wanted that coffee, if only to get away from Max’s somber eyes. He didn’t know her and Billy were that close, or maybe his recent ordeal has brought them closer and he just hadn’t noticed. “I’m...uh...coffee,” he pointed in the direction of the kitchen. The words left his mouth before he could really think, “anyone else want anything?”

It’s exactly how he ends up in his own kitchen with million cups of water, his microwave popping sporadically with popcorn while he takes long gulps from his mug of coffee he’s ninety percent sure should be sipped slowly in a tiny cup.

Or is that espresso?

It doesn’t matter.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, wincing at the sting, forgetting about the bruising and the cut there. “Jesus Christ.”

“I didn’t know you drank coffee,” Nancy said in the foyer of the kitchen. It’s surreal seeing her in his house again, after Barb she only came back twice. Steve never complained, her house always felt warmer than his does.

He loved her bedroom, how much personality was put into. He wondered if Billy’s had the same personal touches that his lacks.

“Yeah,” he looked down at the half-empty mug. “Only when my mom makes it.”
“Oh,” Nancy mumbled, ducking her head to look down at the floor. She opened her mouth, inhaled, stopped. He remembered how careful she’s gotten about everything she says to him. The words always have to perfect like the way she used to cut her slice of pizza into squares. She shook her head as if doing away with whatever thoughts she had. They weren’t good enough. “Are you okay?”

Steve shrugged, “yeah, yeah,” he absently pointed to his nose. “I don’t think it’s broken I’ll be--” “That’s not what I meant,” she said. “I meant because...all of this stuff. You know?”

He felt his throat go a little tight, he took a long gulp of the coffee. He pulled the popcorn out the microwave and focused on shaking the bag to avoid looking at her in deep blue eyes. Nancy’s are something a little bit like a lake with little flecks of green and them, Billy’s are the truest blue he’s ever seen. Last night in the dark, with the reflection of the pool water hitting them they looked electric.

He said he has a thing for blue eyes.

That’s true.

“Yeah,” he shrugged again. “Yeah, Nance, I’m fine just…” really, really ready for this to be over. “Tired, I guess or worried. I don’t know.” He remembered she had asked for a glass of water with a small wince because he’d turned himself into everyone’s errand boy. He handed it to her and went back to dumping the second bag of popcorn into a bowl.

“I had no clue you and Billy were so close,” she said. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen.”

“It’s okay.” He supposed it didn’t matter now.

“Steve--”

“I’m serious,” he snapped. He exhaled through his nose. Breathe. “It’s okay, really. I shouldn’t have told you about it anyway.” He imagined Billy probably would’ve liked the whole ‘I can take people’s memories’ thing a secret, in that case, Steve did a really shitty job of that.

“You should’ve,” she said. “I just wasn’t listening.”

“No,” he shook his head. “I was supposed to make sure something like this didn’t happen, or maybe I wasn’t supposed to, I just...” He breathed. He’s supposed to breathing. Nancy isn’t worked up so he shouldn’t be either. Except his heart is hammering and his palms are sweating and he regrets more than anything getting out of bed. “Forget it. It’s fine, I forgive you if that’s what you want to hear. I’m not mad at you.”

He looked at all the glasses on the table and the two bowls of popcorn, “you wanna help me with these?”

Nancy looked pale, or maybe hanging out with Jonathan somehow made her paler. Her eyes glanced down at the cups with wide eyes and for a moment she looked fragile too.

She nodded, “sure.”

“Cool,” he said. “At least I’m not the only waiter around here.”

They fielded through questions and the hypothesis that they had come up with while Hopper was
upstairs. Steve was on his third mug of coffee by then, answering and explaining where he was and what he was doing and why until they had the total and true timeline of all that’s transpired.

He left out every Billy shared with him. He left out the diner and the spelling bee and Indiana Jones, and most of this morning and last night. Those were for him and him alone he decided instantly. Billy would probably actually rather have that aneurysm than have the others know about any of that.

“Billy was...you?” Max blinked.

“Sometimes I guess,” he muttered. “I don’t know. All I know is that it was a really unpleasant experience having me in his head.” Or at least it had been in the beginning.

“That would explain the sweater,” she said. “And the apologizing.”

“That’s awful,” Jonathan grumbled around the nail he was chewing on. The eyes in the room lifted to him. “Having a bunch of people’s memories, I mean, he’s lived like...a bunch of people’s lives.”

“You think he’d be smarter,” Dustin said.

“Dude!” Will smacked his arm.

He held his hands up, “like...he could just not go to high school.”

“And do what?” Max snapped.

“Anything!” he said. “He can just decide he doesn’t want to be him anymore and disappear, he’s a mega spy remember.”

“He’s not a mega spy,” Mike scoffed.

“Yeah, but he could be a literally any time,” Lucas said.

“Jeezus, enough!” Hopper quieted them again.

For that, Steve was grateful. All the coffee he shouldn’t be drinking finally hit him, he grabbed a handful of popcorn and shovelled it into his mouth.

El had been watching him for a while now, her owlish eyes mostly unblinking but interested. Her head cocked to the side like one of those greeting card pictures of a curious cat. He didn’t like the look she would give him too like she’s sad, infinitely sad about something and so he’d been bracing himself for bad news since he caught her gaze.

“Why am I down here?” He blurted out after they talked more. After Hopper had settled down the Party and everyone else and the popcorn bowl was running low just from him grabbing handfuls manically. “I could be upstairs.” With Billy.

Hopper leaned back his seat from the kitchen.

How much worse could the news be?

Hopper’s gaze shifted and then he did, he looked at Max.

“He’s malfunctioning,” El said sagely. “It’s not a good thing.”

“Kid,” Hopper started. She didn’t need to spare him from being the bearer of bad news. He’s the
She looked at him, her head no longer cocked to the side with fierce eyes and a frown. “I can explain,” she said.

“So explain,” Steve said impatiently.

“The old ones, not like me,” she said. “They start breaking and they get overwhelmed.” She paused, a determined look on her face. “So they shut down and it fixes itself, like... ‘have you tried turning it off and on?’” El perfectly copied the voice of one of the tech service guys down at Radio Shack. “But sometimes...they don’t fix anything, sometimes they don’t wake up.”

Max was listening just as intently as Steve was. Just as intently as anyone else in the room. Her face was bright red, but there were no tears just red and red and red. Maybe that’s how you’re supposed to respond?

Minimally.

When his grandfather died his mom fixed herself a glass of wine, downed it and then she disappeared. Steve’s hands were rolled into tight fists at his knees, tears in his eyes. “I’m going back upstairs.”

He’s pretty sure he’s never moved so fast or been in such a fog in his life. He was upstairs before he even realized he was actually moving, his face wet with tears and sweat. He could’ve sworn he heard people calling his name, but it didn’t matter.

He lowered himself back into bed with his knees to his chin and his arms wrapped around his legs he waited for nothing. He looked at the plaid wall of his room if only to keep himself from looking at Billy.

“I promise you won’t wake up alone,” Steve said.
Hopper barred Max from running upstairs after him, which Steve thought was smart. Billy looks...ugly. Swollen, black and blue, bloody and pale. It’s not a face that he thinks should be branded into the mind of a thirteen-year-old girl.

Steve agrees.

Dustin tried to coax him out of the room, through the door of course, because although he’s seen Billy, rules are rules and no one’s allowed to come into the room. He gave them free rein, since apparently none of them are leaving, to watch TV cook popcorn, order a pizza if they feel like it.

For the first time in a long time, the Harrington household is as full as it should be considering the size of it.

Steve hasn’t left the bed, why would he?

A little hopped on caffeine, jumpy and angry at how unfair everything is he’s tunnel visioned. As far as he’s concerned that’s the most ‘Harrington’ trait he has, the ability to block almost everything out when things get uncomfortable.

At some point, he put Billy to bed properly. The way he was laying before looked uncomfortable like it would hurt his neck when he wakes up. Steve put him flat on his back, propped his head up with a few pillows so the blood wouldn’t run down his throat and propped up his still swollen foot.

Billy moves now, every once in a while his fingers and toes twitch, his arms and legs shift and he makes small noises from the back of his throat, Hopper considers this a good sign.

He read to him, he remembers that kind of content look Billy had while reading and the fact that he steals books from the library. Besides, on TV, they read to people in comas so Steve figured it’d help somehow.

There’s nothing in his room but a few magazines so Steve reads People and National Geographic and Time to him to pass the hours away.

He’d just finished reading about a Chilean earthquake when there was a soft rap on his door. “Steve,” came El’s voice. “There’s pizza,” she said. “Cheese and pepperoni and Hawaiian. Would you like some?”

He would.

He’s starving.

He gnawed on his lip, eyeing Billy. Steve slid from the bed, putting the magazine down words first and went to the door. He slid out of the door opening it just enough to get out and shutting it behind him. Hopper was standing behind her looking tired and strained.
Steve imagined he would be after stopping Max from bolting upstairs multiple times and keeping the Party in line and answering Nancy and Jonathan’s questions, which are always never ending once they’ve become invested.

He knows what he’s going to say.

“You can’t spend all your time up here,” Hopper said.

El looked at Steve solemnly and nodded. She’s like one of those things witches have...like Hopper’s familiar or something. The little parrot on his shoulder.

...That’s *pirates*.

Steve ran a hand over his face.

“Days,” she said. “Could be days.”

“Come down and eat pizza with us alright, kid,” Hopper said. “The kids are trying to make the best of this, they’re gonna pick out a movie, and we’re just going to...relax alright. There’s nothing any of us can do."

Steve hated hearing that.

Which is pretty ironic considering every single person here knows he’s pretty prone to sitting on his ass and twiddling his thumbs and burying his head in the sand and just being plain *stupid* when he shouldn’t be.

Nancy probably thinks he’s lost it.

“What about that guy?” Steve ignored him, all tunnel vision. “The guy that moves mountains.”

“I already called him,” Hopper said. “He said, he’ll do what he can, but there’s not much he can do when Billy’s not conscious. If--”

“When,” Steve corrected him.

Hopper stopped. “Fine, kid, when he wakes up, he said we can take him to the hospital and he’ll sort out the rest.”

Steve wanted to meet this guy, much like the rest of them, since this guy is so important. Since El seems to be such a fan of him. He wanted to get a good look at him and see with his own two eyes how good this guy actually is.

“But for now, come downstairs and eat some pizza, you can’t run on coffee alone, trust me,” Hopper said.

Steve was tempted to say, ‘no,’ he was tempted to say ‘watch me,’ but Hopper’s right. He can’t run on coffee alone, he’s shaky and light headed as is. So instead he gnawed on his lips and said, “can’t I bring it back upstairs?”

Hopper jaw twitched, he shared a look with El, who was looking at him with one of her eyebrows raised. Steve can’t tell if that means she’s on his side or not. “I just said you can’t--”

“Please.”

“How about this?” He sighed. “Come down for a few minutes, I’m talking like ten or fifteen and
you can bring what you don’t finish back upstairs. They’re gonna riot down there if you don’t at least show your face for a few minutes. Deal?”

As touching as that was, and it is, he really couldn’t find it in him to care, but Hopper looked like he wasn’t going to budge on that. “Okay,” Steve said with a small shrug. “Ten minutes.”

“Fine,” Hopper said. “Just drink something and eat some damn food.”

El stood by his side with a soft small, “can I hold your hand?”

He must look bad. He probably looks the way Hopper had described him, a fucking corpse, a ghost. “Sure,” he agreed with another small shrug.

El taking his hand brings him out of a fog a little. He can see why the Party is such a fan of her, she seems really tooth rotting-ly sweet and well-meaning. “We got one of the paper pizzas for you,” she said. “Dustin says they’re your favorite.”

His brows furrowed. “Paper pizza?”

“She means thin crust,” Hopper explained.

Steve nodded, letting El lead him down the stairs like a seeing eye dog leads a blind man. “Oh, thanks,” he muttered.

“No one else likes it,” El’s nose wrinkled. “Too crispy, not enough sauce.”

“Sorry.”

Wait.

He blinked. He just said sorry because no one likes the same pizza as he does.

He’s fucked up.

So

So

So fucked up.

As if El was reading his mind, Steve wondered if she could do that too, she gently tugged him down the last few stairs. “You need a whole pizza.”

She’s probably right about that. He just can’t get why he can’t eat it upstairs with Billy at his side. Hopper peeled off from them to go back to the living room, Steve could only guess that was because El had such a grip on him.

The little girl pulled the box from the oven and handed it to him with a smile. “Eat, please.”

“I know, I know,” he said, taking it back from her.

She placed a water bottle on top of the box, “and drink.”

“Yeah, I know, I’ll drink,” he grumbled.

El raised an eyebrow at him, his attitude probably isn’t appreciated. She’s just trying to help after
all. There’s no reason for him to be taking his anger out on her, except she did knock him out earlier. Honestly, that feels like it was so long ago he barely remembers, maybe that’s a testament to how long the day’s been or how hungry he is or how long Billy’s been unconscious.

Probably all three.

“You’re acting like Mike,” she laughed. “He is grumpy when he is worried about someone.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Because he’s sure El is either amused or truly thinks that that’s some kind of encouragement or a good thing. He smiled anyway. “Most people get grumpy when they’re worried.”

She nodded. “Me too.”

El accompanied him out the kitchen too, following at his side loyally. “I’m sorry about Billy.”

Steve swallowed the knives in his throat. “Yeah, I know.”

“He’s not the worst,” El said. “He’s impatient.” Steve raised an eyebrow, prompting El to keep talking. “When I met him he was very impatient. It was funny.”

“Well then, you met him in his normal state,” Steve said. “I’m sorry if he gave you hard time.”

“No,” El shook her head. “Just impatient.”

Steve was surprised to see his living room still occupied. The other really made themselves at home with all of his stuff. He isn’t mad about it, his parents would be furious though, he thinks it’s only right that a place so big have so many people in it.

He was greeted with a chorus of ‘hey’s and ‘Steves’s. Dustin’s whole face lit up like it usually does. Hopper looked pleased that he hadn’t tried to run upstairs and gone back on his word. Steve reminded himself, he promised him ten minutes.

His eyes landed on Nancy and Jonathan, they were sequestered in the corner and whispering to each other like they usually do. Nancy looked vexed, he’s pretty sure he still knows what that look on her face means.

“Steve!” Dustin yelled, startling both him and El.

“Jeezus,” Hopper sighed.

“We need a tiebreaker!” Lucas added.

Steve figured his ten minutes should start now, his attention is being demanded. He sat down on the floor with box and water bottle. “Tiebreaker for what?”

“Okay well, we were raiding your movie cabinet and like honestly, your parents seem super lame, but you’ve got a really solid movie collection,” Dustin said. “And I was like we should watch Airplane! And Will agrees and then Lucas and Mike were like,” at this point, Dustin was mocking them. “We should watch Raiders of the Lost Ark . And we asked El and she doesn’t care and then we asked Max and she also doesn’t care.”

“I told them to just pick a damn movie,” Hopper grumbled.

“Not helpful,” Dustin hissed.
He held up the empty cassette box for *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, “also it’s missing which is reason number two for why we shouldn’t watch it.”

Steve felt his chest go tight again. “That’s because it’s in the VCR,” he said. The words ‘Billy and I watched it last night’ almost slipped from his lips. He coughed, “I’d rather watch *Airplane!* anyway.”

“I told you he was going to say *Airplane!* ,” Mike said.

Lucas scoffed, “yeah, you and Dustin have the same brain.”

Steve rolled his eyes, ejecting the VHS from the player. “We don’t. I’d just rather watch *Airplane!* right now. I mean, Indiana Jones is cool and all, don’t get me wrong, but *Airplane!* is funnier.” It didn’t need to be said, he needs a good laugh right now.

He needs something that doesn’t remind him of Billy’s glassy blue eyes staring at him, a loopy grin stretched across his lips over Indiana Jones and his whip. He slipped in the VHS in and pressed rewind, sitting back with his hands behind him.

El gently prodded him in the ribs with her fingers after the VHS finished rewinding. “Eat,” she said insistently.

“Yeah,” Will nodded in agreement.

The rest of the Party, even Max, nodded their heads with varying enthusiasm. “We literally made Hopper buy it for you, it’s your own pizza, so dig in,” Dustin said.

Steve opened the box since everyone was staring him down and made a big deal of lifting a slice to his mouth. It was good, so fucking good, actually. He sighed. He hadn’t realized how hungry he truly was.

“Good,” El smiled approvingly.

He bit into another slice while the movie played on. At some point, Max slid down from the big chair. She was wrapped up in the blanket his Aunt Guiliana had knitted, the top of it steepled at her head and curled around her legs as she sat down next to him.

Steve tensed.

Her eyes looked red like she’s spent most of the day crying, her face is a washed out pale shade. “How is he?”

“His fingers move a lot and so do his feet, sometimes he makes little noises. I think that’s a good thing. Hopper said it was.” Billy’s far from fine, but he didn’t think Max wanted to hear that. He wouldn’t want to if he were in her shoes.

She nodded sullenly. “Good.”

“Yeah.”

“Is he really hurt?” She asked. Steve nibbled on his bottom lip, he chugged some of his water. Max’s eyes were searching over him imploringly. “My mom called, she’s been looking for me...and him. Hopper had me tell her he dropped me off here and then did some other stuff.” She didn’t even sound too terribly worried, even though all the signs point to the fact that she should be. She sounded a little worried, Max didn’t think it was enough.
He could be dying.

“His dad’s gone too,” Max whispered. Steve turned to look at her, he had to read her lips to hear her over the movie. “Billy talks about him in his sleep like...like he’s bad or worse or something. He’s scared of him. He said his dad tried to...to hurt him.” Max shifted, she wrung her hands underneath the blanket. “I took the trash out last night, I know I did. I had to do all of my chores and his that night.”

Steve’s focus was solely on Max. His food long forgotten, the echo of laughter sounds so distant it might as well be in a different country.

“Hopper said, don’t jump to conclusions,” she said. “But Billy didn’t take the trash out last night. And I found...” her hand wriggled around in the pocket of her jacket. When she pulled it out, furled in her fingers was the necklace Billy always has around his neck. “It was in the backyard, he never takes this off.”

Steve swallowed thickly and feels like he’s going to vomit. He picked up the necklace. “The chain’s broken,” he said. He thought of the hands around Billy’s neck and the scraps in his skin.

“He’d flip,” Max said seriously.

Steve motioned to give it back, but Max shook her head. “You’re the only one allowed near him, when he wakes up he’s gonna want it back.”

He nodded, pocketing it. He knows for sure his mom has a few silver chains that she won’t miss so he can replace the broken one.

“Why...” Steve tried to steady himself. “Why didn’t you tell Hopper?”

Max bit her lip, she looked around as if expecting Hopper to be lurking behind them, and honestly, it wouldn’t surprise Steve to terribly if he was.

