Mates
by Stranger Ships (Imaginary_Boyfriend)

Summary

In this story, those with the alpha and omega gene are extremely rare and erroneously assumed to be exclusively male and female, respectively. Betas know nothing of their strange, secret universe of scents, soul bonds, and sensual appetites.

First we meet Billy Hargrove, a guilt-ridden alpha from California who spends a year wading through personal tragedy and sexual awakening before being dragged two thousand miles east to the strange, sleepy town of Hawkins, Indiana.

Then we meet Steve Harrington, a nightmare-plagued beauty who always keeps a can of Farrah Fawcett hairspray and a nail-studded baseball bat in his BMW (just in case). He may not be a genius, but there are a few things he knows with absolute certainty:

1) He is straight.
2) He is an alpha.
3) He hates Billy Hargrove.

Steve will discover that none of those things are true.
Saturday, October 15th, 1983

Donna Hargrove sometimes wondered if she had been in her right mind when she agreed to let her son have that ridiculous Camaro.

_We should’ve just gotten him a new skateboard and a bus pass; plenty of kids his age don’t even get that much._

It was an unusually warm Saturday in mid-October, and she had just received an unexpected phone call from the church in Pasadena where her daughter, Emily, took choir lessons. The youth director had spotted the nine-year-old girl waiting outside on the front steps long after all the other children had been picked up.

Embarrassed, Donna thanked the director politely and hung up the phone in its blue plastic cradle on the kitchen wall.

“Gosh darn it,” she muttered to herself as she wiped a bead of perspiration from her forehead. “That’s the second time he’s forgotten.”

In regards to the Camaro, Billy had presented his mother with a strong case: he had passed his driver’s test with ease and vowed to keep the car in good repair and pay for his own gas and oil changes with money from his summer job. What really swayed Donna in the end, though, was his promise to use the car to run occasional errands and pick up his little sister from choir practice. So, she had done her part to convince Neil, and they bought the blue death contraption for their son at a reasonable price from a used car lot.

_What were we thinking?_

Donna sighed heavily, looking down at the pile of vegetables on the counter she’d been about to start washing and chopping for dinner.

“Oh, well. It can wait, I suppose.”

She put the green beans and zucchini back in the fridge, which was covered with magnets, postcards, and photographs of her beautiful children. As she untied her apron, Donna looked at one of the more recent photographs of Billy: a handsome teenage boy with freckles, roguish blue eyes and a riotous mop of golden-brown curls, grinning confidently at the camera.

_What’s he up to that’s more important than making sure his little sister gets home safely? Has he gotten himself a girlfriend?_

Shaking her head with exasperation, Donna secured her long, curly blonde hair in a blue scrunchie as she walked to the living room to say goodbye to her husband. He was watching the World Series with his eyes glued to the TV set and his hand glued to a cold can of beer.

“Bye, Neil,” she said, leaning down to kiss him on the top of his head. “Be back in an hour… dinner’s gonna be a little late, I’m sorry.”
“That’s fine, honey.” Neil was obviously distracted by the baseball game, but he took the time to look up at her with a warm smile. “Drive safely... I love you.”

"Love you, too."

Donna decided it was just as well that he didn’t ask her where she was going. He probably would’ve gotten angry about Billy shirking his duties and insisted on going to pick up Emily from choir practice himself, and then he’d be in a sour mood for the rest of the weekend about missing crucial moments of the World Series.

*Men get so serious about their sports.*

“I should be putting together that vegetable casserole right now,” Donna grumbled to herself as she grabbed her sunglasses and handbag on her way out the door. “That boy is in deep trouble whenever he decides to grace us with his presence.”

Her trusty old station wagon had been parked in the driveway all afternoon, and it felt like the inside of an oven. Even the holy pendant she always wore was stuck uncomfortably to her chest, which was damp with sweat beneath her blue floral blouse. She rolled down her window and turned on the radio, muttering under her breath the whole time.

“He’d better not be smoking marijuana or drinking beer... I don’t like those cigarettes he thinks I don’t know about, either. Neil and I are going to need to have a serious talk with him later, before things get out of hand.”

She was frustrated with her rebellious son, though not especially worried because she was sure he had just lost track of the time while hanging out with his silly friends. She knew he was probably smoking, skating, talking about girls and whatever else it was that teen age boys got up to. Billy had been an avid skateboarder in the days before he had a car of his own; he and his loyal little pack of betas used to spend hours skating in parks and occasionally even down in the graffiti-covered, concrete-lined L.A. “river”.

*He needs to learn to take his responsibilities seriously… I bet he’d shape up his act in no time if we took his keys away for a week. If he needs to go somewhere, he can ride his skateboard. Or, if I'm feeling generous, he can drive the station wagon.*

She smirked at the mental image of Billy’s indignant whines of protest when she told him he’d have to go meet his friends in an old wood-paneled station wagon that didn’t even have a cassette player.

*I knew that silly sports car would go straight to his head.*

Her preferred Christian music station was on a long commercial break, so she turned the dial to the news; it was a depressing segment about the terrifying new disease that had killed thousands of people. Donna wasn’t sure what to think about it, but she knew she didn’t agree with certain members of her church and book club who reasoned that this was God’s way of ridding society of homosexuals and drug addicts.

*Why do some folks prefer to focus on the Lord’s wrath, rather than His forgiveness? Scripture tells us, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and “He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone.”*

The man on the radio mentioned terrifying figures: thousands of deaths reported, and more with each passing year. It really did seem like a plague, and now it seemed like everyone Donna knew was afraid of everything from blood transfusions to tattoo parlors and public bathrooms.
What is this world coming to?

Donna hoped her son wouldn’t be silly enough to get a tattoo, or sleep with a loose girl who had some kind of disease; there were all kinds of things a careless individual could catch besides AIDS. Getting a girl pregnant before he was ready to settle down would be catastrophic, too.

The older Billy gets, the more he reminds me of Neil in his younger days. Devastatingly handsome, with the kind of smile that makes girls forget their senses.

Naturally, Donna couldn’t help noticing all the young ladies that stared at her son at Mass every Sunday; his haughty indifference only seemed to increase their fascination. Billy was getting taller and better-looking with every passing year, losing most but not all of the baby fat that had stuck with him his whole adolescence. She had silently observed the way he started doing crunches and push-ups, lying outside by the pool to work on his tan, and not only growing his hair longer but also rubbing Sun-In all over it to make it more golden. She saw how proud he was when enough dark stubble sprouted on his jaw and upper lip to start shaving; Neil had showed him how to do it without cutting himself.

It seems like just yesterday Neil was crawling on the floor, pretending to be a horse as Billy rode on his back and shouted, “Yee-haw, Daddy!”… and now, Neil’s teaching him to shave. Lord, where did the time go?