“He said not to jump to conclusions,” she said, voice going thick. “And what if...” Steve knows it’s not being wrong that she’s afraid of, it’s being right. “I want to, I just...I need the right moment, I guess.”

Steve nodded. He didn’t get it, but he could see the tears welling in her eyes so he didn’t push her on it.

He didn’t touch his pizza, but he drank all of his water because of El’s prodding. He stayed longer than ten minutes because of his conversation with Max and the Party had begged him to and even Nancy and Jonathan preferred it.

Billy doesn’t talk about his dad, but Steve’s never asked. They try not to talk about their parents. He didn’t think Billy was scared of Mr. Hargrove, he could imagine it though from the severe way Max always talked about him.

His stomach churned, he pushed the pizza box farther from him. The sight of it made him nauseous, he’d got about three-fourths of the way through it. He couldn’t imagine Mr. Hargrove making Billy run to his house in the middle of a storm and the night, he couldn’t imagine him wrapping his hands around his neck so tightly Billy still whistles slightly when he breathes still.

Actually, he could imagine it.

It just made him sick to his stomach to.
Does he know what Billy can do?

From the way El describes things, it’s not too common for kids to go back to their parents. In fact, it seems like almost never. Maybe he found out? Maybe he didn’t know until that night and then this is all his fault too?

Steve stood. His arms wrapped around his waist, he feels cold, his palms have begun to sweat the TV seems too loud.

“Steve?” Nancy asked. She knows he’s freaking about because can always tell when he’s freaking out no matter how stupid she thinks the reason is. “Steve, what’s--”

“Nothing. I’m gonna go upstairs,” he announced too quickly for it to sound like anything other than panicked.

The boys groaned. “Already?”

“Yeah,” his foot bobbed, heel slamming against the carpeted floor. “Yeah, it was fun, I just…”

He didn’t know what to say other than he needed to get away from people and think, he needs to look at Billy again and think about last night between the blood and the fear and--

The others startled, even Hopper.

It sounded like someone took a bag of rocks from the quarry and tossed them down his stairs, except everyone is accounted for and he doesn’t own a massive sack of rocks, and rocks don’t groan loudly.

“I fucking hate your house you rich son of a bitch,” came the sound of Billy’s voice from the other end of the hall.

Steve’s pretty sure he’s never been happier.
Sorry this one was a little shorter than the others (if any of you all noticed! I was a bit under the weather while writing/ posting this so there’s that lol)
I come with a song, although, I usually don't mention songs with this fic. However, I was listening to Welcome Back Subjects by Dan Romer when I was writing the end of this chapter and if you want a little mood setting for the end you're welcome to listen to it!
Check the End Notes for an announcement.

“Billy?”

There’s nothing weirder than forgetting your name. For a second he could’ve sworn his name was fucking Leonard or Job or Maria.

He stared blankly at his reflection for a moment, blinking.

“Billy, can you hear me?”

Steve is not his reflection, Steve is Steve.

Steve Harrington.

There’s nothing more terrifying than knowing exactly where you are and what you were intending to do and why you’re even here one moment and then forgetting the next. It’s like walking into a room and then forgetting why you did but worse.

His eyes landed on...the Chief of Police? And Max? His eyes swiveled around to the eldest Wheeler and Byers, both pale and concerned looking. He thinks the two of them would be better off if they just conjoined at the shoulders or the hip or something.

“What’s wrong with him?”

There was legitimately nothing wrong with him a second ago, Max I swear.

He was him.

He was in Steve Harrington’s house, but he got to the top of the stairs and he blacked out. And then he was him again.

But in between who knows. He could’ve sworn he was fine.

Billy thought he was in a cave...or was it a hole? Maybe he was in the middle of a street looking at clouds? He was going to help the scientists with the freaky little kid?
Hopper snapped his fingers in his face a few times, “kid?”
No, he was in bed.
He just woke up.
Steve nibbled on his bottom lip worriedly.
“I swear I was…” he said.
He passed over all the toads to look at El or Jane or Eleven whatever the hell she’s preferred to be called. You call me Jane. You call me Jane. Jane. He focused on her dark brown eyes, he likes Steve’s better, Steve’s have flecks of light in them. Janes are dark, but they’re grounding while he tries to remember why he was on the floor, how he got to Steve’s house.
Did he swear something?
Yeah, he was going to fucking kick Harrington in the leg for having such a shitty staircase.
No, he was going to tell Max he’s okay.
He was going to tell Max he’s okay because he is okay and she looks like she’s about to cry and if...Billy swallowed down a choked noise.

One more time, Billy. Just one more time, I swear on it. Any mistake and I finish this. His old man hadn’t done that once, he did it twice.

“Allright,” Hopper sighed. “Help me get him up.”
“No,” he said.

He was supposed to be getting the fuck out of dodge. But first, he was going to find Steve and he was going to eat breakfast and they were going to watch a movie. He was going to try to make him a smoothie with the fancy ass blender and then check on his wounds. He was going to bring Billy back to the house, he was going to get his car and some clothes and drive to Miami and start over.

“No?” Hopper echoed.

“Yeah,” Billy said, gaining his voice. “No, I’m fine.”

He is fine.
He just... had a moment.

Like when you walk into a room and forget why you went there and then you remember. He remembers.

“I’m fine,” he said coolly. He grabbed onto the banister and hauled himself up with a pained grunt, he found he couldn’t really put any weight on his left foot. When he lifted his head again they were staring at him like some sort of creature.

Billy glared at them. His eyes slid to Steve, “why the hell are there so many people in your house, Harrington?” Not that the castle doesn’t have room for it, but still. “What happened?”
Steve bit his lip. He eyed him. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m standing, aren’t I?” Billy wobbled and held onto the railing again. “I’m standing.”

“Barely,” Mike said.

He’s just feeling a little sick, a little like if someone asked him when his birthday is he wouldn’t know whether to say August, May, December, July or April.

That’s not that weird.

Steve hushed Mike with spite.

Billy looked around at them. There were too many eyes on him and it was giving him the creeps. “I’m starving,” he said.

The grouped nodded unanimously.

“Yeah, I bet,” Hopper said. Billy scowled at the look he and Steve shared. It was one of those lookings with meaning in it. “There’s leftover pizza in the kitchen,” Hopper said. “Drink some water and eat. We’re not going to bother you for a little bit.”

“We?” Steve said.

Steve actually has a tendency to look like his mom every once in a while. When he gets the look on his face, like, when hell hath no fury level of scorn so present in his eyes it’s chilling. It had reared its ugly head on Hopper ferociously.

Billy wiped at his nose to keep anyone from seeing the smile break out on his face. First starters, he’s almost surprised Steve wants anything to do with him, and then there’s the fact that it seems like he’d rather lose an arm than be separate from him. He away from them until he could stop smiling.

Hopper rubbed a hand over his face, “Christ, fine. Fine. Not you.”

“Thanks,” Steve smirked. “I mean it is my hou--”

Hopper glared at him, “don’t push it.”

Steve all smile, at least his own version of all smiles. He held his hands up in mock surrender. “Understood.”

Billy was grateful actually.

He sure as hell wasn’t going to say it with the others around, he didn’t want to be left alone with his head. He didn’t think he could trust his head at the moment, the thing is about as reliable as the Millenium Falcon’s hyperdrive.

Who knows when he’ll just forget something important.

Who knows if he’ll forget himself again.

Hopper was forcing the crowd to disappear from the stairs. Three is a crowd in his mind at this point. Anyone besides him and Steve is too much. El lingered with Max, her watery blue eyes looked at him.
“I’m fine,” Billy said, deciding he probably should say something to her. “Since when did you start crying so much, Maxine?”

He hates that he’s going to miss her. Maybe he’ll get a chance to send her a letter or something when he gets to Miami. The last few days he’s almost actually liked her. If anyone asked, he probably would call Max his sister.

“I thought you were going to die, asshole,” she said, wiping at her face. “Don’t do that ever again.”

“Tough shit, everyone dies,” he said.

Max’s head snapped up to look at him, all big-eyed and surprised.

“Billy--” Steve started.

“Sorry, I made you worry though.” He’s even more sorry he’ll have to do it again and so soon. Billy hobbled his way between Max and El. “Don’t eat too much pizza, that shit always makes you sick.”

Max’s eyes followed Billy as he disappeared around the corner, something alit in her eyes that looked like determination. Whether that’s a good thing or not, Steve can’t really tell.

El tugged on Steve’s arm with worry lines on her face. “Watch him,” she said. “You need to watch him.”

He nodded. He looked between Max and El, “you guys are alright, right?”

El nodded.

Max snorted, “peachy.”

“Max--”

“You heard her,” she hissed. “Watch him.”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck, “yeah, I know I just....it’s just,” he stopped. If there’s one thing he can’t do is change Max’s mind. In all honesty, he has better luck with Billy. The little girl glared up at him. “Yeah, okay. Okay.”

Steve followed Billy down the hall and turned into the kitchen.

Billy was leaning against the countertop with a slice of cold pizza in hand and a water bottle already more than half empty at his side. Steve thinks he looks pale, dark circles and bags under his eyes, the whites of his eyes look bloodshot and his lips are chapped, but none of it really matters when he’s standing there grinning.

“What?” Steve asked, unable to hide his own smile.

“You know a sneeze travels at about a hundred miles an hour?” Billy snorted a laugh. He bit down into his pizza. “Wild.” He grimaced, eyeing the pizza before placing on the countertop. He turned to root around his fridge instead.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he said with his head in the fridge like he was looking for something.
“Billy?” Steve called out.

He ignored him.

“Billy,” he repeated louder. He was looking for something there in the fridge, deep in thought or in a trance or something. Steve went to stand beside him. He placed his hand on the back of his sweatshirt. “Billy?”

He froze, lifted his head. “What, Harrington?”

“What do you mean what?”

“I called your name twice,” he said.

Billy got paler. He swallowed. “You got strawberries around here?”

Steve stared at him for a moment, Billy avoided his eyes. “What’s wrong with the pizza?”

“I didn’t eat any,” Billy said. “I was just asking ‘cause I like them,” he pulled away from him. He limped over to the breakfast nook and sat down. “It doesn’t matter.”

Steve blinked at him.

He’s not okay.

He’s so not okay.

He knew Billy knew it too because he looked down at his hands, clasped on the tabletop instead of meeting his gaze. As if by meeting eye contact they’d both acknowledge it.

“Billy?” Steve took a step toward him.

“I’m fine,” he said.

El said to watch him, she probably took one look at him and knew. “No, you aren’t,” Steve said.

Billy’s jaw tightened.

“Do you remember what you just said to me?” Steve asked.

Billy didn’t move. Steve waited for him to say something. He prayed he would say something about anything that just happened in the last two minutes. Then Steve could believe he’s just disoriented, that it isn’t something worse.

He shifted.

“What did you say to me when I walked into the kitchen?”

Billy’s uninjured foot bobbed. “I don’t…,” he swallowed the words back down. “Look, I’m just--”

“You said, do you know a sneeze travels at about a hundred miles an hour,” he said. He picked up the slice of cheese pizza. “And then you took a bite out of this pizza. You don’t remember that?”

Billy grimaced. “I’m just--”

“Disoriented?” Steve said.
“Fuck off, Harrington,” Billy growled.

The thing is, he is disoriented. He’s scared, scared shitless, in fact, because he doesn’t really remember Steve coming into the room or talking to him or taking a bite of that pizza. He just remembers Steve laying a hand on his back and calling his name once, not three times.

“What’s happening with you?” Steve walked up to him. He placed his hand on his back again where Billy seemed to like it best and let him lean his head on his side. “What’s happening?”

“I feel better,” he said. He hadn’t even realized how pressurized his head felt, like every day someone was putting a pump in both his ears and filling him up with air. “I mean, everything hurts cause I’m bruised to hell, but I feel better.”

Steve rubbed his back. He nibbled on his lip, it’s never a good sign when Billy lets him get close, no matter whether he like-like him or not. “Yeah,” Steve said. “But you sound like that’s not it.”

“I don’t know when my birthday is,” Billy said. “I don’t know what my favorite song is or how to get home from here.” He shuddered. “I keep forgetting the important stuff, I keep forgetting my name, Steve. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, alright?”

Fuck.

He’s afraid, Steve knew that much. He’d be scared shitless too if he were Billy. He’s not even Billy and he is terrified for him. Steve grabbed the chair on the other end of the breakfast nook and brought it around to sit down in front of him.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay,” he said. “There’s this guy, El says he’s been helping her and Hopper said he’s coming to help you too. Hopper says he knows all about this stuff and he’ll know what to do,” Steve said assuringly.

Billy scoffed. “Who is he? The Messiah?”

Steve shrugged, “El said he moves mountains, I’m sure it was a figure of speech, but who knows? There’s a whole other dimension out there so maybe.”

He tucked the messy blonde curls behind his ear again. “He can help you, okay? You just have to keep from freaking out for a little bit.” Steve’s hand stayed there, he cupped the side of Billy’s face. “And we’re at my house so it’s not like I’m going anywhere. Until he gets here I’ll look after you, just like I have been.”

Billy smirked, but his cheeks and ears were undeniably red. Steve let his hand drop. “Did that come from a movie, cheeseball?”

“Yeah,” he snorted. “You know the one with the two guys in it where one of them has a really shitty superpower and the other one has really cool hair.”

Billy's tongue licked out across his chapped lips, he smiled. “You didn’t ever answer my question,” he said.

“What question?”

“You got strawberries in this place?”

Steve rolled his eyes and stood, “yeah.” He went over to the fridge and pulled the door open, “you still want a milkshake?”
“Smoothie, Harrington,” he said. “But sure.”

He shook his head while fishing the strawberries out of the drawer.

Billy watched him. His smile faded from his face, he really had no choice, but to stay until this guy comes to look him over. But it’d be for the best if he forgot his own name, right? It’d be the best option if he forgot Steve and Max and Hawkins, Indiana and Billy slipped into some hole his brain had created just for him.

Steve turned around, eyes all bright again, looking alive now that he knows Billy is alive too. “You want whipped cream on that?”

If someone told him he’d end up majorly falling for Steve Harrington, he wouldn’t be too surprised. The guy isn’t hard to like and he’s easy on the eyes. If someone told him he’d miss him, that’s where he’d call bullshit. Billy mustered up a matching, playful look, “sure, why not?”

Chapter End Notes

SORRY! I will not be posting a new chapter Sunday, November 25th. I'll be traveling all day that day and I'm one of those people that will be suffering from a very busy Thanksgiving break *huffy pout and sigh*
I'm sorry :(

 :((
“Good?” Steve asked.

Billy’s lips wrapped around the straw with a small grin. “Great, actually.”

Steve was careful not to make it look like he was eyeing him too obviously. He had gone to grab his pizza from in front of the TV so they were having shakes and pizza, although Billy barely touched the pizza.

Billy looked...happy, off as hell, but happy.

Steve couldn’t find anything actually wrong with him except for the fact that he paused mid-sentence and forgot the things Steve had just said to him. His injuries were about the same, his voice still wasn’t what it normally was.

Billy didn’t seem to mind let alone notice he didn’t sound like himself.

“Are you…” Steve shifted. “Are you sure you didn’t hit your head last night?”

“Last night?”

Steve nodded.

Billy stared at him blankly for a minute. Steve could see he didn’t remember last night or he had forgotten it again. And then he did, just like that. It’s like his memories come in waves, ebbing and flowing, leaving and returning all a moments notice. Billy recoiled from him, lips curling up, his eyes going glassy.

He paled. “No, no I didn’t, I just...he just...”

“Punched you a lot,” Steve finished for him, he had said that last night. “But you didn’t hit your head.”

Billy nodded, not meeting his eyes.

Steve forced a smile, he rubbed Billy’s shoulder soothingly. “Alright, just making sure because of the--”

“Fact that I can’t remember a single fucking thing?”

Steve winced. “Yeah...that.”

They sat in silence. Steve lost interest in his pizza again. He sat back, chewing on his nail. “I think Hopper's going to send everyone home soon,” he said. “What do you think they're going to do about Max?”

Billy froze. He swallowed thickly, “Max is...a great kid. Smart as a whip, you know, she'll make something out of nothing. At least she always did with me, I'm sure she can figure something out.”

Steve blinked. Billy was doing that thing again where he was him but not him. At least he looked
like Billy but only barely. For a moment he sat differently, talked differently and nibbled on his lip in a way that Billy never would.

And then he was back again, blinking, rubbing at his face. Billy hid his face and groaned, “I hate this,” he looked at Steve’s own worried expression.

“You can tell…” he paused, rubbed at his arms, hugging himself. “You can tell when you get different?”

Billy snorted. “Knew as soon as you touched me I was fucked, it’s always like that.”

Steve took in a breath remember the way Billy curled in on himself, hands pulling at his hair with tears streaming from his eyes relentlessly. He can’t imagine it, what it’s like to take on someone’s whole life in an instant.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are.”

“Will you tell me now,” Steve asked tentatively. “How many people are in your head?”

He chuckled humorlessly. “Could’ve given you a straight answer a few weeks ago, pretty boy, but now I’m not so sure.”

“What was it before?”

Maria. The doctor. Michael. Daniel. “There were four.” Only four, but he’s sure now there were more. Where they’ve been or how they came back he doesn’t remember, but there had to be more.

Billy swirled his straw around the mostly empty cup not really meeting his gaze. He sighed softly, “so, now what?”

Steve had some vague understanding of the plan. That everyone will be going home soon so that Billy can go to the hospital, but he was still wondering the same thing Billy was. What about after that? What about right now?

“Hopper says he’s taking you to the hospital,” Steve said. “You’re gonna meet that guy there or something.”

He frowned, his arms crossed over his chest and his bottom lip jutted out. It’s Billy for sure, but a very unhappy one. “No.”

Steve’s eyebrows went up to his hairline. “No?”

“Yeah,” Billy said. “I’m not going to a fucking hospital.”

“You can’t...you just told me you barely remember your birthday, Billy,” he said, voice going strained. He should’ve taken him last night, all of this could’ve been prevented, maybe if he had. “You...you were bleeding for hours for God knows why. Who even knows what that actually did to you, not to mention the fact that you can barely walk!” Steve ran his hands through his hair, not even sure why he’s freaking the hell out over this. All Billy had said was ‘no,’ a word he’s heard a million times. He just couldn’t take it, not this time. “I should’ve last night, man, you don’t know what you were like when you knocked out. I thought you were going to die.”

Steve looked up at him. His eyes shifted. “I like having you around...I...I want you to stay around
for a while,” he said.

He knows he’s clingy, clung so tight to Nancy he suffocated her probably or something. He’s just...a suffocating person, but he can’t help himself. And this feels nothing like that , this is stronger and intoxicatingly heady. It happened fast, his head is practically spinning with it.

With Billy.

He thought of Billy’s lips, chapped and plush against his own, the feeling of his hand snaking up his shirt and he felt breathless.