Donna Hargrove sniffled a little; thinking of the past always made her sentimental. She was an omega, and had been fortunate enough to meet the love of her life during her last year at college. Neil Hargrove, a handsome alpha, had swept her off her feet and they were bonded and married within six months. Their union produced two healthy children: William, who had been called Billy since he was a chubby, blond baby, and his sweet, precocious little sister, Emily. There was no way to know for certain until they were older and met their future mates, but Donna prayed that both of her children had inherited the alpha and omega gene; she liked to refer to it as “the gift”, since it felt like a blessing sent directly from God.

Billy is sixteen… if he doesn’t find a nice omega girl in high school, he’ll definitely meet one in college. A boy as handsome as him won’t have to wait long for someone suitable to come into his life.

When she finally arrived at the large church in Pasadena and retrieved her daughter from the office, she patted her shoulder affectionately and hoped Emily wasn’t too unhappy.

“Thanks for waiting so patiently, sweetheart.”

Emily had the same blue eyes, dark lashes, and sandy-brown hair as her brother. She looked down at her white Keds as they walked back to the car and kicked a small stone, sending it skittering across the parking lot. “Billy forgot about me again, didn’t he?

Donna sighed. “I’m sure he feels terrible about it, honey.”

“Yeah, right,” Emily said petulantly as she sat down in the back seat and slammed the door. “He doesn’t care about anybody but his stupid, damn self.”

Donna narrowed her eyes sternly in the rearview mirror and shook her head with motherly disapproval. “Watch the colorful language, young lady. I understand that you’re upset, but that’s no excuse for profanity.”

She changed the subject by telling Emily about all the progress she had made earlier that day with
sewing her Halloween costume (they’d had a great time selecting the fabric together at the craft store). She also asked her about the songs she learned that day. Emily had been singing with the Los Angeles Children's Chorus since she was seven, and she was blessed with an absolutely breathtaking voice. One of the songs she had been practicing was a lovely, intricately harmonized adaptation of an old hymn called ‘Leaning on the Everlasting Arms’.

“What a fellowship, what a joy divine…”

Donna found herself blinking back emotional tears as she drove down Colorado Boulevard and listened to Emily's high soprano, pure and clear as a bell. Billy had a wonderful voice, too, of course, but he preferred playing the piano to singing; nothing delighted Donna more than hearing him accompany his little sister while she sang.

“What have I to dread, what have I to fear…”

All the frustration and annoyance she had felt earlier dissolved as her daughter’s voice filled the car. Donna counted her blessings: she had a beautiful, talented daughter and a handsome, intelligent son (even if he could be impulsive and maddeningly careless at times). She had a devoted husband who worked tirelessly at his job so his family could live in a comfortable suburban house with three cars and good food on the table; Neil was her rock and her best friend. How many people, after all, could truly say they had found their soulmate?

“I have blessed peace, with my Lord so near…”

When the signal turned green and Donna advanced into the intersection, she didn’t notice the massive Buick Electra that was speeding through a red light. After the initial, deafeningly loud impact, she was only distantly aware of her old station wagon skidding uncontrollably across the intersection and colliding with a wall. Donna wanted to look at Emily, but couldn’t see anything besides bright, blinding white light, and she knew everything was all over when the angry sounds of breaking glass, crumpling metal, and her own hammering heartbeat disintegrated into nothingness, replaced by the solitary, far-off echo of her daughter’s beautiful voice.

“Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms… leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.”

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: The Mamas and the Papas- Dedicated to the One I Love
“I am waiting for the dawning of that bright and glorious day, when the darksome night of sorrow shall have vanished far away.”

-19th century funeral hymn

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saturday, October 22nd, 1983

In the long week that followed the accident, the Hargrove’s refrigerator gradually filled with foil-covered pans of lasagna and Tupperware containers of pasta salad, all left on the front porch by well-meaning neighbors and members of their church. Most of the food sat uneaten and grew less appetizing with each passing day.

Even though Billy resented it for doing so, the sun kept rising each morning and life dragged on. Nothing had changed in the outside world, but everything was different in the Hargrove household. Without Emily around, the house was much too quiet: no singing, giggling, or light footsteps in the hallway. No stray pink socks clinging to Billy’s laundry when he took it out of the dryer. No girlish shouts of “Mom, have you seen my hairbrush?” or “Daddy, Billy left toast crumbs in the butter again!”

Billy officially hated everything. He hated leaving the house and stepping into a world where nobody knew or cared about his loss, and he hated staying home even more. The pain was ever-present and inescapable; everything either reminded him of his sassy, precocious sister, who laughed at his jokes and called him “fart-face” when she was grumpy, or it reminded him of his mother, whose absence he felt like an amputated limb.

The sudden loss of the family matriarch forced Billy to see all the innumerable ways she had made their lives easier. When he and his father were abruptly left on their own to fend for themselves, they soon ran out of toothpaste and toilet paper, among other things, because neither of them had ever been responsible for buying it. Donna Hargrove had always taken care of everything in the household, but those days were gone.

Billy despised thinking of his mother and sister in the past tense, and for the first few days after the tragedy he refused to admit to himself that they really weren’t coming home. He tried thinking that they were just away on a trip from which they would soon return, or that it was all the longest and most frightening dream he’d ever had.

Billy’s father, Neil, was also trapped in the waking nightmare. He was a hollow shell of his former self, and spent the first week of his bereavement leave slumped lifelessly on his armchair in front of the TV, glugging whiskey in his bathrobe and pajamas. He didn’t shave or shower until the morning of the funeral, and he didn’t speak to his son unless it was absolutely necessary.

Billy knew Neil held him partially, if not entirely, responsible for what had happened, and for once, he agreed with his father. He couldn’t help feeling like he might as well have been the one driving the massive Buick that wrecked Donna Hargrove’s poor old station wagon and sent her and little
Emily to early graves. His guilt played constantly in a loop in his head, over and over until the words blended together and lost their meaning.

_All my fault. All my fault. All my fault. All my fault. All my fault. All my fault._

…………..

“Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine…”

The funeral service for Donna and Emily Hargrove was held on a Saturday, exactly one week after the accident. Billy had seen coffins before, but he’d never seen one made to fit a nine-year-old. His sister had been a short, slender child, and her funeral casket wasn’t as long as the one beside it, with their mother inside.

“…et lux perpetua luceat eis…”

There was a large, framed photograph beside each coffin, as well as a forest of flowers. The overwhelming fragrance of lilies made Billy’s nose itch and his eyes water, and he resented the flowers for making him look like he was crying in front of everyone assembled in the church. In truth, he hadn’t been able to shed a single tear since the events of the preceding Saturday; he just existed from day to night to day again, numb and crushed beneath the weight of all his regrets.

“Requiescant in pace… Amen.”

After the long church service, there was a somber little reception in the parlor. Everyone milled around and spoke to each other in hushed tones as they sipped coffee and ate devilled eggs and mini-muffins. Billy stood off to the side of the room in his new, inexpensive black suit, clutching a styrofoam cup of weak black coffee. He felt like he might scream if he had to smile politely at yet another person offering handshakes, hugs, and tearful condolences.

_I don’t want any goddamn hugs, or any of that “I’m so sorry for your loss” horseshit. I just want Mom and Emily back, and there isn’t a single person anywhere in the world who can make that happen._

One of the funeral attendees was Paula Carver, an attractive girl who had gone to the same church and school as Billy for years. She had been batting her eyelashes at him since they were thirteen, and both of their mothers had openly encouraged the flirtation because Billy was an alpha and Paula was an omega, one of the only ones his age that he had ever met. Despite this, Billy felt nothing for her, and when she sashayed over to him in the church parlor that afternoon with a sad smile and watery eyes, he had abruptly walked away from her before she even opened her mouth to speak.

_I’m sick and tired of being polite… why the fuck should I be? I’ve gotta get the hell out of here._

Unable to stomach any more of the sickening pretense, Billy put on his sunglasses, slipped out the back door, and tossed his coffee cup into some nearby shrubs. He loosened his tie, which felt like a noose, and unfastened the top two buttons of his stiff white shirt. Exhaling with relief, Billy leaned against the red brick wall of the church and lit a cigarette, though his solitude was disturbed just a few moments later by an elderly man in thick square eyeglasses and a black wool coat. It was Neil’s father, who Billy had always known as Grandpa Ron.

“Mind if I join you, young man?”

Billy shook his head and shrugged, feigning indifference, though he would’ve preferred to be left alone.
As if I have a choice… it’s not like I can tell my own grandpa to fuck off. Dad would kill me.

His grandfather stepped up beside him and cleared his throat. “You’ve gotten a little taller since the last time we saw each other… say, you wouldn't happen to have another one of those, would you?”

It took a second or two for Billy's brain to register that the old man was requesting a cigarette. Surprised and slightly amused, he wordlessly held out his half-empty pack of Marlboros.

I thought he quit decades ago.

“Your grandma didn’t like it when I smoked,” Grandpa Ron said as though he’d read Billy’s mind. He pulled out a cigarette and tucked it between his creased lips. “She didn’t care for the smell… can’t say I blame her.”

“But now…?” Billy prompted, passing him a lighter. “You can do what you want, right?”

“No,” his grandfather replied with a slow, mournful shake of his head. His hair had once been thick and dark brown like Neil's, but now it was wispy and silvery grey. “I can do things like smoke and waste money on lottery tickets and eat cake for lunch because Cathy isn’t here anymore to scold me, but…”

He trailed off, frowning in frustration as his unsteady, arthritic fingers struggled with the plastic disposable Bic.

“How in blazes do you work this confounded gadget…”

“Here, lemme do it.” Billy took the lighter back and lit his grandfather’s cigarette for him, trying not to think about how horrified his mother would be if she could see them smoking together.

“Much obliged, Billy. Anyway, no, I can’t do what I want, because what I really want is to talk to my wife again, hold her hand, take her out to breakfast, watch our favorite television programs together… and I can’t do a single one of those things.”

Billy noticed that, behind the thick lenses of his glasses, there were tears in the crinkled corners of his grandfather’s eyes: the exact same pale blue eyes as Neil.

“Are you okay, Gramps?”

“I’m trying to be, Billy. It’s a terrible thing, to outlive the ones you love. So please try to be patient with your father. Losing a wife and child like that in one fell swoop…” He pulled a large handkerchief from his jacket pocket and blew his nose with a loud honk. “That kind of misfortune can really change a man.”

Patient, my ass… he’s not the only one who lost them. What about me? What about my goddamn misfortune?

Billy puffed on his cigarette and nodded along to be polite, but internally he was screaming. He had a headache and wanted nothing more than to go home, hide under his blankets and sleep for a hundred years. But his grandfather wasn’t finished talking.

“Neil felt it happen… the accident, I mean. Did you know that, Billy? Your father actually felt her death at the moment it happened, like a knife in his heart.”

Grandpa Ron spoke from personal experience; he had been completely devastated when his wife of forty years had died of cancer in 1981. To Billy, Grandma Cathy was just a sweet old woman who
loved Scrabble and made him peanut butter fudge when he came to visit. But to his grandfather, she had been everything: wife, mother of his children, best friend, and above all, his soulmate. He had never been quite the same after her death.

“…I hope you never have to go through that, Billy, but you might. That’s the downside of finding true love: you’ve gotta lose it someday. Either that, or it loses you.”

“Unless you lose it together,” Billy said darkly, dropping his cigarette butt on the concrete and crushing it beneath his heel. “Like in a car wreck.”

“I wished I could’ve gone at the same time as your grandmother, but that’s not what God had planned for us.”

Billy looked down at his shiny black shoes and frowned. “Does Dad wish he could’ve died with my mom?”

Grandpa Ron hesitated for a moment before answering. “Well… he might, but I think it’s more likely that he wishes he could’ve died instead of them.”

Billy could relate; he’d gladly give up his own life if it would bring his mother and sister back.

_But that’s not how it works… we’re just stuck with whatever bullshit fate decides to fling at us._

Grandpa Ron glanced around, then discreetly pulled a hip flask from an inner pocket of his black wool coat. Billy watched silently as he tipped his head back and took a long, noisy swig.

Jesus, he’s really turned into a lush since Grandma died. A depressed drunk pining for the old days, just like Dad.

Given the way soul bonds had turned out for his father and grandfather, Billy was starting to think he didn’t want one at all. He thought it was just as well that alphas and omegas were so rare, because he didn’t want to fall in love and he sure as hell didn’t want a soulmate.

If you don’t really give a shit about anyone, you can’t get hurt. If someone ditches you or dies, you won’t fall to pieces… you’ll just brush it off and move on with your life.

“It’s better not to care,” Billy muttered morosely. “I think I’d rather just be on my own forever.”

“Hush,” his grandfather sighed, sounding very tired. He took one last puff on his cigarette before flicking it aside. “Don’t say that. You’re still just a dumb kid. I know it’s hard to have any hope on dark days like these, but you’ll learn someday that it’s better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all.”

_What a bunch of corny bullshit._

Billy wasn’t in the mood for sentimental platitudes, and he definitely wasn’t in the mood to tell his grandfather that he might never find a soulmate— not if his lurking suspicions about himself were true. Omegas were always girls, after all, and Billy simply wasn’t interested in the opposite sex the way sixteen-year-old boys usually were.

_Mom wanted me to find some nice omega chick and live happily ever after. Maybe it’s all for the best, in some twisted way, that she didn’t live long enough to be disappointed in me._

He knew better than to speak the words aloud, but they were carved in his mind and he couldn’t erase them. His inner turmoil and the conversation with his grandfather had made him so glum that
he was almost relieved when the back door of the parlor suddenly swung open and his father poked his head out.

Neil Hargrove glanced around the tree-lined walkway until he spotted them. “Billy? Pop? What in the world are you two doing out here? Everyone’s wondering where you went.”

Grandpa Ron promptly clasped his hands behind his back, successfully concealing the flask. “Oh, I’m just having a nice little chat with my grandson.”