He licked his lips nervously. “I want you…around,” Steve said. “At least let them check you out just to make sure you’re truly on the mend.” He sure as hell hoped he was.

Billy was watching him with one of his heavy looks, he just wished he knew what it meant. His jaw twitched as his eyes fell to the table.

It’s just tough shit.

He’s leaving and Steve Harrington just said he wanted him. He wants him around, presumably for as long as it takes for him to realize how much trouble all this really is.

But he’d take it if he could.

He hasn’t stepped foot in a hospital in years, he never knew why the place gave him the heebie-jeebies. The sterility, the white, the tests, he thought it was because of his mom, but he’d been wrong. It had nothing to do with her. Billy remembers the lab in washed out flashes, running away aside, he can’t step foot in there.

And thirdly, if he does, they’ll have to call Neil.

He can’t.

“You know that sounds all well and good, Stevie, but I can’t,” he said slowly.

The statement shocked him so much he was expecting to see Billy as another one his not-Billy’s.

“You can’t…,” Steve paused, thinking, and at total risking of sounding like his mother finished with, “or you don’t want to?”

Billy’s eyebrow arched, “really, Harrington?”

Steve bit down on his thumb nail and shrugged. “It’s a serious question,” he mumbled. “Unless there’s a no Billy Hargrove ban at every hospital, you should be okay.”

Except he won’t be okay, and he isn’t going.

Billy stood, lips curled. “You’re gonna have to fucking drag me,” he snarled. “You want me safe? Take me home alright, Harrington, I wanna go home.”

This isn’t the first time Billy’s avoided the hospital or even the second, it’s the third. The third time it would be the best thing for him and he’s denied it and every time it’s only made things worse.

Steve opened his mouth to speak, to say that.

Except Hopper beat him to it, “you’re not going home any time soon, kid,” he said. His arm
crossed over his chest. “And I’ll haul you in my car over my shoulder if I have to.”

Billy would normally fight him, would normally raise hell, but he shrivels the way Steve Harrington would because Steve Harrington admires Hopper and even worse Steve Harrington hates being yelled out.

And maybe it’s the wimpy side of him that’s talking sense, but he’d hate to be manhandled again. Over the last twenty-four hours, he’s been tugged and pulled be Steve and Neil and everyone else.

He recoiled. Billy pouted and sat down with his chair.

“Jonathan and I taking everybody home,” Hopper said gruffly, “when I get back, you’re going.” He paused, “it’s the only place you left to go.”

Billy scowled.

Hopper eyed him, “and say goodbye to your step-sister, you put her through hell.”

Steve winced as if he were talking to him. He bit down on his lip and fiddled with his own fingers.

Hopper walked down the hall again.

Billy snarled in his seat.

“I’ll stay if you want,” Steve muttered. The anxiety in his stomach had quelled as he realized that Hopper was going to take him to the hospital whether he liked it or not. “I’ll go with you if you want too,” he said.

Because he hates that place and they’ll call Neil and he needs to leave when he doesn’t even want to leave in the first fucking place. He can’t fucking believe it, he wanted to stay. He never thought he’d want to stay in the shit hole town of Hawkins, Indiana, but Steve is here and Max has made real friends here no matter how stupid they actually are.

He’s not happy here, he misses the sea and warm air and palm trees, but at he’s pretty sure he wouldn’t be entirely happy anywhere else either.

“I’m not,” Billy said stubbornly. “I can’t.”

He can’t.

But it doesn’t seem like he has much of a choice.

Max appeared shortly after, a little less washed out looking but tired like she’s in desperate need of a nap. Honestly, she might be an annoying asswipe and all, but he hoped she would sleep through this all. When she wakes up he’s gone or in the hospital or whatever and goddamn school can start up again so she has something to take her mind off all this.

Her eyes shifted from Steve to Billy. She walked until she was standing directly in front of him. “You know, you could’ve told me,” she said. “Since he knew which meant you knew…”

That morning he was sick in the bathroom he could’ve told her then and none of this would’ve happened. He could’ve told her when they were alone in the kitchen and she asked if anything weird was going on, instead of all of this. She didn’t blame him for it, she didn’t blame herself either. She blamed the lab and their past, but most of all she blamed their house.

Billy scoffed.
Steve wished Max hadn’t come to say goodbye when he’s so angry.

She knew why he didn’t because as far as she’s concerned, somewhere in their house did this to him. Neil did this to him and it’s always been that way.

She rubbed her arm and looked away. “Guess it doesn’t really matter anymore.”

“No,” Billy agreed, “it doesn’t.”

She could wish and he could wish, but in the end, it didn’t mean much. In fact, it meant nothing to the universe or God or the powers that be. They don't give a shit what two kids from California want.

“My mom didn’t ask where you are,” she said. “I don’t know where Neil is but he hasn’t been home.”

Billy tensed. He didn’t like the Max was giving him a look. It was pitying and knowing, it lingered on the bandages around his neck. “I think he’s out of town for now. Do whatever you want with that information,” Max said apathetically, though it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Stay out of trouble,” Billy offered. It’s all he really knows how to with her, it’s their only constant. He tells Max to stay out of trouble.

Max scoffed. “I should be telling you to stay out of trouble,” she said, but she was smiling now. Her smile was to Steve as well. He didn’t expect the girl to briefly wrap her arms around him, it was so fast he barely registered it.

“Bye, asswipe,” she said, already leaving. Her ears a little red.

“See you later, shitbird,” he said.

Max lingered at the kitchen foyer, her lips stretched into a soft smile as she turned towards the front of the Harrington home where no doubt they were waiting to take her home.

Steve’s eyes lingered on Billy after she was gone, he smiled to himself.

Billy glared at him. “Shut up, Harrington.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he said. “You’re not hearing things again are you?”

He glared at him. “You face was saying shit.”

Steve was grinning now, he felt like he had to. Somebody has to. “What does my face say now?”

Billy looked at him, eyes focused and startling blue despite all he’s been through. They lingered and darted over his face until Steve’s expression slipped which by all means is cheating. It had changed to something else, soft brown eyes and pillowy lips curved down only slightly.

Billy licked his lips nervously, “you’re really worried.”

Steve was looking at him not like he would kiss the ground he walked on like Nancy, but more like he’d hold his hand as they walk through it. It was soft and kind and more than Billy thought he deserved.

He swallowed. “Sorry,” he said. “I should say I’m sorry.”
“For what?”

“Think I really fucked you up today making you worry so hard,” Billy admitted. He wanted to kiss him. He wanted to kiss him again.

He had, but he was worrying less. “I’m better now.”

“Steve--” Nancy froze.

The two of them had inched together, enough to be noticeable, enough that Steve pulled away with his back straight against his chair. Their eyes went to Nancy and Jonathan and the gaggle of teens around them.

Nancy’s eyes shifted and Jonathan turned pink.

The Party seemed none the wiser to what almost happened.

“We…” Nancy cleared her throat. “We came to say bye.”

“Oh,” Steve said quietly. His cheeks were turning red, “oh, okay…”

Billy sat awkwardly with Nancy and Jonathan’s gaze burning into the side of his head while every single one of the nerd squad did their own goodbye with Dustin hugging Steve for an eternity and Mike offering him an apathetic fist bump.

He expected nothing from them, but still Will, the scrawny one he knows is related to Jonathan offered him a really meek, “I hope you get better soon.”

The others grumbled something like the same thing making Steve beam.

Nancy and Jonathan waved, decidedly keeping their distance and ushered the kids towards the Harrington’s front door.

Steve’s used to eerily silent home and after so many people and the TV and the smell of pizza and popcorn the house was brimming and teeming with lift. It was an explosion and now the dust had settled and it was only him and Billy.

“You think they noticed?” Steve asked.

“Probably.”

He huffed. “I’ll never hear the end of it,” he pouted.

“What are you going to tell them?” Billy braced himself for all sorts of answers, but he didn’t expect Steve to shrug.

“I don’t really know,” he said. “I don’t think it’ll matter.

Billy blinked, but he didn’t want to ask. Sometimes it’s better to not know, he doesn’t think he truly wants to anyway.

“You want to sit on the couch?” Steve asked. “It’s comfier without the plastic. You can lay back or stretch out or something.”

“Take me home,” Billy said without looking at him.
Steve groaned. *Not this again.*

“No.”

“Steve—”

“I’m not taking you home,” he said. “I’m letting you end up getting killed or kidnapped or hurt worse just because you don’t want to go to the hospital, Billy. You’re going as soon as Hopper gets back.”

He glared at him.

He wished this could be easier. “Fine, then I’ll walk.” Billy stood. He’s not going. He can’t go. For a million and one reasons, he’s absolutely not. But he wished Steve could drive him home. “See you later,” he said.

He walked away from the table, gritting his teeth at the pain shoot up his leg. Steve went after him, he had his hand wrapped around his arm. They both froze at the sound of the door opening and shutting.

“Hello?”

At first Billy thought it was Mr. Harrington, but Steve looked just as panicked as he did. Billy could swear he’s heard that voice before, he can’t place where.

Steve tugged his arm like a leashed dog. “*Hide,*” he hissed.

But Billy could swear he knows that voice. He knows it and he knows he knows it and he has to see. “I think I know him.”

“You can think all you want later,” Steve pulled at him again, they stumbled back toward the bathroom.

The man’s footsteps and his voice were growing closer. “The Chief of Police said you were a bit of flight risk, so I came here first,” he said. “He didn’t say much about you hiding.”

They stood still again.

His footsteps were closer, and as he rounded the corner Billy recognized his ever-present smile, his coal black eyes, and the striped red and black tie around his neck. It’s his goddamn world studies teacher.

“Mr. Cooper?” Billy blinked.

Steve grip on his arm loosened. He stood up straight while the two of them shared matching, dumbfounded expressions.

“Hi Billy, in this particular situation, you can call me Dean or Cooper, whichever you like,” he said. “I’m sorry we’re once again meeting in unfortunate circumstances.” He turned to Steve. “I’m glad you’ve made up with your friend, I told you those are important.”

He swallowed, mouth going dry. “What…?”

There Mr. Cooper...er... Cooper was again, smiling. “Chief Hopper told you I’d be giving my assistance while this all gets sorted out?”
The boys nodded.

“Well,” Cooper said, seemingly unaware of the boys’ confusion. “He told me you were a bit of a flight risk, right now I’m making sure you get to the hospital.”

Billy nodded.

Holy shit.

“You’re the mountain man!” Steve gasped.

Chapter End Notes

Now y'all know why I asked what you thought of Billy's teacher all those chapters ago lmfao!!!! I'm so excited!!!!!!! Does this count as a twist? Am I feeling smug?
...Maybe... Thanks for reading y'all!!! :D
“Is that what I am around here?” He asked. His eyes switched between the two of them, he grinned.

Billy didn’t feel like talking, if he were being honest, it’s a good thing though because Steve did. He nodded, cockatoo hair shaking along with his head. Then he shook his head, “well, no, it’s just…,” Steve didn’t know if he was allowed to mention El, if he should play dumb, or what. For all he knew there could be another non-disclosure agreement on the rise.

He nibbled his bottom lip and turned his head look at something else, “never mind.”

Cooper didn’t seem fazed by it either way.

“You should probably sit,” he advised. He nodded towards Billy’s foot, which was hurting as usual, hasn’t stopped hurting since last night.

Billy glared at him, he used to be his world studies teacher, but he isn’t right now. He’s not sure what he is right now except the man keeping him from escaping. He was his teacher. Billy couldn’t help eyeing him instead, he looked like a teacher, like a pencil-pusher, he dressed the same as he always does at school.

So, what the fuck?

Cooper smiled because he’s always smiling. “The fact that you’re looking at me that way tells me, at very least, you’re doing better,” he said. “That’s good.”

“Yeah?” Billy raised an eyebrow.

It’s in his nature not to trust people immediately, alright? Billy keeps thinking about how he was in the parking lot that day. He was watching him, Cooper had to have been.

Steve was nearly standing in front of him like he might fight and he was there to stop him. He wasn’t going to fight though, he’s tired and his foot hurts, his brain is scrambled eggs and he can’t. He’s sick of fists for now.

“Why don’t I let you ask me some questions until Hopper gets back?” He suggested. “I’m sure you have some.”

It sounds like placating. Cooper was probably going to let him ask questions anyway, this just made it sound like some sort of deal. You sit, I give you what you want. Billy shifted a little. He could see the wheel’s in Steve’s brain turning.

“He stays,” Billy said.

“That’s fine.”

So he sat, begrudgingly, because answers sound good and his leg was going to give out soon. Steve sat down too, pulled his chair ridiculously close to him like he either still didn’t trust Billy or didn’t trust Cooper or both.
Cooper seemed to notice and grinned, *amused.*

“Do you mind if I make coffee?” The man asked.

Steve falter for a second, shook his head, “no, yeah, that’s fine. The pot’s dirty though.”

They watched as Cooper made his way around Steve’s kitchen with his back turned to them. “You know I *love* this town,” he said. “I’ve been stationed all sorts of places, lived in D.C. for a while, but this town is lovely.”

“How…” Steve started then paused. “How long have you been…doing this?” He said, heavily implying the ‘whatever it is that you do part.’

“Straight out of college,” Cooper said simply. “I went thinking I was going to be a lawyer,” he chuckled. “Came out being something completely different.”

“And what’s that?” Billy asked.

He rinsed out the coffee pot with sudsy water. “A jack of all trades,” he said with a small shrug, “for a lack of a better word.”

“That’s vague,” Steve said before Billy could.

Cooper chuckled, “unfortunately.” They watched him go about Steve’s kitchen until he located a mug, the coffee grounds were still sitting out from this morning.

“Why are you here?” Billy asked

“Well, lovely little towns like this one usually have a habit of strange things happening,” Cooper said simply. “And when strange happens, bad or good, someone like me is around.

“So it’s... an agency?” Steve asked. “That handles weird stuff like this?”

Billy snorted.

He hates that he’s officially been qualified as ‘weird stuff.’

He turned on the machine again, immediately effusing the scent of coffee and steam. Cooper smiled, shoulders sagging slightly. The man turned to face them now that his coffee was brewing. “Exactly, yes,” he said.

“Then how are you going to handle me?” Billy asked snidely.

Cooper laughed a little, “depends, honestly.” He looked amused by Billy if anything. “Not badly,” he added. “I’m here to make sure things don’t get out of hand, and so you can lead as normal a life as possible.”

Steve and Billy both froze.

They had not been expecting that.

Billy swallowed, his mouth had gone dry. “A normal life?” He repeated. “What does that...what does that even mean?”

“Whatever you want it to mean,” Cooper said. He was transfixed by the coffee maker again, watching it brew with intense eyes. “What I do is make sure no one knows you can do what you
Billy blinked, watching the man.

So, if needed a new name, and a new place to live, and a way to get away...he could just... ask him? His stomach flopped and crossed and knotted. If his job is to make sure no one knows he has powers, he could make Neil go away.

He felt Steve’s hand curl around his underneath the table, his stomach unclenched. “Is that what you do with Jane?”

“Yup,” he said cheerfully. “Same thing.”

Billy nodded his understanding. He paused for a moment. “How many people--”

“That I can’t tell you,” he said, very serious for a moment. “But I understand why you would ask that.” It comes with more questions, more hows, and whys, and whens. Cooper poured himself a cup of coffee. He hardly waited before taking a sip, the man sighed happily, obviously pleased, before sitting down across from the boys.

“How much do you know about...” Steve shifted, swallowed. “About the lab? I mean, if you work with people like El then you had to have known and--”

“That would make me complicit or worse,” Cooper finished for him. “Is that what you mean?”

Steve nodded.

He wondered what happened to the people that worked there, the ones that didn’t get eaten, at least. Did they get normal jobs or end up somewhere else?

Billy had wondered too.

Cooper turned to Billy. “I told you it’d be good to have friends,” he said.

Fuck off.

His eyes are much darker than Steve’s but they catch light like any others and they darken even more so than usual when he thought of what to say next. He sipped from his mug. “Our job is cleaning up messes, it’s unfortunate and I’m not proud of it, but we don’t look at what happens before the spill,” he said. “At least not in-depth.”

As much as Billy didn’t want to believe that. He did.

“So now, you make sure everything goes back to normal?” He asked. “Like all of this never happened?”

“If you want.”

Billy gnawed on his lip, he did.

He wanted everything to be the way it was before. Before Neil and Lori’s party and everything changing on him. He wanted that, but...

“What do you want then?” Billy asked. “Because there’s a catch.”

“You know you really would be better off raising your hand in my class,” Cooper said with another
wiry laugh. “Nothing gets by you.”

They both tensed.

That’s a yes, that’s a ‘this is an exchange.’

Of course it is, everything is.

Our secrets kept for your life.

My secrets kept...for what?

“What do you get from Jane?” Billy asked.

“The same thing we'd get from you. The ability to run tests,” he said. Cooper saw both their faces change and quickly added. “Not painful, or at least as painful as a push up test, but they are invasive, unfortunately.”

As painful as a push up test.

Steve could see why Hopper and Jane accepted, maybe it took some pushing and shoving and re-negotiating, but for El, as painful as push up test in exchange for a new lease on life sounds like small potatoes.

At least, he thinks it does.

Who knows what the others will think even they're even allowed to know.

Billy didn't say anything he was staring at Cooper. The only good thing about it was that he could tell it was definitely still Billy. He hadn't lost him somewhere along the way like you lose grandma in the middle of explaining what a mixtape is.

He was present.

“So you get to poke, prod, and watch me and no one comes after me and no one does anything, and I get as normal, slice of apple-pie life as I want?”

“That's the short in the long of it, yes.”

There are reasons why he hates hospitals and all of them begin and end with poking, prodding and tests.

He's taking him, to the hospital just for that exact thing. And then he has to do more.

In exchange everything goes away.

It sounds simple, it sounds easy. It sounds like the least human thing he's ever heard of.

“I think you're a great kid,” Cooper said after while since Steve was suddenly silent and Billy was too busy mulling. “I want you to think about it, whether you say yes or no has no effect on my helping you today.”

The man finished his coffee and stood. “Anymore questions?”

He did. Billy looked at him, all malice drained. He's drained.
Drained by thoughts and fears and pain and exhaustion.

“How’d you find me?” He asked.

“*Sheer luck,*” Cooper said with a smile. “I’m here to help Jane, there was a possibility she might attract other people like herself, but it was unlikely.”

Steve and Billy scoffed.

“Clearly, we were wrong.”

Cooper left them alone, he had asked if he could look around at some the fancy foreign shit Steve's parents have all over the house. Turns out he wasn't just faking the World Studies part.

He wasn't kidding about being a jack of all trades.

Billy needed to think and worry and plan, it was hard enough as is with his head feeling like it'd been compressed and stretched out more times than taffy. Steve grabbed his hand under the table again, while he worried his bottom lip between his teeth and thought himself to in oblivion.

Billy thought about stopping him, but he thought about kissing him again too and then he decided he shouldn't think about Steve at all.