Neil grunted in response and went back inside, leaving the door propped open for them.

“Well,” Billy said with a resigned sigh as he trudged back to the church parlor. “Back to getting hugged and cried on by random people who barely even knew Mom and Em. If I have to hear one more person say they’re in a better place I’m gonna punch someone in the face.”

“You and me both, kid,” Grandpa Ron said, taking another surreptitious swig from his flask before tucking it back in his coat pocket. “You and me both.”

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Billy returned home the same way he’d gotten to the funeral service at church: on his trusty old skateboard. Since the accident, he couldn't stand the idea of being in a car, so he locked his beloved Camaro in the garage and skated instead. Even though the church was far from his house and he was wearing a suit, he had declined his father’s offer to drive him to and from the funeral in his GM pickup truck. When Neil demanded to know why he was being so stubborn, Billy said the fresh air and exercise helped clear his head, but the truth was even simpler: he was afraid.

They died in a car... because of another car. I’ll get over it someday, but for now, I hate every car on this godforsaken planet.

Back at home, he went in his sister’s room for the first time since her death. He sat on her bed for half an hour, trying not to cry as he looked at all of her things: her Barbie dolls, a few of whom had received unfortunate haircuts, a music box, a little stack of Ramona Quimby books, a slightly creepy E.T. stuffed animal, a Chia Pet, and the modest collection of Star Wars action figures she had inherited from Billy when he decided he was too old to play with toys. There were two movie posters on the walls: one for ‘The Last Unicorn’ and another for her most recent favorite, ‘Twice Upon A Time’.

Feels like just yesterday we were watching Looney Tunes and eating Cheerios together on the couch.

The thought of never watching Saturday-morning cartoons with his sister again made Billy feel like his chest would cave in. He hurriedly left the room and closed the door behind him softly, as though there was someone inside he was trying not to disturb.

Depressed and desperately in need of a distraction, Billy ran to his room and popped an Adolescents cassette into his boombox. He cranked the volume up to headache-inducing decibels, but the angry words and frenetic beat did little to drown out his thoughts.

“House of the filthy, house not a home, house of destruction where the lurkers roam…”

He stood in front of the mirror and stared sadly at his reflection: he had the same blue eyes, dark eyelashes, snub nose, and wavy, golden-brown hair as his mother and sister.

No wonder Dad can’t look at me anymore. He sees them in me.
Billy clenched his fist, momentarily tempted to punch his reflection in the mirror. He didn’t want to be reminded of those he had lost every time he looked at himself, but there was nothing he could do about it. Even if he dyed his hair or shaved it all off, he’d still see his mother and sister staring back at him from his blue eyes fringed with black lashes.

_Goddamnit._

He wanted to feel something besides grief and guilt, even if that meant punching the mirror and splitting his knuckles open. Instead, Billy proceeded to do something he’d secretly wanted to do for years: he pierced his ear.

_Fuck it. Why not? Nobody’s here to stop me, and it’ll probably take Dad months to even notice, he’s so comatose these days._

Billy had been contemplating the possibility of piercing his ear for so long that he even had an earring already, stashed in the back of a drawer; it was a simple stainless steel hoop, just half an inch in diameter. Billy doused the earring, a safety pin, and his ear with rubbing alcohol, took a deep breath, then shoved the safety pin through the soft, yielding skin of his left earlobe. He exhaled shakily, pulled out the safety pin and quickly slid the little earring into the fresh, pink wound. Even though it hurt like hell, it wasn’t enough to distract him from the throbbing pain in his heart.

_How much would Mom be freaking out right now if she saw what I did?_  

Billy never thought there would come a day when he missed being scolded by his mother; he’d give anything to hear her voice again, even if it was raised in anger. He never thought he’d miss being teased by his little sister, either, but there he was, wishing she was there to giggle and point at his new accessory.

_She’d probably say I look like Mr. T, or George Michael. God, I miss that little smartass._

He rubbed a tear from the corner of his eye and sniffled, commanding himself sternly to get a grip. No matter how much he missed his mother and sister, they were gone and he wanted the old version of Billy to disappear along with them, so he could resurrect himself as someone different. Someone interested in girls. Someone tough, who displayed no signs of weakness and never shed a tear.

_‘Cause tears never fixed a damn thing or brought anyone back. Tears don’t do shit but make your face wet._

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Chapter End Notes

If anyone is at all interested in Californian hardcore punk from the early eighties, the song Billy listens to while piercing his ear is an old favorite of mine, “Kids of the Black Hole” by Adolescents.

Oh, and a quick PSA: According to the internet, rubbing alcohol and hydrogen peroxide are NOT what you want to use on piercings, but Billy doesn’t know that. Ouch.
“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home. Sometimes I feel like I’m almost done, and a long, long way from home.”

-African-American Spiritual

When Billy returned to school a week after the funeral, his Camaro continued to sit in the garage, neglected and collecting a thin coat of dust. He was still too anxious to drive, and almost every night he was awakened by terrifying nightmares of crumpled metal, shattered glass, and the acrid stench of gasoline and burnt rubber. Fortunately, the high school he attended in North Hollywood was less than two miles from his house, so he shouldered his backpack and made the journey on skateboard.

One of the advantages of being an alpha was that he had always been able to make friends easily; for as long as Billy could remember, he had a tightly knit group of betas who followed him around loyally and laughed at all his jokes. His “pack”, as his parents had termed them, had no idea that the alpha and omega gene existed; Billy wasn’t supposed to talk about it, and he doubted any of his friends would have believed him, anyway. His mother used to say that the only way to believe soul bonds were truly possible was to experience one yourself, and that it was pointlessly cruel to tell betas about something wonderful that they would never have.

Even if Billy somehow had proof of his alpha status, he wouldn’t have wanted his friends to know that their loyalty and affection for him was, in large part, due to a deep-rooted, biological impulse beyond their control. He liked to think they would’ve been his friends even if he wasn’t an alpha and that they genuinely enjoyed hanging out with him, but there was no way to be sure. Billy’s pack was a lively, motley group of almost a dozen eleventh-grade boys and girls from a variety of backgrounds; some of them had been friends with Billy since they were ten years old, or even younger than that. They used to spend hours together after school, goofing off at the mall, record store, skate park, and their favorite taco stand.

But that was before, when he was still the confident, laughing kid who loved skating, pranking his friends, and playing Van Halen arrangements on the piano.

Now, Billy was just the boy with a dead mom and sister: the lone scion of a family slashed in half. Nobody in his social circle seemed to know how to talk to him; they had all met the late Mrs. Hargrove and little Emily on countless occasions when they visited Billy’s house, and cried genuine tears when they heard the news. To their credit, they tried to be supportive in Billy’s dark hour of need. They brought flowers and kind words of comfort. Most of them had even come to the funeral, though Billy just ignored them and talked to nobody besides his grandfather.

At school, his teachers looked at him with sad, sympathetic smiles and didn’t scold him when he turned in his assignments late. Billy loathed being the object of everyone’s pity, and cringed at the feeling of curious eyes following him when he entered classrooms or walked through the crowded hallways.