He has to decide what to do.

“Do you want me to go with you?” He asked. “To the hospital? I said I would if you wanted me to.”

Yes.

He was going to go stir crazy if he didn't and Billy wanted him to come. Sure Hopper is alright and Cooper is okay for the most part, but they're not Steve.

At this point Billy's not even sure who he's trying to hide all this fucking gay shit from. He's dead to Neil no matter what. But the word stays stuck in his throat and nodding is just as hard.

Steve's eyes search his for a moment. “You know it scares me when you don't talk,” he said.

“I'm not a talkative person.”

Maybe not in the traditional sense, maybe not all the time. Steve laughed. “Yes, you are,” he said. “When you want something known you don't shut up.”

And him wanting Steve to go to the hospital with him is something he doesn't want known, so.

“Hopper's not gonna like it if I do,” Steve said.

Maybe he's afraid they'll end up like El and Mike, that dangerous word that keeps being thrown around, Nancy called it “co-dependent.”

He's pretty sure it's a little late for that. It feels like bugs are crawling on his skin when Billy isn't there.
He was clingy before but this is worse. Everything feels kicked up to a twenty.

“Good thing he's not the one about to be cut open,” Billy said tersely. “I feel like I should have some fucking rights.”

Steve paled. “They're not gonna cut you open.”

“There's something wrong with my head, pretty boy, they're either gonna crack my skull open or put me under a machine. Or both.”

Which fucking sucks.

Steve gnawed on his lip hard again, until the pillowy flesh turned white. His eyes searched Billy again before speaking.

“I want you to know that all those times in my head when I said I wanted to be as far from you as humanly possible?” He said. “I take them back.”

“I'm not gonna die, Harrington, jeezus.” Billy rolled his eyes.

“I know,” Steve leaned back, his arms wrapped around his waist tightly. “I just didn't know what to say so...I mean, at least you know I...” he shook his head. “You know?”

No.

He doesn't know.

But he smiled anyway, “yeah, I get it.”

The front door opened again, followed by Hopper's lumbering footsteps.

Billy hated that he broke out in cold sweats at the idea of getting in that car, of going to that place.

He could hear the their hushed voices in the foyer as low, grumbling murmurs.

“The hospital has good ice cream,” Steve said. “I know it's stupid but they do and... there's not like a real library but there are books, you just have to ask.”

The voices faded. “Maybe we'll run into Tommy or Carol.”

Billy turned to look at Steve. His leg stopped jiggling. “Is he awake yet?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “I heard from Roger his legs are fucked up though, like...not working fucked up.”

“Are you gonna visit him?”

Steve shrugged, his face shifted and twisted. “I think I'd just make him angry.”

For a moment they were enraptured in teenage gossip. It was a distraction but it was enough.

The two men came around the corner, noticeably without the presence of El.

Hopper turned to Billy, “you good now, kid?”

Billy was this close to simply saying, bite me, pig.
And he doesn't even think police are pigs but someone is head fucking does and for a moment he agreed.

“He's coming,” Billy said defiantly. He jerked his head a little toward Steve.

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose. “For what?”

“Because I want to,” Steve answered.

Cooper was grinning like this was all funny. Hopper was about to say something when he spoke. “It won't hurt to bring him with us,” he said. “He's not family after all, and we're not going anywhere important. No place he hasn't seen before.”

Steve grinned too, like a damn princess.

Billy snorted. Even he had said no he knows now that Steve would've bitched and moaned until he said yes.

“Christ,” Hopper grumbled. “Fine, if it matters that much.”

“It does,” Steve added.

Hopper glowered at him.

Billy almost laughed. He's pretty sure he's in love.

They got into Hopper's car.

He drove with Cooper in the passenger seat, writing in an old notebook, while Billy and Steve sat in the back.

Steve pretended not to notice Billy shaking or the fact that all the sun in his complexion that he'd gained since waking up was gone again.

It was too low down for either of the men in front to see their fingers touching. Billy wasn't sure when they started holding hands so much or why, but he didn't ask.

Steve's hands were warm and soft except the calluses at his knuckles from holding the bat all the time.

Billy tried not focus on them over the feeling of needles in his skin and the sticky syrupy feeling of sedatives.

“You know when this is all over, Harrington,” Billy said. “I think I'm gonna ruin Chad's life.”

Steve snorted.

“You're gonna need a lot of kitchen plates to do that,” he giggled. “You want my bat?”

“You know I can hear you both, right?” Hopper said.

Not that he was really gonna stop them.

“What are you gonna do, Chief?” Billy challenged. “We're already in the back of a cop car.”
Chapter End Notes

It's a chapter with xxx in it and no smut lmfao. (At least I think that's funny). Also I'm sorry if this is messy, my laptop was acting up and I wrote this entirely on my phone.
He liked Steve holding on to all his stuff better than anyone in the hospital, they lose shit, people steal shit all the time. These nurses and doctors and orderlies sure as hell aren’t any exception to rule.

Hospitals are awful like that.

They reek like death, they’re completely white and there’s something about the tiles that sit behind him that bother him. They might be worse than the large, flat panels that ‘decorated’ the walls of the lab.

They might not be.

He’s fucking drugged out. Hopper didn’t know him before and neither did the nurses, but he knew he was flinching more than he ever had. He couldn’t stand the thought of any more hands on him after his old man, Steve had gained his trust but that was about it. He wouldn't let them get too close without jolting and bending, even involuntarily, even when he was just damn tired of being jittery.

So now he’s fucking drugged like a dog getting its balls chopped off. Just enough to make him manageable he heard a nurse say. He’s just blissed out enough that he barely cares that he’s being poked and pulled and prodded, that Steve was only allowed so far. So he can manage to lie still under the machine for an hour while the giant ass tube-machine ‘scans his brain.’

*For an hour* at the most.

They warned him it banged too sometimes loudly.

He’s not happy about being drugged, but he’d be even less happy if he wasn’t. Right now it’s hard to care about much of anything and it keeps getting harder.

Cooper had disappeared to get more coffee. Whatever act he had, which Billy was pretty sure wasn’t actually an act at all, the teacher Mr. Cooper was just as obsessed with coffee as spy Cooper. Hopper left to do whatever else he has to do, and only God knows where Steve is or if the thing Hopper’s doing is taking him home.

Who knows, he sure as hell didn’t.

he’s supposed to wait for the machine to tell them all if there’s anything wrong with his head, the doctors sure as hell weren’t sure he didn’t just have a concussion, and what is exactly wrong with him.

“Hey,” Steve popped his head, like, actually leaned over the side of the door frame with a broad grin.

A slow, syrupy smile spread across his face, he really missed him which was even worse than not being able to hide it. “Hi,” Billy grinned back at him. “Where’s Hopper?”

“On the phone,” Steve said, entering the room. “Scoot over.” Steve hopped onto his bed with him,
“Can’t I have my own bed? Jeezus, Harrington, for all you know I could be dying.” He’s pretty sure he’s not, but he could be. He could be.

Steve didn’t stop nudging him with his hip, warmth spreading from him already until they were wedged tightly into the same bed. “All the more reason for me to be right here, you know?” He said.

He felt himself blushing like a complete loser, looked away from him and scoffed. “Whatever you say, pretty boy.”

They stayed like that, and maybe everyone just knew to stay away because they did. There was no Cooper, no Hopper, and no nurses for a while. Steve’s hand snaked into his like it has all day, his thumb stroked over the veins on his hand and the ridges on his thumb.

He turned to look at him, “why d’you keep holding my hand?”

Steve shrugged. “I dunno, ‘cause you let me?” He said. Steve looked at him with one of his eyebrows raised. “You look pretty blissed out already, and I know this helps.” He shouldn’t have asked when he knew the answer would only make things worse for him. Steve’s other hand brushed his lips nervously. “You asked, so…”

Billy didn’t say anything but he hummed back a little, shaking his head. “I hate these fucking drugs.”

Steve snorted. “That’s almost surprising considering you’re the keg king and all.

“Oh shut, Harrington,” Billy laughed.

Steve watched him, “they really wanted to put down the problem child.

Billy groaned just thinking about it, thinking about spending another hour with the scent of antiseptic and reheated food. “Yeah, and you know they’re just starting depending on when they get to pop me in that fucking tube machine.”

Steve was still marveling a little at Billy, he had his reasons--and they were good ones, but he couldn’t believe it was hospitals that would have him climbing up the wall. “I bet you know already, I mean, I don’t know how it works, but my basement is…” his lips pursed. “Scare me.”

“I know,” Billy said. “Your basement, the Upside Down, the dark, you and Nancy both hate clowns a hell of a lot.”

“You remember me?” Steve’s thumb went on rubbing against his hand again. “You said it yourself, you don’t even know which way is home...I just wanted to know how much you’re having trouble remembering,” he said.

“Yeah,” Billy shrugged. “I remember you and a whole bunch else.” He wasn’t trying to put Steve in a panic, Billy bit down on his thumbnail. “It’s just some stuff that’s...foggy.”

“Oh,” Steve swallowed.

Billy talks about him in his sleep like...like he’s bad or worse or something. He’s scared of him. He said his dad tried to...to hurt him. I took the trash out last night, I know I did. I had to do all of my chores and his that night. But Billy didn’t take the trash out last night.

Steve’s fingers absently rubbed against Billy’s pendant still in his pocket. “You remember
anything about the guy that did this to you in the first place?”

Billy had to try hard not to pull his hand away. Sure, he fucking remember, he didn’t forget that. Or
the other thing, gnawing in the back of his head. He’s pretty sure this question would’ve really
fucking messed with him if he wasn’t so mellowed out. That’s probably why Steve asked. “Are
you asking me because I’m suggestable?” Billy asked. “Like on TV when they’re drugged out so
you ask all these fucking questions to get funny answers.”

“No, I was...I wanted to know so I could help maybe,” he said. “But don’t worry about it, Billy,
you’re all drugged up, relax.”

Billy let his eyes slip shut and gravity take his head until it was leaning on Steve’s shoulder. It’s
not like he’s doing it on purpose, he’s just so so tired and his head feels so full with all the things in
it. He couldn’t possibly hold it up anymore.


He should tell him the truth though, a little voice says. He knows all your other secrets, what’s one
more?

Billy opened his mouth, “when I woke up I--”

“Oh,” Billy’s eyes snapped open. “William?” A woman dressed in scrubs looked at the two of
them with her eyebrows raised.

Billy watched a blush crawl across Steve’s face, “that’s him...not--”

“I know,” she said awkwardly.

Steve clambered off the bed into the chair where he was supposed to be in the first place if he had
any decency and interest in keeping his distance.

Billy chuckled lazily.

Her eyes turned him, as far as Billy could tell the woman looked pleased. “Now you look like you
could lie still for a little while.” He was not looking forward to being stuck in that machine. “I’ll be
back in a few minutes, and then we’ll get you moving.”

“Great,” Billy sneered at her.

She frowned slightly, holding her notepad a little closer to herself.

Sure, it’s not her fault, but like fuck every employee in this joint.

“Billy--”

“If you tell me to play nice, I’ll rip this IV out and kick you, Harrington,” he said moodily.

“That doesn’t sound like someone who’s been lightly sedated,” Steve crooned. Billy glared at him
from his hospital bed. “I’m just trying to keep your mind off the machine, just pretend you’re
taking a nap in a futuristic space pod.”

Billy actually laughed, it was goofy and slow. “You’re a fucking loon, Harrington.” He’s pretty
sure it’s one of the drugs where the longer you hooked up the slower you get. He feels slower than
before.
He shrugged, eyes sparkling. “You were going to say something?”

Billy’s smile faded. He turned to look at him, eyes searching for a moment. “I forgot,” he said.

Steve’s eyes went soft on him, pitiful and big and brown. He didn’t deserve it, he’d rather leave than tell Steve what his old man did, undoubtedly Hopper would find out too. He absolutely doesn’t deserve it.

“It’s okay, maybe it wasn’t that important if you forgot?” He said with a small shrug. Steve mistook Billy’s silent hesitance for frustration. “Or if it was it’ll come back to you, take it easy.”

He agreed, nodding his head a few times.

“Oh.” Cooper was back with a steaming cup of coffee. No doubt he stopped to drink one in the cafeteria, whether or not that was purposefully to linger away from them, they weren’t sure. Unlike Hopper, he didn’t seem to mind having Steve linger around. “I see he’s calmed down considerably,” he said sipping from his cup before taking a seat.

Billy wanted to say something about the guy getting his precious brain scans so he can turn them over to a bunch of lab goons and all have a big circle jerk about their success, but half out it didn’t really make sense once he started mumbling, and then he decided he didn’t want to say ‘circle jerk’ anywhere around his World Studies teacher.

So he sneered a little and slumped in his bed.

Steve got a kick out of it. He laughed nervously, “he’s not happy about it.”

“I’m glad you’re able to find the humor in this,” he said with a slight smile. “I’d hate to see either of you moping through this.”

Steve wasn’t exactly wary of the man, he just couldn’t believe that there was someone in Hawkins from God knows where that was watching them more or less. He got used to presence quicker than he normally would have given the circumstances. While Billy was silent, from the looks of it he was falling in and out of consciousness, Steve stared at the man trying to make sense of him.

It didn’t last long as Cooper’s eyes shifted towards him for a moment questioningly before going back to his coffee without a weird.

_He’s just a weird fucking guy, alright?_

Hopper came in looking less tense. There were no seats left so he leaned up against the wall closest to Cooper with his arms crossed. “El says hi,” Hopper said.

Cooper smiled, “oh good. How is she?”

Steve tried not to listen to their small talk. He leaned over onto Billy’s bed, tapping his arm lightly. “You still awake?”

Billy opened his eyes, “barely.” He looked between Hopper and Cooper. “When did they get here?”

Cooper waved.

“Hey, kid,” Hopper said.

Billy grunted back.
His eyes shut again with a loose pat to the top of Steve’s hand. It’s not his fault his eyelids are so heavy.

When he woke up he was being told to lay down a table. That, large, hunk of shit looking machine was sitting in front of him and the nurse--a different one--had her hand on his shoulder ‘soothingly.’ which was wild because he didn’t remember leaving the room and he didn’t remember being in a wheelchair.

Her arm wrapped around Billy's to steady him. “Just hop up when you're ready.”

This was worse than when Max jammed the fucking needle into his neck. At least then he wasn't conscious.

Billy slowly pulled himself up when he realized “when you're ready” meant within the frame of a minute. “Such a long face,” she crooned, looking at him with a slight frown. “You poor thing, all you have to do is lie back, alright? And stay still.”

The nurse gave his shoulder a slight push. She guided him back slowly. Billy stared up at her for a moment. She didn't look like the other nurse, she was older with blue eyes and soft yellow blonde hair like his mom.

She sort of looked like her, Billy blinked, she looked a lot like her.

“Stay still for me,” she said.

“M--” He swallowed the word, his mom is dead.

He found himself on a highway, one of those blank highways that are so perfect, blue sky so equal with the dirt ground, that it looked more like a painting than reality.

“You know I ain’t supposed to let little kids sit here in the front, but you seemed to like the clouds so much,” she said. “Now, when we get you home, what do you call me?” Billy felt someone tapping his arm repeated. “Six, d’you hear me? What do you call me?”

Billy’s view changed from perfect sky to the front of an old car, to a curly-haired woman with smooth, brown skin and even darker freckles. “You hear me?” She had on an emblem, a torch that looked to be engulfed in fire itself, on the lapel of her polka-dotted dress.

“Ms. Ruth.”

“That’s right,” she said. Billy giggled when she tickled him under the arms a little. “And you’re...” Billy watched her intently. Ms. Ruth grabbed a piece of paper out of the purse between them. The car swerved slightly while she pulled it out of the envelope. “William Ivy Hargrove.”

Billy’s own nose wrinkled. “Six,” he said, pointing at himself.

“No, William,” she said. “You ain’t Six anymore.”

“There’s a nice, little lady that’s gonna be your momma, and big, strong man that’s gonna be your dad, alright?” She said sternly. “But Six doesn’t get none of that? Six gets bupkis.”

“Bupkis,” Billy repeated seriously. He knows that word, bupkis. It’s in Frank’s brain.

“You want a mommy and daddy, right? Like in the books?”
“Why not Six get that?”

“You are,” she insisted. “You just gotta be William to get it.” Ms. Ruth sighed. “You know what? If anyone tries to call you Six, run. That’s it, alright?”

Billy nodded.

Six is bad. William is good.

She stuffed the paper and envelope back into the bag between them. “You’re gonna be just fine, William, I promise.”

“He doesn’t belong here!” He heard Neil yelling through the walls. Something familiar spreads through Billy’s body.

“He’s our son!” His mother shouted back.

“He’s a freak of nature! Our son?” he scoffed, “He’s a goddamn lab rat!”

He flinched at the sounds of loud crashes, it sounded like glass shattering. Like the glass bottles of beer, his father likes to drink from. Billy wiped the blood from his nose on the back of his sleeve and listened with his ear pressed to the door to hear more.

“He’s mine! I don’t care!” She cried. “My baby, Neil! My baby!”

His skin ached from bruises that weren’t his, a fear he’s coming to understand settled in his stomach making him clutch at it reflexively. He heard more thumps that made silent tears fall from his face.

“That thing isn’t ours!” He heard him growl. “Not until I fix him, he’s not.”

He heard footsteps traveling down the hall, Billy sprang back into his bed. He pulled the covers over his head and nestled himself deep within them.

His dad’s always trying to fix him, it always hurts.

“William?”...“William?”...“Billy?”

Billy blinked up into the dark brown eyes of the nurse, she was... annoyingly close. She smiled. “Hey,” the woman pulled back far enough for him to see that he was back in the same hospital room. “You fell asleep,” she said. “And now you’re all done, easy-peasy.”

Billy’s eyes wandered lazily across the room. Hopper was gone again, and so was Steve. He wanted to know where he was. Cooper was still there, one leg crossed over the other with a faint smile on his face. He waved. His eyes landed on the x-rays next, there were a lot of them.

Plenty.

“It’s a good thing too, we had to scan you three extra times,” she said. She cleared her throat and went about fixing small things like re-stacking the x-rays so that they were centered in their folder.

He looked out the window and sure enough, it was dark outside.

“What the hell?” He croaked.
She looked between him and Cooper, “a doctor will be in shortly,” she said.

She scurried away closing the door behind her.

*Not a good fucking sign.*

“Yes,” Billy sighed. “Pretty sure I’m either getting cut open or I’m dying.”

Cooper chuckled. “In that case, you don’t look bad for a dead man,” he said with that same ever-present smile. *He’s creepy, alright? He might be the messiah or something, but he’s weird.*

Billy turned to look at him. “You know you’d be less weird if you didn’t say shit like that,” he groused. “Where’s Steve?”

Cooper made an amused noise again. “Hopper took him home, or perhaps to Mrs. Henderson’s? He’s alright either way. Nervous but alright. If you’d like I could get a message to him?”

Billy nodded slowly.

“Because that’s what you do...make things simple, keep me happy.”

He nodded. “Exactly. There are certain things I can’t do like...bring the President of the United States here, but for the most part, this is my job.”

“Yes...” Billy said slowly.

He leaned back, he was too wired to close his eyes. He’s wide awake. He thought about the pin on Ms. Ruth’s lapel and made a note to ask Cooper about it later. The man’s pretty much at his beck and call until he either decides to play lab rat or die, so he might as well make the best of it.

Chapter End Notes

1.) Whew! Sorry that took forever...I'm still recovering from a very not good Saturday, but it's all good now! Don't worry!
2.) Ms. Ruth is 100% based off of Ruth Negga who plays Tulip in Preacher
3.) Writing Cooper and Hopper is hard...I apologize if it ever says, Copper and Hooper.
4.) THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR BEING PATIENT LOL LIKE...I APPRECIATE IT SO MUCH IT MADE MY WEEK MUCH LESS STRESSFUL AND I APPRECIATE IT SOOO MUCH <3 :D
XXXII. Cooper

Chapter Notes

Two for Two on being late as hell, man, December is kicking my ass! I hope this is still good!

There’s something real snide about doctors that only makes hospitals that much more unpleasant. Even Dr. James Connors was somewhat of a cocky bastard in his own right, Billy didn’t even need Dr. Mason to explain much from the four scan, who is arguably more of a cocky bastard than Dr. Connors. One had a lot of dark shadows, one had some, one didn’t have many and one had none...or, sort of not really.

“This,” Dr. Mason said with a fancy flick of his point stick. He looked over at Cooper who was paying a serious amount of attention, looking grave. “Is the brain of someone suffering from memory loss similar to dementia.” Billy turned back to look at the man frown and make slight points. “See, here, this is a slight contusion which is a very big word meaning--”

“A bruise,” Billy drawled.

What is he? Five?

Cooper’s brow furrowed when he turned to look at him, more disapproving that he had interrupted him than that he had said his brain isn’t working.

“Well, yes,” he said.

The man coughed awkwardly and carried on with a little bit less of that ‘look at me I have a Ph.D. and I save lives ’ bullshit in his towns. At the corner of the scans was the number 1, the subsequent three scans labeled accordingly. Dr. Mason moved over to scan number 4, the last one they took apparently.

“This,” he said, pointing all the way to scan number 4. “This is the brain of someone with an exceptiona

l memory, think of this brain like a supercomputer with enough room to store a vast quantity of data. I’d even say pockets waiting to be filled with information.”

“So, that’s him currently?” Cooper asked.

He nodded. “Yes, there’s still slight bruising, but it seems in the span of…” he paused to think.

“Five or six hours he went from an amnesiac to a memory whiz. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Billy swallowed, throat clicking dryly. Sure, it’s great he’s not cuckoo for cocoa puff, but nothing’s changed. He’s still exceptional and dangerous because of it. The doctor makes it sounds like even more so than before maybe.

He reminded himself the doctor knows jackshit about him, about Six or Ms. Ruth. He knows jack all about that.

Billy focused his attention on Copper’s stone-face, not an unpleasant one, but still very serious with dark intense eyes and a stiff upper lift he’s seems to be listening and processing everything Dr.
Mason tells him like it might be vital later.

For him, it probably will be.

“At first we thought the machine was broken,” Dr. Mason, cut into his thoughts. “But we checked it on one of the nurses, looked at its insides and everything,” he flashed a PR-style smile. “It’s all you, kid.”

He almost pulled a goddamn muscle trying to keep his eyes from rolling out of his skull, he swears.

“Do you have any predictions for how he could’ve gone from scan 1 to scan 4?” Cooper asked.

“Predictions?” He repeated with a small snort. “No, I prefer not to make them.” Which pretty much means, ‘and if I did they’d be straight out of science fiction.’ “We’ll have someone more qualified than even me take a look at these.”

Even better.

Billy decided now was good enough time to ask the most important question of all:

“When am I getting out of here then, doc? Like in the wee hours of the morning?” Billy asked, he was a little too hopeful.

He’s got a life to run away from and a school to not go to and one Steve Harrington to sorely miss.

Cooper and Dr. Mason shared a look, one of those ‘should I tell him looks?’ Billy’s shoulders drooped. “I’m not getting out of here any time soon.”

The doctor shrugged. “Not as soon as you’d hope if you mean this morning,” he chuckled, less of a PR smile and more of a ‘you’re not a smart as you think you are.’ “We’re going to keep you for a day or two more, you fluctuated so fast we want to make sure you won’t do it again,” he said. “There’s also still bruising, inside and out that we’d like to keep an eye on.”

Billy already knew he wouldn’t. He jaw clenched with all the effort to keep his mouth shut, better yet to not scream at a day or two more.

Fucking doctors.

Dr. Mason pulled the scan down and placed them in a fancy little manila folder. “We’re all playing this by ear, so we’ll see. Just try to be patient,” he said.

Billy glowered at him, not unlike a child, his arms crossed. “I’m already a patient.”

Dr. Mason’s lip crooked upward at one side, Billy wondered if this is how Steve feels when he starts acting like an asshole. “Then it should be easy for you,” he shut the door behind him.

“What a windbag,” Billy huffed. He slumped in bed. Cooper was still looking pensive in a very uncomfortable plastic chair. He didn’t make a move to sit in the cushy chair next to his bed where Steve had sat. “You said you could do anything,” Billy said.

“I’m not getting you out of here,” Cooper said. “I won’t do anything to detriment your health.”

Billy groaned. “So I get to sit on my ass and you’re here to watch?”

“I can offer company,” he said. Billy rolled his eyes. “I’ve also got to do my job, unfortunately for you, that means asking you more questions.”
“Now?”

“Whenever you’re ready,” Cooper said. “But preferably sooner rather than later.”

Of course.

Billy thought for a moment. He didn’t feel like answer questions he felt like ripping all the wires hooked up to him off and out of him and punching a wall. He sucked on his teeth, thinking, “not now,” he said.

“I can also retrieve things for you,” Cooper said. “Like a book? If I’m not mistaken Steve mentioned you enjoy reading.”

“Yeah,” Billy drawled. “Sure.” Cooper went to stand, “I got a question?”

Hmm?”

“How much do you know about me?” He asked.

Cooper closed the door to lean up against it. His arms crossed. “Whatever we have on record, and what I’ve managed to learn in the past few months.”

“On record?”

“They’re very old, haven’t been changed or updated since 1976,” he said. Billy’s eyes narrowed on him. “Of course, I think the questions you’re asking are where and how.”

Billy’s chin tilted, “something like that, yeah? How do you even get this stuff?”

For the first time since Billy met Cooper, he looked...uneasy. He’s looked mildly confused before, but never has his eyes switched back and forth the way they had. He took a seat in the plastic chair.

“That’s a story you’ll surely be less comfortable with,” he said.

“I’m already uncomfortable,” Billy said. He held up his right hand where they had jabbed a needle through his skin. It’s a miracle they didn’t put him in a gown with his ass out for Christ’s sake.

Cooper grinned, amused.

He really shouldn’t be.

“The department I work for--”

“That’s called?”

“The Department of Unexplained Persons,” Cooper said. Oh, great, he’s unexplained now. On top of extraordinary and freak of nature. “Once worked with what you called the Hawkins National Laboratory and it's countrywide replicants .”

“Once?”

“In the 1960s to the mid-1970s, were in the ‘affiliates’ section,” he said. “The department split after that, laboratories, like Hawkins National, are a major liability and we’ve made it our job to repair all their messes.”

Unexplained, mess, freak of nature.
“So you’re like their janitors?” Billy said. “And they pretty much dropped all the eggs in the aisle with the Upside Down?”

Cooper actually laughed, he chuckled. “That’s a way to put it, yes.” He fidgetted slightly with the cuff of his jacket. “I appreciate that you’re not calling my integrity into question, I wasn’t employed when the lab and the D.U.P. worked together.”

Billy snorted. “I don’t trust you, anyway,” he said. “But I’m listening, Cooper, cause I have to. Helps me think.”

He grinned easily. The man loosened up a little in his chair. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from you I’m being honest,” Cooper said.

He ended up grabbing Billy a book.

Billy flipped through the dismally thin thing, if he put his mind to it he could get through it in about an hour. *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* is the last thing he thought he’d read, but he’s almost sure it was in his mom’s library as a kid, on the top shelf he wasn’t allowed to touch.

But there’s no way Cooper could know that.

He disappeared to get coffee ant take-out, that looked like pancakes from that diner he and Steve go to. His hospital “dinner” was a sloppy-joe sandwich, mash potatoes, and green beans. ⅔ of that meal was mush.

He ate his greens, he’s always been the only kid he’s ever known that isn’t an absolute bitch about vegetables. That includes Max, Susan pretty much gives him brownie points because ‘if Billy can eat his vegetables so can you.’

Billy briefly wondered if he goes home how many vegetables he’d have to eat to keep Neil from killing him. What Billy hadn’t expected was for Cooper to pull out a second box of breakfast and place it next to Billy’s mostly untouched hospital food.

“You’re going to have to eat something,” Cooper said.

Billy stared at him unblinkingly.

He looked down at the box before tearing it open. “Thanks.” The food always looks more appealing at the diner than in a styrofoam box, but it smelled like the place and it reminded him of Steve.

“There really is nothing like this place,” Cooper said with a wide grin. Billy was prepared for this, teacher Cooper is as inexplicably enamored with Hawkins as agent Cooper is. “The trees, the people, the atmosphere, it’s wonderful.”

*Dead. A bunch of shitty hicks. Also dead, the opposite of wonderful,* Billy thought.

“I was stationed in Washington state before this,” Cooper said. “I never made it out to California.”

Billy snorted.

“That explains a lot for you, huh?” He said, like he was reading his mind.

Billy shut his mouth. He opened it, “you said, pal, not me.” But it did, Hawkins isn’t cool. It isn’t great, it’s a dirt pile waiting to get swallowed up by a different dimension in a frozen, useless state.
Half of those were Steve’s own thoughts.

“You ever get stationed anywhere interesting?” Billy asked.

“A lovely town in Tennessee, Maine was also beautiful,” he said. “More often than not I find myself in small towns like this.”

Billy shook his head, he dug into his breakfast, “sounds like a shame, you get a job that travels and you get stuck in a shithole like this. I’d quit.”

Cooper looked amused again, he shook his head. “I don’t think there’s anywhere I’ve been that I’ve hated so far. Maine was a particularly nasty case, but I’d even say Hawkins is my second favorite town.”

“What’s your first favorite?” Billy found him asking.

If only so he could avoid it like the plague.

“Just a little town in Washington state, just south of the Canadian border,” Cooper smiled wistfully. “Beautiful trees, lovely, helpful people and the little diner. All these small towns have amazing diners.”

Cooper made it all sound so great, he had one of those ‘special twinkles’ in his eyes.

He’s thinking about getting out here. It’s such a reality, he now wished he’d never asked Cooper how much he loved Hawkins.

Like, Billy doesn’t love Hawkins, but he loves familiarity and this dumb town is familiar. The roads are familiar now. He’s pretty sure when he took ‘the Hawkins roadmap’ from Steve’s brain, the part of Steve that kind of loves them, came with them.

Billy kept eating.

“How long are uh...stationed here?”

“Longer now, presumably,” he said. “I was here to keep Jane out of any danger, but now with you here, I suppose I’ll looking after both of you in that respect.”

Billy raised an eyebrow. “If I let you poke around at me,” he corrected.

“I wouldn’t let you get yourself into true trouble, regardless,” Cooper said. “That’d be the exact opposite of doing my job, and, as your teacher, I do hope you have a long and good life.”

He’d hate to burst the guy’s bubble on that so changed topics. “Are you actually a teacher? I mean...that’s just a cover?”

“I’ve been trained to teach in history, Spanish, and English, but my true job is working for D.U.P.,” he said.

Billy stared at the man, he can’t be older than thirty-five. “Right,” Billy drawled.

They finished their food in mostly silence beside Cooper making the occasional pleased sounds, and moans of pain (?) coming from some poor, unfortunate soul down the hall, and some other SOB’s rattling cough.

He hates hospitals.
Cooper put his box back into the large paper bag, along with his finished coffee cup and Billy’s finished meal. He looked at his watch, some industrial spy looking thing that probably does more than tell time. A real sci-fi looking one.

“It’s late,” he said. “Are you going to be alright, here?”

No.

Billy nodded. “Yeah,” he said.

He bit down on his thumbnail as the guy grabbed his long coat off the back of the chair and stood. Cooper patted his jacket. “While I was out,” he said. “I stopped by a Radio Shack, needed to ask a few questions about a doo-hicky and what-not.”

Billy wasn’t sure where this was going, but Cooper’s the type of guy that has trouble getting to point. He’s like that in class too.

“And, I assumed you’d like these,” Cooper dropped a bag with a Walkman and a few cassettes in the tray.

“Woah,” Billy breathed. “You didn’t have to--”

Cooper shrugged. “It’s a small length to keep you from running out of here, I suppose.”

Billy looked through them, barely paying him any mind for a second. Cooper seemed pleased with himself, a slight self-satisfied smile pulling at the corners of his mouth while he slipped on his coat.

“I’m still not letting you poke at me,” Billy said. “But I appreciate this,” he waved the new pack around a little.

“I’m not trying to convince you,” he popped his collar and flattened it back again so it was aligned. “I told you, you’re an alright kid, Billy.” With that, he grabbed the bag of trash and made his way to the door. “Try to get some sleep.”

“Yeah,” Billy mumbled, a little stunned. “I’ll try.”
Billy, despite what most people think about him, knows how to feel bad about something. He knows what feeling like shit is, he knows that it feels like a weight, he knows 90% of the time he's overwhelmingly aware of it, like he couldn't miss it, like getting hit in the gut with a sledgehammer.

Steve came by after school.

School, he had completely forgotten about.

He thinks it's coincidentally a day after everything settles down, after he's contained here, school starts up again. There really must've been a flood because he started telling him about how some of the classrooms are redone and the lunch line area in the cafeteria is completely new.

"Kind of wished the gym flooded," Steve said. "Maybe the locker rooms, they're grody."

"Yeah," Billy grunted.

Steve was doing some sort yoga to fit into the chair next to his bed with a pencil in one hand and his notebook situated in his lap and his textbook at his side. "I mean, Gertie is happy," Steve said casually. He shrugged, twirled his pencil between his fingers the same way he likes to twirl the bat around.

“Gertie?”

“Lunch lady,” Steve said.

“Shit, I thought her name was Matilda,” Billy said.

He laughed, “and that’s why you don’t get the good applesauce.”

Steve had brought him his homework too, but it was untouched in a neat Hawkins High folder that he placed on the countertop a half hour ago. He isn't the type of person who can read and write and talk at the same time. Billy sat back to stare up at the ceiling while Steve did his homework.

Actually, he was letting the guilt eat at him while staring up at the ceiling while Steve did his homework. "You don't have to be here," Billy said. "I'm fine."

Steve made a noise between a groan and 'ugh,' his tongue stuck out. He laid the pencil down on his lap and looked at him, "don't do that again."

"What?"

"The 'I'm fine' thing," Steve said. "You're not."

"I'm fine enough," Billy said. "You could, I don't know, go home or something you don't have to do your homework here."
Who wants to be here when you could be anywhere else, sitting here keeping him company for nothing. Jesus, he's no better than Carol.

"But you looked so sad before I came in here," Steve teased. Billy didn't budge, he looked at him with the same somber eyes that he had before. "Fine," he huffed. "I was trying to be funny. What am I gonna go home for anyway? You know what it's like after school for me."

Snowglobe.

The word came with barely any thought.

Cold and cut off from the outside world. The Harrington house is the type of house you can forget the world in, hours'll turn into days without opening the doors or leaving the bed if you're aren't careful.

"I'd rather..." paused, looking away from him. Steve licked his lips. "I mean it's better here anyway," Steve said. Someone yelped sharply from the end of the hallway.

Billy snorted, a smile pulled at both corners, he looked away from him with the smallest shake of his head. Steve laughed. "Not everyone has to feel the same as me about it."

"Yeah," Billy snorted. "No kidding."

He yelped again.

Billy winced.

"How’d you sleep?" Steve asked.

He chuckled sourly. Between the smell, the people, and all the shit in his head... “Funny you should ask, I didn’t,” he said. “I think I dozed off for like an hour.” He flew threw I Never Promised You a Rose Garden, he could see why his mom liked it, it was about someone just as batshit as she was.

Steve hissed. “Jeezus,” he didn’t sleep much last night either. “That sucks.”

“Royally.”

Their silence was comfortable, not that either of them thought it wouldn’t be. Billy tried to doze off again since Steve was determined to stay whether he liked it or not. He curled up on his side and let his eyes droop, half-lidded as he watched him work away at his homework.

“I quit,” Steve tossed the pencil down and ran his hands over his face.

“Huh?”

"Nothing, I just hate math that's all," he said. He rubbed at his eyes. "I mean, I was fine and then they made us do long division and now there are letters in the math, like my life isn't rough already."

Billy tried not to laugh at Steve, the poor bastard that he is. Only he could take trigonometry as a personal attack.

"Lemme look at it," Billy said, sitting up again.

“You’re trying to sleep,” Steve said.
“And now I’m not, fork over the books, Harrington.”

He reached out to take the textbook and his notebook from him. He's no math-whiz or anything, but Neil wanted him to keep his grades up. A's and B's only, one C maybe and it better by a C+.

Steve gave him the textbook like it was a lost cause, Billy imagined it was the same way he was handed off to his parents. 'Lost cause this one, good luck.'

Billy poured over the pages, his fingers traced over the words at the top of the page. He could feel it again, the waves coming in against his skull, a slight headache, but not like it used to be. There wasn't some sort of dark rider leading on the charge of a tsunami, it was what his ma used to call a 'baby wave' just a foamy white curl of water before hitting the sand. It was dull, easy to ignore.

Daniel Mayfield knew better than Billy did, and he was all too happy to help, putting the information out on a silver platter. Billy didn’t even have to ask.

He hadn’t asked.

"Pencil?" Billy asked.

Steve's hand were covering his eyes like it's a horror show, he slapped the thing into his hand. Billy took it, his left hand was luckily uninjured, and started out writing down the steps to solve a problem. He's pretty sure he's never written so fast, smoke should be flying from the paper and page until he's accidentally caused a fire.

Steve sat up to watch him write.

“Oh,” he said softly.

Billy put the pencil down and blinked.

He’s never had to not look before. Other people’s heads have always been like a file cabinet to him. Find Steve Harrington in a short row of cabinets, flick through manila folders labeled baseball, girls, secrets, music, etc pluck out what he’s looking for.

He was pulling before .

There had barely even been a tug.