Within a few weeks, though, everyone stopped asking if he was okay, and that made Billy feel even
worse. It may have been easy for his friends and teachers to forget and move on, but Billy felt stuck, like he was sinking in a lake of slowly-hardening concrete.

A lifetime of attracting friends with little to no effort had made Billy rather cocky and careless. His friends were well-accustomed to his casual mockery and occasional mistreatment, but they weren’t ready for the new version of their leader— a sullen, foul-tempered boy who returned to school in November with less than zero interest in maintaining his friendships. Billy was deliberately rude and dismissive to every beta in his pack, and they could only put up with so much. One by one, they stopped talking to him and slipped away.

*Fuck ‘em. They’re not my family. They’ll never understand what I’ve lost.*

Billy preferred being alone, or so he told himself. He didn’t think he deserved friends, and he was almost surprised by how little he missed them. He knew his old comrades were soldiering on perfectly well without him, and that after the first few somber days of whispering “Jeez, isn’t it awful about Billy?” they would return to their lives of homework, studying, and driving to the beach together. It wasn’t *their* mother and sister who had died, after all.

For Billy, there could be no return to the carefree days of before. All he wanted to do after school was bolt away the moment the dismissal bell rang, stop at 7-Eleven for chips, candy, and a Coke, then skate home to the solitude of his dark bedroom for hours of reading sad books and shooting things on his Atari console. He stayed up too late every night, torn between wanting to go to sleep because being awake was too painful and dreading sleep because he was afraid of the inevitable nightmares.

Neil Hargrove was living in a waking nightmare, too; losing his best friend and soulmate had shattered him beyond repair. Within just a few weeks, he transformed into a man Billy barely recognized as his father. When Neil’s bereavement leave ran out and he returned to work, he stayed late almost every day, then came home and sat in front of the TV until midnight. He didn’t like sleeping in the bed he had once shared with his wife, and usually just fell asleep in his big La-Z-Boy recliner.

Billy knew his father couldn’t stand the sight of him; he looked too much like his departed mother and sister, and the memories were too painful. They rarely spoke or crossed paths, unless Billy needed to ask for money to buy more of the frozen TV dinners, chips, and Campbell’s soup he and his father had been living on since Donna Hargrove and her excellent cooking disappeared from their lives.

A complete lack of interest, insomnia, and frequent nightmares about car crashes and embalmed dead bodies resulted in Billy’s grades slipping from his usual As to Bs and eventually to Cs and Ds. He even managed to flunk gym class, which he had once considered an easy A.

In December, when Neil asked to see his son’s end-of-semester report card, Billy reluctantly brought it to him and tried not to cry like a little kid when he was promptly smacked across the face, hard enough to sting. He wasn’t particularly surprised or outraged— his grades were abysmal, after all— but it was the first time he’d been hit by his father in at least ten years; Neil hadn’t raised a hand against him since the rare spankings of Billy’s childhood (a punishment reserved for transgressions like stealing money from his mother’s purse, lying, or running into the street without checking for cars).

“You’d better pull yourself together and straighten up your act, boy.” Neil had snapped, his voice heavy with frustration and disappointment as he shook the report card in Billy’s face. “Just ‘cause times are hard doesn’t mean you get to flush your future down the crapper! What the hell would your mother say if she saw this?”
Billy wanted to point out that the only reason his report card was so awful was precisely because she wasn’t there to see it, but he didn’t want to get smacked again, so he stormed down the hall with wounded pride and hot tears stinging in his eyes. He slammed his bedroom door hard enough to make a framed photo tumble off his bookshelf, landing on the hardwood floor with a startling crack. It was a picture of him with his sister, freckled and grinning at the beach, their matching blue eyes squinting in the bright California sunshine.

Billy picked the framed photo off the floor and sat down slowly on the edge of his bed, tracing his thumb lightly over the jagged cracks on the glass.

“Fuck,” he muttered, squeezing his eyes closed and willing himself not to cry. He hated crying because he knew it was a weak, useless indulgence and that he wouldn’t be able to stop once he started. “Goddamn it, Em… why’d you have to go so soon and leave me behind?”

_I never got to teach her how to get past round twenty on Dig Dug. I never got to teach her how to drive. I never got to teach her how to throw a punch. I never got to… I never…_

It didn’t matter. His sister was gone, his mother was gone, and there was nothing he could do about it. And it was all because he was goofing off with his stupid friends and lost track of time.

_All my fault._

------------------------

Billy had once loved holidays, but now they just depressed him. On Halloween, his father switched off their porch light to discourage trick-or-treaters, but they could still hear the distant giggles and excited shrieks of all the neighborhood children trooping up and down the sidewalk. Billy tried not to think about the costume his mother had almost finished sewing for Emily and how much his sister had been looking forward to Halloween. He was about seven years older than Emily, so he had been taking her trick-or-treating since she could toddle up their neighbors’ driveways with an orange plastic jack-o-lantern bucket clutched in her tiny hand.

Thanksgiving was difficult, too. Most of their extended family, including Grandpa Ron, lived in other states, which gave Billy and his father a good excuse to just sit glumly at home, eating their Hungry-Man TV dinners in separate rooms and pining for the delicious Thanksgiving feasts Donna Hargrove once made. Billy remembered how his little sister always shaped her mashed potatoes into a volcano-like mound filled with gravy “lava”, and how much she looked forward to cracking the turkey wishbone with him each year. He always tried to hold the tiny furcula so that his sister ended up with the larger, “lucky” half of the bone. Billy didn’t believe in luck anymore, though, just the conspicuous absence of it.

The Christmas holiday season was, by far, the most difficult time of all. Neither Billy nor his father felt remotely festive; they didn’t decorate the house, mail cards, buy a Christmas tree, or shop for gifts. They didn’t watch ‘White Christmas’, ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’, ‘A Charlie Brown Christmas’, or ‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas’ like they had every year since Billy could remember. He didn’t sit at the piano to play his mother’s favorite carols; he hadn’t touched the instrument even once since the accident.

Late on New Year’s Eve, when Billy was finally inspired to sit down at the dusty, chestnut-brown baby grand in the corner of the disused dining room, he stared at it for almost twenty minutes before gingerly placing his fingers on the keys. Rather than playing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ or one of his mother’s old favorites by Liszt, Billy began improvising a slow, somber rendition of ‘Stairway to Heaven’.
He hadn’t even reached the middle of the song when his father bellowed at him from the TV room to quit the depressing racket and go to bed.

………………

Billy had never been a skinny child. Enviable good looks ran in his family, but he had always been self-conscious about how easily he put on weight, and longed to look like his celebrity crush, David Lee Roth. When he started high school determined to improve himself, he ate less and exercised more. His efforts and deprivations began to show in just a few months; girls had always smiled and stared at him, but when Billy shed twenty pounds and started wearing tighter shirts to show off his burgeoning biceps, they really took notice.