“You okay?” Steve asked softly, using his ‘spooked animal’ voice.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Billy said without thinking. He felt nauseous, but it was passing. A little kickback.

He got up to take the books back from him. “I shouldn't have you doing that anyway,” he said quickly. “You’re head’s all messed up, Jesus, I shouldn’t have let you do math,” Steve said like math of all things is liable to put him six-feet under.

Billy wiped at his nose, a small smear of red pinked his skin. He pulled on the University of Michigan sweater he was admitted in to hide it.

“I’m sorry.” Steve got himself resituated in the chair. “That was stupid--”

“No,” Billy grabbed the water off the little tray on his desk and sipped. “I’m fine,” he said. He did felt fine, remarkably.
Steve looked at him with worried eyes, he *looked* sorry. His eyes jumped all over him until his shoulders slackened. “You were in a trance, I thought...” he started. “*You know.*”

Billy bit down his lip, he nodded, “yeah...”

Steve kept eyeing him, “are you sure you’re okay,” he asked again.

“I’m fine, I promise,” he said. “Seriously, Harrington, you’re gonna give yourself an ulcer.”

“Maybe I’ll end up in here,” Steve said, looking around as if these white walls could easily be mistaken for the Taj Mahal. “I could keep you company.”

Billy’s nose wrinkled. “I keep forgetting you’re the same guy that calls two hours of separation a lifetime.”

“There are worse things you could be, it makes me sweet,” he shrugged. Billy watched him plot ahead into his homework having no trouble with it now.

“Sweet,” Billy repeated, sucking on his teeth. “You’re a ham.”

“Yeah, a *sweet* ham,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“Get out of my room before I find a way to get a knife in you,” he grumbled.

“Or I could finish up this homework and get in your bed and we could take a nap?”

Billy thought for a moment, or he pretended to think. They both know what he’s going to say, “you can stay...for now.”

“Now who’s the ham?”

Steve’s heart hammered loudly, his fingers curled in Billy's hair absently.

“Are you still awake?”

“Barely,” Billy muttered.

He bit down on his lip, he shifted, causing Billy’s head to fall onto his shoulder. “Never mind.”

“Hmm?” He lifted his head “Do you...” he felt stupid asking if he remembered something that only happened a day ago, but it felt like weeks ago to him.

Billy turned to look at him. “Hm?”

“That morning,” Steve muttered. “After my mom...do you remember that?”

Billy felt the soft tickle of butterfly wings rush through him. “Yeah,” he said. He shifted, the covers and his sweatshirt made him feel hot, he felt jittery.

At the end of the day, *their* long, awful day, he was still a dumb teenage boy and that’s what he thought about when Hopper dropped him back off at his house. Billy’s scent lingered a little in his bed and he thought about it above all else, above all the pizza and popcorn, the movies strewn about his living room floor.
“Nothing,” Steve finally said. He scratched his nose. “I was just wondering because you know...your head.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” Billy said quickly. He rolled his eyes. “I was just grateful. ’S a really stupid way to show it. I was out of it.”

Grateful.

Jesus.

He looked at Steve nibbling his lip, he was pretty sure he’s going to combust like a balloon with too much air. He’s going to explode like the fucking Hindenburg if he doesn’t do something.

“Were you?” He asked. He backtracked. Of course Billy Hargrove is gay. He kissed him with his tongue in his mouth. He’s just causing unnecessary pain by asking, what is he even doing? “I mean, obviously, you’re grateful but...that thing you said about uh...Indiana Jones. I don’t care, I mean, I do care, I totally care, I care a lot about you,” Steve rambled. “So much, I care about you so much.”

If he could go back in time and kick himself in the nuts he would, he should’ve never done that. Kissing Steve Harrington was the stupidest thing he’d done all year. The butterflies were all cold trickles of dread and embarrassment.

“You can make a big deal about it, Harrington,” he said. His arms crossed over his chest. “I’m not.”

Steve’s mouth snapped shut. Billy was determined not to look at him. Steve twiddled his thumbs in the most depressing way possible.

“Do you like me?” He asked.

Check Yes or No.

He felt like he was in kindergarten all over again.

“Like--”

“I know what you mean,” Billy snapped.

“Do you?”

“Why’s it matter?” Billy growled. “What are you gonna do about it anyway?”

If he decides to go around and tell everybody the good news is he’s not even in school, hell, if everything works out, he won’t even be in town for much longer.

“I don’t know,” Steve muttered. He wanted to scoop up Billy’s hand between them, they’re rough and dry, but he likes them. He likes holding his hand. “I kissed you too, once,” he said. “You were asleep.”

Billy turned to look at him, his mouth hanging open just a little. He licked his lips. “You did?”

Steve flushed and he nodded.

“Oh…” Billy whispered, his ears turned red too. “Still doesn’t mean anything, you were probably just worried.”
He was.

It meant a lot though.

“Yeah…”

“I guess when you have someone in your head all day and night, you end up… with feelings,” Steve said.

But that’s never happened before. Billy was tempted to call bullshit.

“Yeah.”

They mirrored each other, nervous glances, lips red from being bitten. Billy thumbnail between his teeth, while Steve’s traced his bottom lip awkwardly.

“You wanna try it again?” Steve asked like it was taking another swing at something completely mundane. Not this. “I mean, hopefully, this time you don’t pass out so…”

Billy jerked, he let something nervous sounding and high pitched that almost sounded like “what?”

“Try it again,” Steve repeated, fidgeting. “Slower, maybe?” He asked.

Slower. Like…like romantic, because Steve’s a goddamn mushy romantic.

His mouth went dry. His eyes must be blown wide, he must look like a spooked animal with the way Steve’s being all careful and cautious.

Like he’s the one that’s never done anything gay before.

“We’re different, Harrington,” he said, finding his voice. “It’s not going to change anything.”

“I don’t know...I like being around you...I... really like--,” Steve said quietly, he cut himself off and shook his head. “That counts for something, right?” He knew it counted for a whole lot, but he needed to ask.

Billy stared at him, whether he’s truly embarrassed or not, he’s glowing red. “I don’t know, it’s not like I have a Ph.D. in...feelings.”

He’s in remedial at best.

His head was swimming looking up at him, pushed into the corner of his hospital bed with more and more of Steve’s weight on him. The smell of his soap beating out the antiseptic, for the first time since he came here, he could breathe. “I don’t think it matters whether it does or not,” Billy said in a low voice.

Steve hovered over him, his hand slid down to his waist. “No?” He laughed a little, as much as he could when they were so close

“No,” Billy shook his head causing their noses to brush.

Eskimo kisses.

They’re fucking Eskimo kissing.
His hand was heavy and warm on the back of Steve’s neck pulling him closer, tilting his head so their lips could meet.

He knows what Steve meant by slower now, just like he thought, romantic, sweet—syrupy sweet. He sighed at his fingers threading through his hair. His tongue didn’t plunge, he licked across the seam of his lips gently, because it’s Steve Care Bear Harrington.

His hand slid up his sweatshirt and stayed there with his thumb pressing into his rib, rubbing it in a circle.

Billy’s fingers gripped for more of him against the cotton of his shirt. Just like all the cows at Hawkins used to say, used to dream about kissing him and he’s the one fucking doing it. It made him delirious and light-headed just thinking about it. It fills Billy’s head up like a helium balloon.

“Better?”

“Better,” Billy breathed.

Chapter End Notes

Slowly making my way back to getting back on schedule thanks for being so patient with me!!!
“You look gross.”

Max didn’t look so great herself. She had darker circles around her eyes than the average tired 13-year-old and her bottom lip was chapped and bitten raw. Billy, on the behalf of Daniel Mayfield and every other adult with a bone of sympathy in their body, kept his mouth shut.

“Yeah, well,” he looked around, “hospital’s suck.”

Cooper was outside, giving them ‘family privacy.’ Hopper gave her a ride here and he tagged along. She came with a new pair of clothes for him to wear when he leaves later today and Susan made him a banana and Nutella sandwich.

Her fingers rubbed nervously against the length of her jeans. Her palms are always sweaty but especially when she’s nervous.

“What are you doing here, Max? Shouldn’t you be playing Dig Dug or some other nerdy shit?” Running around in tunnels almost getting yourself killed or worse?

“I didn’t want to stay home,” she said quietly.

Oh.

Max never liked her house, home, whatever. She wasn’t happy when they were a pleasant nuclear family of Daniel and Susan and her. She hates the Hargrove-Mayfield family just like he does. The happiest she was was getting carted between Daniel and Susan, but she stayed. Max always toughed it out and stayed.

“I’ve been staying at Lucas’s,” she said. “Mom found out, she’s pissed.”

Billy’s brows furrowed. He couldn’t imagine Susan getting pissed, she gets...displeased at best, but Susan was always different with him than Max. She’s Max’s mom to him she’s just Neil’s wife. “She says I should want to be home,” Max scoffed. She slouched in her uncomfortable plastic chair, pouted like the brat she is and crossed her arms. “I’m not going back there,” she growled.

Oh.

Those are usually his words. Max doesn’t get to utter those words. He was pretty sure she didn’t even have a reason to, but if Neil came back and he snapped. Billy shifted, he swallowed.

“Why not?” He asked, softly, like someone might be listening in.

He never prided himself on understanding Max, he didn’t want to understand Max. He wanted her to go away. Part of him wished he listened more or actually talked to her sometimes that way he wouldn’t be utterly lost right now.

“Because that place disgusts me. I don’t want to go back,” she looked at him, the pout she had started to wobble fiercely and her face turned red. “I know about Neil,” she blurted out, blunt as always.

Shit.

“Max--”
“You lied to Steve,” she hissed. “And Hopper. You covered for him when he did this,” she said accusingly.

**Shit.**

“I know he did this. You told me he tried to cut your head off in your sleep, he’s the only person that knew what you could do, and you didn’t take out the trash that night, I did, because your head was all scrambled!” She screamed.

If Billy wasn’t so shocked he’d be telling her to stop *yelling* about his dad trying to kill him with a cop and an agent on the other side of the room.

**Jesus fucking Christ.**

“I didn’t tell Hopper.” She hated the way Billy’s shoulders dropped a little with relief. “But I told Steve something was wrong.”

*Well, he must’ve forgotten or not cared because his hands were all up my shirt yesterday, Billy thought.*

He looked at her and seriously wondered when she started to care or if she’s just smart enough to put two and two together.

Tears spilled from her eyes onto her splotchy red face. “Say something!” She screamed again.

She’s always had a big mouth, always been fiery and impulsive. It’s the only reason some people believe they’re siblings. She’s just as much of a hot-head as he is.

“I’m not covering for--” Billy stopped Max with a glare and a growl. She sucked in a big breath like she was going to yell something at him again. “I swear to God Max if you start yelling or interrupt me again I’m throwing you out of my room.” Her mouth snapped shut with a small click.

“I’m not covering for him, I don’t want to cover for him.” And yet he has, again and again and again and again. “Do you know what he’ll do to me next time he sees me? Actually, I’ll do you one better and put it in a way you’ll understand, do you know what will happen to you?”

She glowered at him, “my mom wouldn’t let him do that.”

“Your mom is gonna let him do whatever the hell he wants and you know it,” Billy hissed back. Susan’s spine might as well be made of a wet noodle. She has to know that because she didn’t say anything else. “If I say something like you want me to, they’re gonna look at the whole fucking family and if they don’t like your mom the same way they won’t like my dad you get to go to creepy children’s home outside of town.”

It wouldn't be hard for anyone to believe Susan was too scared to say something, but if they don't believe that or they don't give a shit, it'll happen.

She shook her head, “Hopper wouldn't--”

It was Billy's turn to interrupt, “that's one cop, Max. *One.*”

“What about Cooper?” She said. “You can let him do this!”

“And you're not telling me what to do, shitbird!” Billy rubbed a hand over his face, she was giving him a headache. *Life* is giving him a headache. “I'm…” Billy started like he had a plan but he really
Max didn't look convinced. “That’s reassuring, Billy, truly.”

He wasn't convince with himself either. “Fu--” The door open with a soft click.

He was reminded he's not exactly pleased his memory has started lending him to remembering the nurses’ names and everything they happen to say around him when Kathy entered his room. Billy would think Dr. Asshat hadn't mentioned his patient has an “extraordinary” memory. Otherwise, Kathy, the nurse entering now, wouldn't talk about her success with Jane Fonda's workout in his earshot.

Congrats to her for losing 26.5 pounds though.

“Another visitor,” she chittered. She didn't seem to notice the fact that Max totally looks like she's been crying. “You're quite popular, Billy.”

They both snorted at the woman.

He sweet talked her into bringing him a Dr. Pepper instead of water. It's not like he’s some diabetic or a kid with a heart problem, the sugar and caffeine isn’t going to kill him. In fact, it’d probably put him in a better mood, placate him or something. She placed a tray of white slop covered in gray slop, a bunch of leaves, and a beef colored hockey puck in front of him.

“Is this your sister?” She asked, finally regarding Max with a warm smile. She pulled a tissue from the box and handed it to her.

“Something like that,” Billy grumbled, poking at the slop in front of him.

Her lips pursed, she hummed a little. “I see,” she said. Kathy turned back to Max, “would you like a cup of water, sweetheart?”

Max shook her head, “no thanks.”

Kathy lingered for a second as if she might change her mind or to maybe figure out what they had been talking about before, when she got nothing she left.

“That looks gross,” Max said, eyeing his tray.

“It is,” Billy said but he’s learned in a night not to wait to eat it. It’s worse when it’s cold. “I’ve had worse.”

“How are you going to figure it out?” She asked.

Billy glared at her, she sounds like Steve’s mom every time he says he’ll figure out what he wants to do after high school. Like, is the answer just going to magically fall in your lap?

“I’ll think of something,” he grumbled. He scooped some of the slop into his mouth and swalloweded without tasting it.

“When? They’re letting you out of here today,” she said. “If you don’t say something they’ll take you back home and he’ll come back, and--”

“I’m not going back there, so stop acting like it’s gonna happen,” Billy snapped. “It’s not gonna happen,” he was for-fucking-sure about that.
Max slumped in her chair a little, she’s still not happy, but she’s shut the hell up and that’s all Billy really wanted. No one seems to understand the concept of ‘I have enough on my mind right now’. “Okay,” she grumbled.

“Are you just gonna sit here and watch me eat?” He said.

“I don’t wanna go back there,” she repeated adamantly. “We could talk?”

“No.”

She pouted.

“You want a book?”

“No,” Max kissed the front of her teeth. Billy inwardly groaned, it’s Max’s ‘difficult’ look, the same look she gives when she’s going to start acting like a brat. “Since when was I kind of your sister?” She asked.

Billy snorted, “you’re annoying enough to be one so…” Max crossed her arms over her chest. She slouched further in her chair. “You know you’re wasting Hopper and Cooper’s time,” Billy groused.

“Fine,” she huffed. “I think Steve has a crush on you,” Max said.

Billy gaped more like fish than a teenage boy. He choked. “What?”

Oh my fucking God.

Max wasn’t nearly as bold as she was 10 seconds ago. She shrugged, looking away from him. “...Just saying,” she mumbled.

“You don’t get to ‘just saying’ that shit,” Billy hissed. His face felt hot. “Jesus fucking Christ what the hell is wrong with you?”

“It’s just a thought, don’t beat him up for it,” Max said softly. “You were going to make me go back, so I said something you wouldn’t want me to say in front of them.”

Billy groaned, his hands found their way into his hair where he tugged. If he didn’t understand not wanting to go home so bad he’s willing to risk all sorts of shit, he’d pick her up by the back of her stupid green racing-stripe jacket and throw her out.

“You are the literal worst,” he growled.

“I just--”

“Don’t say another fucking thing about Harrington, alright? Just shut the fuck up and stare at a window or something. You ever heard children should be seen, not heard?”

He sounded like his old man.

Way too much like his old man.

“Okay, Jesus, I shouldn’t have said anything,” she whispered. Her face was doing that splotchy red thing right before she starts crying. “Sorry

“Damn right you shouldn’t have, just shut up,” Billy grumbled.
They sat in silence. The hospital sounds and the clock ticking kept it from becoming too stifling. Max pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her head on her knees. It was better that way, at least he could think.

“Cooper said if I let whatever weird place he comes from run some tests on me, he’ll...I don’t know...help or something?” Billy sighed. “You won’t have to go home, I won’t have to go home, a-”

“And Neil?”

Billy shrugged. In the best case scenario, Neil doesn’t become his problem at all. It’s the exact opposite of what he would do, but Billy hoped he fucked off somewhere and never came back.

“I don’t know.”

“But it could work?” She asked hopefully.

“Yeah if I let his weird science friends test me and shit,” Billy snapped.

Max’s nose wrinkled and her lips pursed. “El doesn’t talk about it, but she’s not unhappy. It can’t be that bad.”

Billy snorted. Compared to whatever D.U.P is doing to her is probably a dream compared to Hawkins Lab, that doesn't make it great.

It certainly doesn't mean he likes the idea.

“What did Steve say about it? You like listening to him.”

“If you say his name again I'm throwing you out of my room,” Billy threatened with no real heat.

“Have you talked about it?” She asked, once again sounding like one of the counselors at school grilling him about ‘higher education.’

She's like 13, she shouldn't be grilling him about anything.

“Fuck off, Maxine.”

“It's important!” She squealed.

“Which is why you should get off my case about it, ” he said. “I'll figure it out.”

She scoffed. “Well, that's great.”

Billy poked at his food which had also gone cold. Also fan-fucking-tastic. Whether he has somewhere to go or not he's excited to get out of here. He sipped from his watery Dr. Pepper.

“Either way I'm not gonna let anything awful happen to you,” Max raised an eyebrow. “To either of us,” he amended. “So...take a fucking chill pill for once I'm trying to actually be a decent person. I just need a minute, alright?”

Max's eyes were light for the first time since she plopped herself down in the visitor's chair by the door.

“You’re serious?” She asked, more like the dumb little sister she should be.
He nodded. “I'm gonna try not to majorly fuck all of this up.”

Her lips were a thin, straight line. She nodded back to him. “Okay.” She paused. “Sorry I brought up Steve...did you notice?”

If he could he'd laugh.

“Shut the fuck up, Maxine.”
XXXIV. The Forest Hill Motel

Chapter Notes

Ooof looks like I'm more or less back on schedule. I had a lot of things kicking my ass in December from medical shit to school stuff and I thank all of you for your patience with it. I tried to at least made sure I uploaded something if I could and I can't thank y'all enough for being cool with it! <3
Thanks for everything and enjoy the new chapter!

Billy hadn’t realized how much he missed wearing normal clothes until he was back in his own. The loose white outfit made him a patient with a schedule, a regiment.

He loved being able to wear Steve’s sweatshirt even though it smells more like the hospital than it does him (he might leave it over there “by accident” for a little bit), but that’s about it. He had about the same freedom as a toddler. He had no problem ripping the plastic wristband off whether he was supposed to or not yet and throwing on his clothes with only a few dull aches, none of which were in his head, slowing him down.