But that was before, when Billy’s family was complete and he had nothing better to worry about than his appearance. After the death of his mother and sister, Billy retreated to the familiar comforts of junk food and video games, and his only exercise was the skateboard journey he made to and from school. Within the space of just three months, Billy managed to pack on all the weight he’d lost in ninth grade.

On the first day of 1984, just a week before school resumed, Neil Hargrove suddenly took notice of his son’s slowly thickening figure.

“What the hell have you been eating, lardass? You look like a goddamn potato.”

He forced Billy to sign up for a team sport at school when second semester began. Neil suggested baseball, but Billy thought baseball was mind-numbingly dull, so he grudgingly agreed to try out for the basketball team. Billy surprised the coach, his father, and himself by making most of the shots he attempted and getting accepted onto the team.

In the end, that was how Neil Hargrove unwittingly led his son directly into the path of Aaron Washington, a twelfth-grade point guard with the best jump shots, quickest footwork, and cutest dimples Billy had ever seen in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: The Sound- I Can't Escape Myself (1980)
Different Like Me

Chapter Notes

“Why, there’s the privilege your beauty bears:
Fie, treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing
The close enacts and counsels of the heart!”

-Aaron the Moor in ‘Titus Andronicus’ by William Shakespeare

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The captain and point guard of the North Hollywood High School varsity basketball team was an eighteen-year-old senior named Aaron Washington: five feet, eight inches and 170 pounds of lean muscle, with short hair, high cheekbones and dark, intelligent eyes. Like most people in the world, he was a beta, but Billy could tell there was something different about him from the first day they practiced together. Aaron didn’t defer to him the way most beta boys did; he challenged him assertively on the basketball court and smirked on the rare occasions Billy tripped, missed his free throws, or got caught traveling.

“Wake up and focus, Blondie!” Aaron would snap whenever he was less than impressed with Billy’s performance (which was most of the time). “You keep moving your feet, man… plant them and draw a charge!”

Normally, Billy would’ve been infuriated if anyone, particularly a common beta who was shorter than him, dared to criticize his abilities or call him derisive nicknames like ‘Blondie’ and ‘Goldilocks’, but he couldn’t help making an exception for Aaron, who was the most jaw-droppingly talented basketball player he had ever seen.

He’s so good, I wouldn’t be surprised if he got drafted by the NBA someday.

Intrigued by Aaron’s brusque demeanor and aroused by how nice his shapely ass looked in his little blue gym shorts, Billy’s curiosity and admiration for his team captain soon blossomed into a hopelessly consuming crush. Billy had gotten so used to being glum and miserable that it almost felt like a betrayal to the memory of his mother and sister when his thoughts began drifting increasingly to Aaron’s dimples and less often to his lost loved ones.

Jesus, I’m going to hell. I should be missing Mom and Em every second and praying for their souls, but instead I’m daydreaming about putting my hand down another dude’s shorts. What the fuck is wrong with me?

One memorable April evening, after their team had won a game against a neighboring high school by an exhilarating eighteen points, Aaron surprised Billy by casually approaching him in the locker room.

Oh, shit. Be cool, be cool.

“You did pretty good tonight, B. Keep that up and those punks from Van Nuys won’t have a snowball’s chance in hell when we see them next week.”
Billy could feel his cheeks warming at the double-whammy combination of unexpected praise and a new nickname (which he hoped was short for ‘Billy’ and not ‘Blondie’); he silently willed himself not to let the sudden attention go to his head.

“Yeah, uh… you, too.”

**What kind of pathetic excuse for an alpha am I?**

Billy wasn’t accustomed to feeling lost for words; he usually had no trouble with casual conversation, but Aaron sometimes made him feel like he’d forgotten how to speak English.

**Why am I stammering and blushing like a lovesick bitch? He’s gonna think I’m some kind of retard.**

Aaron tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans and leaned against the lockers, apparently unbothered that Billy was still changing out of his uniform and half-undressed.

“Listen, B… I don’t know ‘bout you, but I’m starving.” He snapped the piece of gum he was chewing and grinned. “You in the mood to celebrate with some In-N-Out?”

Billy wasn’t currently wearing a shirt, so he was grateful for all the basketball practice he’d been doing in the past few months, which had worked wonders on his physique. He cleared his throat and returned Aaron’s smile confidently.

“Yeah, that sounds cool. Just you and me, or…”

“You and me?” For a split second, Aaron’s brow furrowed in confusion, but then he laughed amiably and punched Billy on the shoulder. “Naw, man. Whole team’s going.”

**Shit. Of course they are. I’m a fucking idiot.**

Billy recovered quickly from his brief embarrassment and ended up having a great time at the burger stand that night. Thanks to the team’s recent victory, Aaron seemed more cheerful and talkative than ever before; his dark eyes twinkled as he discussed strategies for the following week’s game, and he made everyone laugh when he stood up and mocked the numerous blunders of their unfortunate opponents.

To Billy’s relief, the other members of the basketball team went home one by one, and by midnight, he and Aaron were the only ones left in the seating area outside the In-N-Out, talking and passing a cigarette back and forth. As it turned out, Aaron had a great sense of humor and a lot in common with Billy. He had lost his own mother to breast cancer a few years earlier, and his older brother was misidentified in a police line-up and sent to prison for no good reason. Consequently, Aaron understood heartbreak and injustice better than anyone from Billy’s former pack of betas, and probably better than Billy himself. Long after all the double-double wrappers and milkshake cups had been cleared away, the two boys continued to talk about basketball, music, and movies. Billy felt happier and more hopeful than he had in months.

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He told himself that the only reason he started driving his Camaro to school again was the increasingly warm weather, but it was really just because of Aaron; he knew the flashy blue sports car was infinitely cooler and more likely to attract the cute point guard’s attention than the beat-up old skateboard Billy had been using to get around since the car crash in October.

The tiny, pink puncture in his earlobe had healed nicely, and he bought a new earring with little black beads and a silver spike, as well as a few rings. He was gradually changing his “look” and
remaking himself in a new image, though he wasn’t really sure what that image was going to be. He shoplifted a little bottle of Paco Rabanne after-shave and devoted more time to styling his wavy, shoulder-length hair in front of the bathroom mirror, much to his father’s tight-lipped disapproval.

Billy would always love the SoCal hardcore punk of his formative teenage years, but he was developing a fondness for heavy metal; it sounded more like what he imagined a cool college-aged guy would listen to than the bratty anthems of his youth. He found himself wondering what Aaron might say if he invited him to go to a record store sometime.

*Just as friends, obviously.*

………………

Billy was fairly certain that Aaron had a cute little girlfriend. He hadn’t seen anyone in particular clinging to the point guard’s arm in between classes, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t some girl, somewhere… she could go to a different school, or perhaps even college. Attractive guys always had girlfriends, Billy reasoned.

*No girlfriends for me, though…*

Billy used to tell himself that everything would fall into place and start making sense when he met a pretty omega girl his age, but the only one he’d ever met was Paula Carver and she excited him about as much as an empty white envelope.