The flashes of facts and memories don’t come with long aches anymore, they’re easier to control and easier to push away like they’re only flies.

Billy looked at himself in the mirror, his face was still mottled with blue-ish green bruises, a few were well on their way to that healing shade of yellow. He grinned, winced, and grimaced.

He sat back down on his unmade hospital bed. Making his bed is a habit Neil instilled in him, but hospital beds, he assumed, were different. When he’s gone, the staff is going to strip everything down, remove any evidence that someone else was ever in here and start over. There’s no reason for him to make the bed.

For all he knows, the last person to lie in this bed fucking died.

His fingers played with his necklace, the old pendant on a new chain. Steve didn’t have to tell him it’s one of the fancy silver ones that won’t tarnish or turn his skin green, he also didn’t have to tell him it’s one that his mom wouldn’t miss.

He touched it, and he knew Steve swiped it from the lonely jewelry box on the top of the shelf of her mostly empty walk-in closet attached to the master bedroom.

Billy laid back with his headphones on, his thumb and index finger playing with the metal of necklace.

The music coming from the walkman is tinny and weak, a byproduct of it being old. It’s on its way to trash; the beginning of the end for the device he’s had for years. With the right song crackling through his headphones he can hear his mom laughing and humming. Rubbing over the silver is like shaking a bell with the most beautiful ring he’s ever heard. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he thought about telling Steve or Cooper or even Hopper he can do these things now, but he didn’t want to.
Not yet, at least.

He wanted this for himself for just a little bit.

Cooper will be here in a few minutes. Maybe he’d mention to him, maybe he’ll ask, every time he thought too hard about it he’d listening to her humming. Billy can blame Steve for the whole ‘act like everything is fine’ schtick, but it’s useful.

It’s useful when he’s at an extremely steep stepping point more important than do another shot or college or trades school or asking the numbskull that got in your head if you should even be anywhere near each other.

Alcohol isn’t an option, neither is beating the shit out of someone so this is all he has.

Billy dozed off when his mom was humming Elvis’s Are You Lonesome Tonight, a melancholy song that used to put him to sleep without any resistance when he was little.

“I see you’re catching up on some much-needed sleep,” Cooper said.

He looked the same as always except without his large coat and his sleeves rolled up slightly. Unlike him, he didn’t have to go to the hellhole of Hawkins high (which is better than Hawkins General). He kept forgetting the school’s actually in session again.

“Yeah,” Billy sat up, stretched, back cracking and groaning with it. He pulled the headphones off, from the soft singing to the constant beeping of someone else’s heart monitor and a baby crying. Billy cringed. “Sure, I think I’d need to sleep for like a week, then I’d be catching up.”

Cooper chuckled.

“You’re ready to go?”

His stomach plummeted and his palms started to sweat. The hospital is still better than that house, Max was right, it’s not really a home. That house has all his clothes, the things he’d need to leave and then he could do something.

If Neil isn’t already there.

Cooper crossed the room grabbing his sweatshirt, his old sweatpants, and the walkman. He put them into a bag. “Don’t worry, the world hasn’t changed too much while you were in here, it’s only been three days.”

It feels like it’s been three years.

“You positive I’m not gonna get outta here and there’s a flying car waiting to pick us up?” Billy asked.

“As positive as I am in the fact that I drove here in a 1982 Mirada,” Cooper said back lightly. He seemed to know that Billy was stalling and didn’t care, adding to the list of the silent things that Billy would have to one day thank him for.

Billy’s nose wrinkled. “That’s not really a spy car.”

“It’s inconspicuous and I’m not that kind of spy,” he paused. Cooper looked out the window above the bed, it’s sunny outside. It’s sunny like the spring everyone’s been begging for lately. “If I ask if you’re ready to go this time, will you answer?” He asked.
“I don’t have a choice, now do I?” Billy stood.

“Unless you want them to put you back under that machine, I don’t think so,” he said.

*Not negotiable.*

*Inevitable.*

*Inescapable.*

“Alright,” he shrugged his jacket back on to his shoulder and rubbed the pendant again. “Fine, I’m ready.”

Cooper offered him a pleased smile, the road sign one that looked like it should be accompanied by two thumbs up. “Good, I’ll lead the way, then.”

The confines of the hospital stretched out into the hospital where the smell of antiseptic and sick wafted up his nose. It’s the worst smell he could possibly imagine. “What are you going to do now?” Billy asked to distract himself from it.

“What do you mean?” Cooper asked.

“I’m outta here and...I still haven’t said yes,” Billy said as if that were already obvious.

Cooper was unbothered, he shrugged. “You haven’t said no, and I have no intention of stranding you or putting you in direct danger, as I said, that’d be the exact opposite of my job no matter what the rewards are.”

Billy mulled over those words as the left the front lobby. He shielded his eyes from the sun, it must’ve rained during the day or the middle of the night, the air was cloying with springtime steam and new nature.

“Jeezus, it’s bright out.”

Cooper put on a large pair of sunglasses, the exact pair of sunglasses Billy’s pretty sure all the CIA and secret service guys wear.

*Not that kind of spy my ass.*

“I may not have a spy car,” Cooper said. “But I can have cool sunglasses.”

Billy snorted. “Mine are cooler.”

“Yours are for a seventeen-year-old, which is exactly what you are,” he quipped.

“Still cooler,” Billy hummed.

Cooper unlocked the car, a truly inconspicuous black 1982 Dodge Mirada. It wouldn’t make Billy looked twice if he was on the road with it. door put the bag of his stuff in the backseat.

The car even smells inconspicuous, not wiped clean, not like ash and cologne, not even a new car smell despite how undisturbed the interior is. Billy wouldn’t be surprised if Cooper told him that he’s the first person to be in his car besides himself.

“Like I said,” Cooper said. “Inconspicuous.”
“Yeah,” Billy muttered absently.

Billy isn’t surprised that Cooper only listens to the news on the radio, no music. He can’t even think of what kind of music the guy would listen to.

Classical, maybe?

Something boring.

They turned down the main strip where Bob’s RadioShack is and Joyce’s Melvald’s. Steve may not be too terribly close to these people, but they are all carrying a secret that keeps him close. Nancy had been right about that.

The mainstrip disappeared to Hawkins’ lovely backroads. Backroads that Steve secretly enjoys, Billy hates, and Cooper seems to love. The news is coming through the radio, football, weather, politics, but Cooper is humming lightly like this really is some sort of pleasant afternoon drive.

“How are you so happy all the time?” Billy finally asked.

There’s usually some sort of warning about people that are happy all the time, like, they’re either total nutjobs without a grip on reality or they’re psychos.

“I’m not happy I’m content,” Cooper corrected.

Billy’s eyes narrowed. “That’s fu--like, semantics,” he said.

“There’s a difference between happy and content, they can present themselves in the same way, however,” Cooper said. “I’m content with my life and my job, but I’m not always happy.”

He was tempted to ask what kind of stuff could put a wrench in his day fucked up his day, Billy couldn’t imagine much. Hell, he could barely imagine what could possibly put a wrench in the guy’s life.

But he doesn’t really know him.

Billy sucked his teeth. “Okay,” he said.

He looked out the window at the trees slightly green, trying their best to grow something that resembled foliage. Hawkins is a green wonderland in the summertime, muggy and warm with a bright orange filter on every day. It’s not too different from California the way Steve thinks about it. The trees zoomed by back, and back and back...in the wrong direction.

“You’re not taking me back to my house, are you?” Billy said.

Cooper grinned, “I’m not.”

Shit.

Billy tensed.

He stared at the man, heart hammering in his chest, thinking of a way to get himself out of what is obviously an awful situation and also wondering what kind of dumbass gets in the car with a near stranger.

Cooper drove with his eyes on the road, his smile fell. “I told you I wouldn’t put you in direct danger or leave you stranded anywhere,” he said. “From what I can tell you’ve been having
problems at home and if your younger....” Cooper paused to look at him with his eyebrows furrowed. “Step-sister? Sister?”


“Well, it’s apparent that neither of you thinks it’s a good idea for you to go back, so I’ve taken the matter into my own hands,” he explained simply. “I think that would please both you and her.”

Billy sunk into his seat and his mouth formed slightly into an ‘o.’ “Can you...that’s like...kidnapping...?”

Cooper snickered to himself. “Do you think your step-mother will mind?”

She didn’t visit him at the hospital. As long as he’s going to school, he can’t imagine that she would care where he is or what he’s doing if Neil isn’t in charge of both of them.

He gave him a small head shake.

“Then everything should be fine,” Cooper said.

Billy sucked in a breath. He looked over at the agent driving down the road with the same pleasant happy look as before. “You’re not just lying to me so I don’t roll out of this car or something.”

“Would you?”

He hated having his bluff called. “If I thought you were taking me some place I didn’t like,” Billy thought. “Yeah...yeah I would.” He’s not getting trapped anywhere. Not when he’s stronger than ever, hell, he’s strong enough that he could run away all on his own.

“Then I must be getting good at earning your trust, considering you haven’t tried,” Cooper said. “I appreciate that, by the way, trust is in short supplies these days.”

Billy was stunned into silence.

“You’ll be able to go to school.” Cooper said. “You’ll just report back there if you chose to, you could also stay with that friend you’re so found. It’s not a prison, just a safe place.”

He nodded.

Holy shit.

The Forest Hill Motel looked like a carrot, largely decorated by orange doors and green railings and doors. It’s an eyesore that’s been threatened by contractors and developers for years. Billy didn’t care, however, because he was staying here presumably where no one--including Neil--could find him.

Three cars were parked out front with it being April and nothing eventful happening except Easter. The only car that mattered was his baby, shiny and midnight blue parked not far from the gate and a dusty gray pick-up truck.

“You’ll be fine here?” Cooper asked.

“I can’t pay to stay here,” Billy said.

“You won’t be,” he informed him. “It’s important you have somewhere safe to stay. Jane has her
residence with her guardian and you have this place.”

Billy felt a smile creeping across his face, giddy and wild excitement bubbled up his throat. “Then yeah, this’ll work.”

“You won’t be your own,” Cooper said. “My room is next to yours.”

“That’s fine,” Billy spoke absently.

The broken down motel was a cove, a place that was his.

The Mirada’s engine rolled over with the twist of the keys. The radio cut off with it leaving the stillness of the almost entirely vacant motel.

“You’ve been staying here?” Billy asked, unbuckling his seat bed.

“My job is largely temporary,” he said. “It’s not like I was going to buy a house.”

He nodded and briefly wondered if he’s ever not been on the road since he joined the D.U.P. The outside air hadn’t gotten any lighter, it was dense and warmer than usual. Cooper slipped on his sunglasses again, pushing them up to the bridge of his nose. He grabbed Billy’s small plastic bag of things.

“I don’t think I’ll be needing to ask if you’re ready,” Cooper said with a light laugh.

Billy stared up at the motel with his hands on his hips. No. He’s always wanted to leave Neil, for almost as long as he can remember.

It’s too good to be true, the best things usually are.

“So when do I find out you’re going to tie me down and send all my organs to the lab?” Billy asked out loud. He can’t help but be cautious of something this great.

“Never,” Cooper said evenly, looking at him with the deep wells of his dark, dark brown eyes. “I think you read too many science fiction books.”

Billy snorted. “My life is a science fiction book.”

“Seem like it,” Cooper said. “But hopefully not one as dark as the one you’re imagining.”

“Yeah,” Billy mumbled.

He followed the agent across the parking lot and up the stairs to the second row of dark green doors and rusted railings over orange corrugated awnings. At the door 210, Cooper fished out a key handing it to Billy.

“I think it goes without saying that you shouldn’t lose that key,” he said. Cooper fished out his own enormous set of keys out from his pocket. He lodged the key into 209’s door. “Dinner is on me,” he said with a slight smile. He handed him his bag. “Try to stay out of trouble until then and let me know if you need anything.”

Billy nodded.

The man went into 209 without another word.

He was standing alone in the unnatural heat of the early spring day, staring at the old key with the
210 tag around a key ring. He's or now he’s escaped Neil for now, he has own place for now, and for once something is working out in his favor.

Billy slipped into the rather large room with a small twin bed, a bathroom and the tiniest kitchen possible. There was a desk and a TV which stood up against the wall he shared with the Cooper. Unsurprisingly, it was cabin themed. A deep wooden bed, dark red sheet and a set of deer antlers were hanging above his bed.

Billy flopped down onto the bed, bouncing a few times before landing on his stomach. His eyes lingered on the bedside table and the rotary telephone situated on top of the pine cabinet. His fingers played with the wheel of numbers for a second, no involuntary knowledge entering his mind because he only had one thought:

*Call Steve.*
XXXV. Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Chapter Notes

SOOOOO BIG NEWS!
(other than the fact that I’m constantly late now, but you know...*life*)

ANYWAY ON TO BIG NEWS
I was looking at my planner for this fic and well...THERE’S ONLY ABOUT 8-10
CHAPTERS LEFT. LIKE...HOLY SHIT IT’S COMING DOWN TO THE WIRE.
(And by 8-10, I mean definitely 8, possibly 9, and unlikely 10). So we’re pretty much
in the home stretch! We’re gonna get through this thing together!!!
WOOO HOOO!!

Steve tore away at his thumbnail with his teeth. School hadn’t started leaving the high school’s
parking lot eerily empty. It was just his car and a few teachers. The sky hadn’t quite reached the
point of blueness, it was cotton candy-colored, edging into lilac and marigold where the sun was
shining. It was all muted between the dark lense of his sunglasses.

His jacket kept the chill from reaching deep into his bones, the collar popped up to his ears.

Billy said he’d come early and he wanted Steve to too.

His stomach tightened.

It feels like they haven’t been here in so long. Like, when was the last time they were normal
teenagers with homework and lunch food that looked like slop and gym class?

The last time the Camaro rolled past him, rumbling so exceedingly healthily Steve could hardly
believe it belongs to a high schooler, was that night they went to the diner together.

That felt like eons ago.

Lori’s party felt like it might not have even been real. Steve would believe he’s always known that
Billy has powers with a few right phrases.

Steve sipped from the green Stanley mug that held a steamy cup of coffee. He swallowed the
molten, mocha drink quickly trying not to taste too much of anything. He wanted it solely for the
buzz of caffeine running through his system.

Sleep has not come easy lately.

The midnight blue devil rolled up next to his car. Billy had his music turned down low. Steve
knew the song, it was one of his songs, Tiny Demons by Todd Rundgren. The engine rolled over,
leaving them both in silence.

“Hey.”

Billy got out of the car with his hands jammed into his pockets. A cigarette dangled from his lips
that he flicked on the ground and stepped on. Steve’s eyes followed him until they were standing
eye to eye.
“Hey.”

“Take your sunglasses off, Harrington,” Billy said. He reached up to take them off for him, tucking them into the pocket of his jacket.

Steve pouted, eyes not ready for the gold light bounce off of Billy’s curled locks. “And here I was actually missing you,” he said playfully. He combed his own hair back from his face and grinned at him still.

They relished being in each other’s space again, breathing the same air. Coming home.

“Yeah,” Billy said slowly. “Big mistake, Harrington. It’ll cost you one day.”

“You think?”

Billy pulled away slightly, moved to the side of him and leaned against the side of the BMW like it was hard to be that close without doing something. “Already has, it’s literally the ass crack of dawn and you’re here just ‘cause I told you to be.”

“Guess I’m whipped or something, huh?”

“Wrapped around my finger,” Billy crooned, one big self-satisfied grin stretched across his face.

Steve knew he was going to get it for this, but it didn’t matter. What was Billy going to do that wasn’t already so normal? “Like the Police song?”

Billy’s smile dropped, eyes slid to look at him. “You disgust me,” Billy said blankly. He snatched the thermos from Steve’s hand and drank from it. He made another face before handing it back, disgusted again.

“Are you trying to give yourself diabetes with that? Or are you more in the tooth-rotting department?” Billy gagged. “Jesus Christ, Harrington, I’m surprised there’s any sugar left in the world.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do to get through the day,” Steve said nonchalantly.

“Yeah,” Billy nodded. “I get that.”

He knew that all too well.

They stayed next to each other, shoulders touching slightly. Silent.

Billy pushed off the BMW suddenly. “C’mon,” he said. His hand dug around in his pockets for his cigarettes and his lighter as he walked.

“Where’re we going?” Steve caught up to him. Billy slowed so they could walk evenly.

“Somewhere not out in the open,” he said.

Steve nodded slowly.

He didn’t want to think about the fact that Billy called him and told him to come to school early for more than just a moment alone. Steve’s resigned himself to the fact that there’s always a reason for stuff, in some ways Nancy was the same.
They went around to the back of the school, down to the empty football field where no one would be until at least lunch. Steve had to applaud the school for their sheer stupidity, underneath the outdoor bleachers is a black strip of plastic like a landing strip for teens who want to skip class and fuck.

“God, this place brings back memories,” Steve thought aloud.

Nancy hated it back here as quiet as it was at times like this. It’s still dirty, still a shitty little hole in the wall with too many implications. Getting caught walking back out from the underneath the bleachers was the same as getting caught with hickeys on your next.

“Yeah, I’m sure it does.”

They sat down with their backs to the cold metal structure, Billy passed him his cigarette wordlessly. Steve pulled from his cigarette before giving it back.

He dove in first, he might as well.

“Why’re we here?” Steve asked.

“Because I wanted to be,” Billy answered simply. They were alone after all and that’s all he wanted.

Back and forth went the cigarette again.

It was a gentle silence Steve didn’t want to permeate with words. Billy sipped his coffee, grimaced, and sipped again. His hand slid into his.

“Level with me, Harrington,” Billy said. “Should I let them do all that shit to me for the rest of my life or not?”

Steve stayed silent for a long time, letting it stretch on and on until Billy started to wonder if he’d asked the question at all. “I…” his mouth shut.

“I guess I won’t have to worry about anything again, like, if some bullshit happened I would have to shave my head and change my name to something ridiculous,” Billy said.

“I could see you as like...a Nick,” Steve said, trying his best to stay light. He laughed airily. “Maybe a...Chris.”

Billy’s nose wrinkled. “You’re so not helping, and I’d rather cut off my left pinky than go by Chris.”

“Just saying.” Steve squeezed his hand softly. “I can’t--”

“Make that decision for me?” Billy finished for him. It’s the same answer he would’ve given him if their places were switched, he thinks. Either that or something like ‘fuck it, let’s run away with all your trust fund money you rich, hot bastard.’

Billy sneered. They’d grow tired of each other on the road.

Steve would miss having a normal life. He’d probably become, like, an alcoholic or a gambler or something which would suck because Steve would have to drive in the case of alcoholism and they’d lose all their money in the case of gambling. They’d hate each other in a span of 3 months tops; collapse in on themselves like the Sex Pistols on tour.
It’d be ugly.

Before Billy had realized it, Steve was tugging his head down on to his shoulder.

“I’m not a baby, Harrington,” Billy grumbled petulantly. “And I’m not dying anymore so you don’t have to--”

“It feels good, okay? So just let me,” Steve grumbled. “M’cold.”

“Whatever.”

Steve nibbled on his lip. He played with Billy’s fingers, rubbing the stub of his nail against the flesh of his fingers thoughtfully. “You’re not...I mean, you’re not like Jane though, where there are people and...and things after you.” Steve kept fidgeting, Billy’s wrist was still in a light bandage. “It’s just...”

*I didn’t tell Hopper, but I told Steve something was wrong.*

“That one person,” he didn’t meet his gaze.

“Max told you...,” the words felt stuck in his throat. “She told you what she thinks.”

It was like being on that cliff at the quarry all over again. There was probably a bit of fun in telling someone he can take peoples’ traits, there’s nothing even remotely glamorous or exciting about admitting his dad hits him.

“I was out of it,” Steve whispered. He huffed, laughing humorlessly. “I don’t really remember most of that day, but she told me that your dad would hurt you like that if he wanted to.” That was the benefit of being in a coffee-fueled panic, he couldn’t think about it.

That’s the great part about school starting again and throwing himself into it.

He practiced writing an admissions essay for fun.

But he had anyway.

“I kept thinking you have a perfect memory now, you have all these memories that aren’t yours and you can handle them just fine now, but you don’t remember what the person who attacked you looks like,” Billy’s head lifted with Steve’s shrug. He sighed loudly. “It rubbed me the wrong way, you know, but...why say something when everything’s so crazy? So.”

So.

“He really did that to you,” Steve said. Maybe somewhere in his voice, there was the question ‘didn’t he?’ But it was faint and unspoken and lost under Billy’s thundering pulse and the disgust swirling in Steve’s eyes.

Billy stared at the beams underneath the bleachers. Without really thinking about it, he understood that his old man was at the end of his rope. It probably wasn’t hard to convince himself you can’t let someone like him out into the world. Even if he just your regular old fag, he would probably have the same thoughts. His mom was always better about being optimistic about what he could do, it doesn’t have to be dangerous, doesn’t have to be tested and examined and looked at.

She always said it is what it is.

He can’t let him do that. And maybe Susan and Max and Hawkins were an attempt to prove with a
fresh start and a new town, things could be perfectly normal. But things have only got worse like picking over at a scab over and over again until it scarred.

“Yeah,” Billy said quietly in the morning air. “He did.”

“Christ,” Steve said. “Jesus. Shit, Billy I’m--”

“Sorry?” Billy answered, his eyebrow rose. “For what?

“Stop it.”

His eyes darkened all over again. Billy could feel the slight shift in his shoulders, the way his chest expanded. Steve was in ‘fuck you and fuck this and fuck the world’ mode and he liked him like that.

Just not now.

“That’s so fucked up, Billy and you know it, you didn’t see yourself, man, let me be pissed he hurt you. God, just...that’s so fucked up, so...just...” Steve huffed loudly. “If I didn’t know it wasn’t going to solve anything I go set his car on fire or something.”

Billy smirked.

It was a nice gesture. He took him to all those lab exams in that ugly orange pickup, he’d hit him in there too if he didn’t want people to see, if they were out somewhere and urge was just too great to resist.

“I’d like that, honestly. See you go all psychopath on that hunk of shit, bring the bat too,” he muttered. “It’d be hot.”

He couldn’t see it, but he knew Steve was rolling his eyes.

“Well, yeah, literally, I mean your dad’s car would be on fire so I guess that’s kind of--ow!” Steve hissed rubbing his ear where Billy had flicked him. “Rude.”

I missed you.

“You have a shitty sense of humor, Harrington,” Billy grinned. “It’s too early in the morning.”

“It was your idea to be out here at the ass crack of dawn, Hargrove.”

Billy shifted until he was more comfortable, he lit another cigarette and shrugged.

“That it was,” he agreed.

He used to think about laying out on the football field, looking up at stars. Maybe with Steve, maybe not...he hoped with Steve, but this is good enough.

“You can’t set his car on fire anyway,” Billy said. “He’s still out of town.”

“Because of what he did?”

Billy shrugged. “Sometimes he leaves for work for like a business week or so, but it doesn’t happen a lot. I think they just kind of coincided.”

“But he’ll be back.”
He sighed, rubbing at his eyes. He watched the smoke filter into the early spring air, “I guess, I’ve got like a day until he gets back and then he’ll be looking for me.”

“Which is why you asked me…”

“Yeah.”

Steve grimaced.

It was at times like these he remembered he’s 18 years old, sitting on a football field in a podunk town like Hawkins, Indiana despite how ginormous the world feels and how heavy he feels. He’s embraced it now but still.

“I don’t know.”

“I didn’t think you would, I just...uh,” Billy shrugged again. “Just wanted your input,”

“I thought you said no one tells you what to do?” He said, looking at him.

“This is different, I said I wanted your input.”

He grinned, “oh, like you value my opinion now?”

Billy exhaled, clouding them both with smoke. “Maybe.” He goes right out with it. There’s a little thought in his head that tells him he should keep all of it, most of it, to himself. “He said he’d kill me if I fuck up again, thought about running away y’know, but…” There’s no real appeal like there used to be when he was younger, it doesn’t feel so much like a ‘fuck you, Neil’ as it does running away just to survive.

“Hopper could help,” Steve said. “I’m serious. That guy’s got you somewhere safe for now, but Hopper could put him in jail.”

The legal system could put Neil in jail.

There’s a difference.

“And then I guess for six months or so I live in the creepy kids’ home north of town for a little bit, and God knows what’ll happen to Max and honestly Max’s mom is annoying but I’m pretty sure she’d snap in half if that happened and even I don’t wanna see that.”

Steve nodded a few times. He hummed softly, grimaced once before looking down at Billy. “Maybe we should Nancy, she’s smart and she likes to meddle.”

Billy snorted.

“I’m not talking to the princess tight ass.”

“She’s not a tight ass...most of the time,” Steve muttered. “Maybe you should ask Cooper.”

He thought about it all of last night, what could the guy do that Hopper couldn’t. As shady as the government is, they’re not gods.

“You think I should go?”

Steve nibbled on his lip. “I think we should go and ask and I don’t know, I mean they said it wouldn’t be painful…”
But people lie *all the time.*

“Yeah and I’d have to report back to the lab for the rest of my fucking life,” Billy hissed.

“I think you should ask,” Steve repeated. His hand laced around Billy’s. “But not too soon ‘cause I was wondering if you wanted to do something today after school.”

Billy raised an eyebrow as best he could while still looking up at him. “What do you mean?”

Steve flushed slightly. “I dunno...a movie? Food? Something fun.”

He sat up to look at him properly. “You asking me out on a date, Harrington?”

Steve bit down on thumbnail, not as smooth, but doubly endearing. “I’m asking if you want to do something after school tonight, just the two of us....’cause I’m happy you’re back...and I missed you.”

Billy felt the familiar tickle of heat across his own cheeks, the same feeling kicking gently in his stomach. “Yeah...okay, Harrington.”
Hi! I know I kind of left this on hiatus with the whole March 12th thing. Thanks for your concern! I don't want anyone to worry about me. It really was just school, it got super busy and then when school was over I COMPLETELY crashed like...I don't think I've ever felt so sapped and so drained and so depressed in my life. Um...as far as picking this up again I plan to, I don't to make any promises but I'm hoping in August to start writing it again and start posting in early September or late August. Honestly, I didn't want to let this fic die, I'm working on another idea if anyone pays attention to author names for fic, so I haven't completely left the fandom. I still think about this fic and I don't intend to forget about it because I never did.

For a while though I kind of thought this was like...utter trash...and I couldn't fix it. I don't think that's true anymore. Obviously it isn't because it's fairly popular and I really like it, flaws and all. I changed as a writer and I think reading through this fic that's obvious and I hope to continue to grow. As I said before, I don't want this fic to die, I just need to pull everything back together and start working on it soon. The good news is, I know what's going to happen next, I know how it's going to end, if I'm not mistaken there are only about 5-7 chapters left and all I have to do now is start writing it. This message is a long time coming and I just haven't addressed my hiatus because...I just haven't...But don't worry! I haven't forgotten about this fic, I'm so grateful for it and for you all for reading and if I can get all my ducks in a row hopefully some magic will happen soon.

Thank you so much, you guys are the best, this fandom is amazing and I won't let you down!

~with lots of love,
Dariary_Absentee

Also damn the message I erased from this is cringey af, but to all the comments I haven't responded to I genuinely am sorry :( I read them and I appreciate every single one of them...I also happen to get overwhelmed easily lol. Thanks again!
Hi guys!!!!
I said I'd be back in late August-early September...I think???? Anyway, it's like mid-September so I would call that too bad considering the last time I said I'd be back in March and we all know how that went (hahahaha kill me please).
Again, getting sidetracked. I know I haven't responded to a lot of comments, but I read every single one of them and they have urged me to get back to this thing and finish it. There are still about 5-7 chapters left if I'm not mistaken so stay tuned for those!
As for now, I will not have the updating schedule that I used to. It's kind of a "it happens when it happens, but I won't be on 'hiatus' thing".
I've traded being on top of some things (like school, fitness sleep) for not being on top of others and I've also been generally unmotivated to do anything lately (and by 'lately' I mean like the last 4 months and by 'unmotivated' I mean depressed hahahaha ( T_T).
But I'm back to working on this thing!
Thank you so much for being so patient and kind while I get my life together(ish), laze about because I don't have the energy to do anything else (;P) and work on other fics (shameless plug: I working on another harringrove fic along with this...read it if you want to lol).
You guys are awesome and I love you so so so so so much.
Okay, I'll shut up now, enjoy the fic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Billy seriously wondered how Cooper could pass any kind of FBI training if he’s on the road all the time and eating cherry pie and pulled pork sandwiches like there’s a shortage of cherries and pork.

He says it jogging and all the worrying that keeps him limber.

He could take him in a fight, maybe. Maybe not. Cooper looks fast and like he punches hard, so he puts it out of his mind. There’s a little voice in the back of his head that says it’s probably better to just bring it up before he gets to the fighting part.

“I’m gonna go out tonight,” Billy said.

The place has a kitchenette but all he bothers to use in the microwave and the stovetop on occasion. There’s a little gingham patterned table that they’re eating on crammed right into the middle of it with two black fold-up chairs that creak under their weight. The fold-up chairs are the only things that aren’t neon in the eyesore of “kitchen.” He almost missed the wild jungle wallpaper that plastered the walls in his room.

Billy bit into his sandwich not to mention he knows how to cook and is probably taking advantage of Cooper, but the last thing he wants to do is solidify that he’s living in a neon orange motel with his school teacher turned guardian.

Picking up groceries would make it too real.
Take out means it temporary.

“Out?” Cooper raised an eyebrow.

A glob of barbecue sauce splattered onto the plastic plate in front of him.

Neil does the ‘eyebrow thing,’ but it always looked worse on him. Cooper’s eyes aren’t nearly as hollow. The amusement sparkle in his black eyes hasn’t gone anywhere, but they’re weighted with suspicion with the raise of his eyebrows. They’re not nearly as suspicious as Billy’s own though and they both know it.

“Is that going to be a problem?”

He probably could run if really wanted to, Cooper doesn’t look like the kind of man that would try to stop him, but he’d also made the mistake of assuming he’s a sad, pencil-pushing high school teacher so he’s not testing his luck on mere appearances and demeanor again.

It was fear of what would happen if he didn’t ask that kept him from doing so.

As much as Billy looks like the type, as much as he says it, he doesn’t believe in ‘it’s better to ask for forgiveness than permission.’

Forgiveness isn’t always a sure thing.

If it was, hell wouldn’t exist.

Cooper chewed slowly. “I suppose not, it depends on where you’re going?”

*Places,* Billy almost spat out.

He bit down on his tongue and knew his jaw looked crooked from where Cooper sat, that tight-jaw thing that makes the muscles bulge. Neil hated that look even though he gets the same one.

“You remember Harrington?”

Cooper grinned. “You’re asking me if I remember the one person that seems to always be around you? I’d think you could give me a little credit.”

Billy shrugged.

“Yeah,” he snorted. “Okay.”
He looked out of the window. Cooper has the curtains drawn, but he can tell it’s getting dark out. The sun’s laid way down behind the trees making the bark and leaves look black against the orange and indigo.

“So, can I go?” He asked impatiently. He felt like a dog asking to go out and fucking run in the yard. At the very least it’s familiar.

“You still didn’t tell me where,” he grinned. “You told me who, which was going to be my next question.”

Billy’s teeth clenched. “Can I go to his house?”

Cooper seemed not to notice, or maybe he didn’t care. He wiped his hands on a napkin. “You’re not a prisoner you know, but I do appreciate you asking first. It’s good. You should be cautious.”

Billy’s shoulders dropped.

“I’m not saying you can’t, I’m genuinely thankful you didn’t just leave. It’d make my job a lot harder,” he said. Cooper stood up and took his plastic plate with him. (He doesn’t seem too terribly fond of doing dishes either).

“Just don’t stay out too late. I also intend on bringing you by the lab soon. The last thing they need is for you to be cranky.”

Billy thought about mentioning he’s going to be cranky either way, they’re going to be prodding at him again, but he’s already made one request and he’s not testing his bounds with the guy that’s in charge of where he can go and who he can see and also has a gun.

“I won’t.”

“What do you have planned?”

None of your business.

As if the guy could read his mind, he turned around to look at him and smiled. “I’m just curious, it’s dark out and in small towns like these everything closes around 9:30.” Which is still the biggest drag humanly possibly, Billy thought. Cooper seemed to know what he was thinking and said, “although, I assume going to his house implies staying in so I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

If either of them were a girl, or maybe not if because Cooper is woefully observant, it implies a lot more and it would matter.

Are you asking me out on a date, Harrington?

“Not really,” he said as lightly as possible. “We’re just gonna do stuff.”

If his old man had asked, he’d probably have to find a way to pull a laminated itinerary out of his ass just to make him happy.

“Stuff,” Cooper repeated with a small chuckle. The guy was amused, the lines around his mouth pillowing slightly with a smile. “Naturally.”

“Yeah,” Billy drawled. “I won’t be out late.”

“Good. I’d hate to come find you,” he said, still with that smile. The look in his eyes was different though. (I will if I have to.) “Not to figuratively drag you back by the scruff of your neck or
anything, but the longer you’re out the more dangerous it could be,” he said. “And if you call me when you’ve reached your destination safely—that’s not negotiable either.”

That in and of itself wasn’t hard.

Compared to Neil, none of it was.

He stood up and dumped his plasticware in the trash. All things considered, Billy got the impression that Cooper was using a loose leash with him and he should be grateful. “Yeah, I hear you, fairy godmother, back to the hut before midnight, call you when I get there;” Billy said gruffly.

Cooper opened his mouth and shut it, with his back turned he shook his head and put the rest of the leftovers in the fridge for another day—probably tomorrow’s night dinner.

“Midnight, Billy!” Cooper called as the door swung shut behind him.

If there was one thing Billy didn’t mind about Hawkins beside all the open sky and the stars it was the traffic—or lack thereof. He was going faster than he was supposed to, Prince blasting because from the Camaro’s cracked windows because most of Purple Rain made him think just a little bit of Steve.

He’s pretty sure Purple Rain is the only shit Steve likes that doesn’t sound hokey.

Billy groaned at the familiar siren, at the familiar flashing red and blue lights, at the utter amount of bullshit he was going to have to go through. Where did he even come from?

He should know better by now, really, this town is one big, hidden back road. No wonder there’s a cop waiting for him.

Billy pulled over to the side. Some local hick in the blue suit stepped out of the car looking equally if not less amused than Billy.

“Jeezus,” Billy groaned again, lighting up a cigarette. He rolled down the window and blew out smoke. He flashed a grin when the big blue asshole stopped in front of him.

“What can I do you for, office?” Billy recited.

He knew this song and dance.

He’ll ask:

“Do you know why I pulled you over?”

Billy stared at him for a moment, almost annoyed at how routine this is. He has to fucking ask when it was obvious. He chuckled. “You caught me,” Billy put his hands up. “Was going a little faster than I should’ve.”

He’s going to be anyway, and he always is.

The uptight bastard frowned. “License and registration.”

Billy handed it over, keeping his smile easy and open. “Sue me, I got a date tonight and I don’t wanna be late,” he said.
And the cop would chuckle. They’d banter about the hot piece of ass he’s got lined up, he’d tell him to slow down and take it easy and Billy would promise he would and then go on his merry little way.

Except that’s not what happened.

The officer held on to it and backed up. “Step out of the car, kid,” he said gruffly.

Billy stared the officer, smile gone. “What for?”

“Just get out the car.” The first time he was asking, this time he wasn’t. “Now. I don’t have all night.”

Neil, Billy thought immediately.

He had hit him, right? He was positive he did, in the haze of that night, he’d knocked him out cold and ran. Susan knew where Billy was, had a vague idea, at least, that he was still in Hawkins and Neil got back today. Did he want him back? He slipped up, and Neil would deal with him? Was he really about to get arrested for slugging the man who had his hands around his neck?

He didn’t like any of the options.

“Now,” he repeated. The man’s hand twitched at his hip, Billy realized the man is wearing gloves.

Shit.

He’s not hard to find. Car? conspicuous as hell. Hair? Only slightly less defining than Harrington’s. Attitude? Well known even in this podunk town because there’s no one here.

Never has that been more evident than on this terrifyingly empty, sprawling road.

Inevitable.

Unavoidable.

Not negotiable.

He stepped out of the car, fists balled at his side. He was ready to swing. It was going to be one hell of a test for Copper--how easily can you get me out of trouble assaulting a fucking cop?

Billy recognized the feeling too well, all things considered, he knew this was the second time something had shot him into his neck in the span of at least seven months. He did miss the feeling of it, at all.

He didn’t even pluck at it this time, maybe this shit was more potent. It had to be because he barely had time to think about the fact that he was scared, that he was sorry he was definitely going to miss his date with Harrington, that he was fucking tired of being knocked out and even more tired of being hunted. He just glared at the man as he melted out of view.

They laid Billy out on the asphalt. A man he recognized stood over him--cold blue eyes, a hell of a shiner healing on his face; the other one he didn’t, but he was old with silver-white hair and a pleased smile on his face.

Billy would’ve liked to have said “fuck you” to both men. He would’ve also liked to have not been kidnapped off of a shitty Indiana backroad, but Billy seldom gets what he wants.
Ps. I had this part planned and half of it written before I went on hiatus and I'm REALLY glad I didn't leave y'all with this cliffhanger, it would've been cruel and I would've been shot dead in the streets ;)

Whew! Made it to the end of the chapter? Congrats! Thank you so much for reading, I really hope you enjoyed it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!