Billy hadn’t gone back to church since the funeral, so he hadn’t seen Paula in six months. She didn’t attend the same high school as him; her family was quite wealthy, and she was enrolled at Notre Dame, a private Catholic high school in neighboring Sherman Oaks. Billy was aware that she liked him, but was still a little surprised when the phone rang one Saturday morning in May and it was Paula, calling to ask him if he was free that evening.

*Seriously? Christ, I must be the only alpha she knows who isn’t either a little boy or her dad’s age…*

Billy was tempted to just say no and hang up on her. Paula was conventionally pretty and seemed to have a decent personality, but he’d never been able to summon an ounce of interest in her. There had been a few girls in his old pack of beta friends, and even the prettiest of them had never managed to catch his eye.

*But... how will I really know tits and pussy aren’t my thing if I’ve never even given them a chance?*

In hindsight, he didn’t really know why he’d kept any of his old friends around, especially the girls. They’d shared some laughs, but when Billy forced himself to think about it, he had to admit their only value was to help him project a certain image: popular alpha male with a large pack of loyal friends, desired by all the girls and envied by all the boys.

*I haven’t said a word to any of them in months, and the world keeps turning. They never needed me, and I sure as hell never needed them.*

While he was acknowledging uncomfortable truths, he had to admit that he had always made a point of only befriending boys that he didn’t find especially attractive. Crushes as unorthodox as his were extremely inconvenient, which was why he’d never included anyone as handsome as Aaron in his pack of friends; Billy would’ve been a goner.

*Kinda like how I’m a goner now…*

It was the sudden, unbidden thought of Aaron’s dimples and beautiful ass that made Billy hastily
agree to take Paula out on a date that night.

*I heard she used to mess around with the Sunday school teacher’s son… maybe she knows how to give good head.*

“I’ll swing by your place at six. How does that sound?”

“Six sounds great,” Paula answered excitedly. “See you then, Billy.”

*Well, here goes nothing. Don’t knock it ’til you try it, right?*

The date began more smoothly than Billy expected. Paula didn’t say a word about his dead mother and sister, and kept up a halfway interesting conversation with him as they ate dinner in a booth at Marie Callender’s. After the meal, they went to the Sherman Oaks Galleria to see ‘Sixteen Candles’, and after that, Billy drove to the top of the hills above Ventura Boulevard, where there was a great view of the entire San Fernando Valley. They shared half a joint in his Camaro, and Billy got so pleasantly stoned that he didn’t mind when Paula suddenly leaned over and kissed him. He didn’t pull away or tell her to stop, even though swapping spit with her didn’t feel any more passionate than when Billy used to practice kissing the back of his own hand in sixth grade.

*Focus, man. Try touching her tits or something.*

Billy slid his hand under Paula’s silky blouse to experimentally squeeze her round little breasts. She moaned his name, which he liked, but then she reached over to unzip his jeans and withdraw his cock. It felt pretty good when she fit the tip in her mouth, but something just wasn’t right. To his extreme embarrassment, he couldn’t get hard, even after five minutes of Paula’s determined efforts. Feeling like a disgrace to all alphas, Billy desperately tried imagining it was Michael Schoeffling from ‘Sixteen Candles’ licking his cock instead of Paula, and when that didn’t help, he reluctantly allowed himself to think about Aaron.

*Oh, fuck.*

There was an immediate reaction in his groin, but before his dick could stiffen, the strong smell of Paula’s hairspray and Love’s Baby Soft perfume returned him to reality.

*Is she really an omega? Am I really an alpha? We should be fucking like rabbits right about now… What the hell is wrong with me?*

Paula was a good sport about it, all things considered. She left a smear of sticky, pink lipgloss on Billy’s flaccid cock, assured him she wouldn’t tell a soul about his failure to rise to the occasion, then sat in silence the entire awkward drive home.

*Well, at least I gave it a try.*

........................................

In the wake of his recent disastrous date with Paula, Billy found himself wishing he had someone who could give him reliable advice. An understanding older brother or cousin, perhaps. Neil was an alpha, of course, as was Billy’s grandfather and the handful of uncles and male cousins who were scattered across the country, but he would rather die than talk to any of them about his strange curiosities.

*What am I supposed to do, call up Grandpa Ron and ask him if he’s ever heard of an alpha bonding with a beta? Or another alpha?*
Aside from being painfully awkward, his grandfather probably wouldn’t know the answers. Most of Billy’s relatives, Grandpa Ron included, were devoutly Christian and would likely be repulsed if they found out about him. There was nobody he could ask, and there were no books he could read on the subject (he had even visited the enormous library in downtown L.A. to be absolutely certain).

Why can’t I just fall for Paula? It would make a lot of sense. Even Mom was always nagging me to take Paula out on a date.

The more he thought about it, the more Billy began to resent his alpha status. It would be bad enough, he thought, to be a regular beta who liked other guys: he wouldn’t be able to display affection in public, he would be shunned by most of his relatives, he wouldn’t be able to get married, ignorant people might treat him like he had AIDS… it was hardly ideal.

But a gay alpha? What a fucking joke.

His mother had called the alpha and omega gene “the gift”, but to Billy, it felt more like a curse. Being “blessed” with the alpha gene felt like a cruel twist of fate for someone with his decidedly not-so-traditional tastes. Betas had the advantage of not knowing true soul bonds were possible. They liked to casually throw words like “true love” and “soulmate” around, have lavish weddings and get tattoos of each other’s names, but then those same self-proclaimed “soulmates” often fell out of love and broke up. Betas knew nothing of real, ’til-death-do-us-part true love.

Neither do I… and I probably never will.

For a fleeting moment, Billy allowed himself to indulge in a brief little daydream in which boys could be born with the omega gene. He tried to picture Aaron going into heat and begging for his cock, the way he imagined omegas did each month.

Don’t be a moron. Guys can’t be omegas… that wouldn’t make any damn sense.

Billy’s mother had told him that falling in love with a beta girl was fine, but warned him that he would always feel incomplete.

“Your father and I can visit one another’s dreams, Billy… you can’t possibly understand how wonderful that is until you find an omega mate to call your own someday.”

Billy blushed at the thought of anyone gaining access to his dreams, especially the ones he’d been having recently. He used to have nightmares almost every night, but lately he’d been dreaming up increasingly strange, sexy scenarios involving his teammate Aaron and as little clothing as possible.

Sorry, Mom… I don’t think a soul bond is in the cards for me.

………..

One warm Wednesday just before Memorial Day weekend, Billy summoned enough courage to invite Aaron to the beach, and struggled to contain his excitement when he agreed.

“Sure, B. Are the rest of the guys on the team going, or…?”

“No,” Billy had answered, perhaps a little too hastily. “Just us. I mean, they wouldn’t all fit in my car, but if you want, I could—”

“Nah,” Aaron had cut him off with an indifferent shrug. “Just us is cool. See you tonight.”

Billy commanded himself not to think of it as a date: they were just two teammates spending a little
time together, with no romantic possibilities whatsoever. Regardless, he was still nervous and spent almost three hours getting ready for his non-date. At the last moment, just before he left his bedroom, he even stuck his hand down his pants to rub some after-shave on his underwear.

*What the fuck am I expecting?*

On his way to Aaron’s apartment, Billy stopped at a supermarket to shoplift a bottle of tequila. He picked Aaron up at five, and they grabbed some supper at a taco stand before making the short drive to the beach. Billy put on his Suicidal Tendencies cassette and made Aaron laugh when he shouted along to the lyrics of ‘Institutionalized’ as they sped down the Pacific Coast Highway. Normally, Billy never let any of his friends lay a finger on his tape deck, but he didn’t really mind when Aaron ejected the hardcore punk tape and replaced it with one of his own: Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five.

On a solitary stretch of beach half a mile from the Santa Monica Pier, they talked for two hours, getting increasingly drunk on tequila as they watched the sun set. Since it was starting to get dark and nobody was around to stare at them, they ended up stripping down to their underwear and sprinting across the sand into the ocean, shouting with surprise at how cold the water was and laughing as they splashed each other. Without realizing how they got there, they found themselves fifteen feet from the shore and waist-deep in the cold, salty water.

When Aaron gave him a playful shove, Billy almost fell over and instinctively grabbed onto Aaron’s arm to regain his balance, coughing a little when he swallowed some saltwater.

“Sorry,” Billy apologized as he quickly pulled his hand away from Aaron’s well-muscled bicep.

“It’s cool, man,” Aaron replied quietly, looking directly at Billy with dark eyes that reflected the orange light from the setting sun.

For a moment they just stared at each other as the waves lapped around them; they dug their feet into the sand and braced themselves each time the relentless ocean current tried to drag them further from the shore.

“I know what you are, B.”

*What the fuck does that mean? He knows I’m an alpha?*

Emboldened by all the alcohol in his system, Billy smiled encouragingly. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Aaron repeated simply, without bothering to elaborate further.

“Well,” Billy chuckled and ran his fingers through his wet hair, stalling for time. “I’m a lot of things, so you’re gonna have to be a little more specific, dude.”

“You’re different… like me.”

*Wait, is he an alpha, too? No way. Wouldn’t I have noticed?*

Aaron’s dimples deepened as his full lips curved into an enigmatic little smirk. “Are you blushing right now, or is that just sunburn? It’s hard to tell with y’all, sometimes.”

Billy glanced down in sudden surprise when he felt Aaron take one of his hands beneath the dark water and give it a firm squeeze.

*Oh my God… I’m such an idiot. Of course he’s not an alpha.*
Aaron took a step closer, near enough that Billy could see the curly tips of his dark lashes. “You really gonna make me spell it out for you, B?”

_He… he likes me. Aaron is gay._

Eled by the sudden revelation, Billy leaned over and kissed him hungrily. Even with his eyes closed, Billy felt like a blindfold he’d been wearing his entire life had finally been lifted. He didn’t know if it was love, lust, or something in between; all he knew for certain was that Aaron wasn’t making any attempt to pull away, and that despite the strong drink and the cold water, both of their dicks were hard as rocks beneath the waves.

_Oh, fuck._

Aaron was a gifted kisser: his lips were unbelievably soft and plump, and he tasted deliciously briny, like saltwater and tequila. He looped his strong arms around Billy’s neck and smiled when the younger boy’s curious hands wandered down to explore the ample curves of his ass.

_Who the hell needs a soulmate, anyway? I’ve got everything I could possibly want, right here._

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Ramones- California Sun
Billy wasn’t sure what to expect when he saw Aaron at basketball practice the day after their first spontaneous kiss at the beach. They had both been more than a little tipsy and he couldn’t help wondering if it was just a one-time thing he was meant to forget about and never mention again. 

*As if I could forget something like that...*

But once again, Aaron took him by surprise, this time by leaving a note in his locker inviting him to a game of one-on-one that night in a local park. Billy hoped that Aaron wanted to do more than practice passes, crossovers and lay-ups.

He wasn’t disappointed.

The basketball courts at the North Hollywood park soon became a regular meeting spot for the pair. They’d shoot hoops together for an hour or two, then check to make sure the coast was clear; if nobody was in sight, they’d sit on a graffiti-covered bench beneath the shadow of a large oak tree. All they did the first few nights was talk and kiss, but it didn’t take long for them to progress to heavy petting and hand jobs.

The frequent trysts in the park were exciting, but they didn’t always end on a high note. Even though the boys met after sunset, when most people had already left the park, it was still a public place where anyone could potentially walk by, and the shady oak tree only provided so much privacy. On one particularly awkward occasion, an old homeless woman had ruined the romance by shuffling past them at the same moment Aaron came in Billy’s fist; she glanced over at them briefly and let out a raspy laugh before proceeding to dig noisily through the contents of a nearby trash can. Muttering curses under his breath, Aaron had yanked his shorts back up and bolted, leaving Billy behind to figure out where to wipe his sticky fingers.

Billy, like many teenagers, was in a hurry to start having sex, but finding the right time and location proved difficult. They couldn’t go to Aaron’s apartment, because his invalid granny lived there and she was almost always home. Billy had suggested that they go to his house, but Aaron was strangely resistant to the idea, even when Billy assured him his father was a workaholic who came home late almost every evening.

The Camaro seemed like an obvious solution to their dilemma, but it didn’t have an especially spacious interior; despite the fact that both boys were under six feet tall, it would be a very tight squeeze. Billy almost wished he had a Volkswagon van instead of the sleek sports car.
They’re like motel rooms on wheels… I’d have plenty of space to bend him over in the back of one of those hippie-mobiles.

The North Hollywood Huskies won their last basketball game of the semester on a warm night in early June. Aaron was in a particularly jubilant mood; in addition to playing a decisive role his team’s victory, he was about to graduate in a few days, so his perfect dimples and white teeth were on near-constant display. The coach treated the entire team to Pizza Hut, but after wolfing down a few slices, Aaron and Billy snuck away from the festivities to have a private celebration of their own.

Billy parked his Camaro at the end of a very dark cul-de-sac with no street lights, and after half an hour of talking, listening to the radio and passing a joint back and forth, they started kissing and pawing at each other.

Am I finally gonna get lucky tonight?

Billy’s mouth twisted into a cocky smirk when Aaron breathlessly suggested that they relocate to the back seat, where they might have a little more room. There wasn’t much room at all, of course, and they both chuckled uncertainly when it became clear that horizontal positions would not be possible on the narrow, uncomfortable backseat.

Should’ve asked Mom and Dad for a VW van… shit, it's cramped back here.

Impatient and determined to make the evening a success, Billy tugged off Aaron’s pants and pulled him onto his lap, kissing him the entire time. He wanted the older boy to see him as a suave, confident lover and not a bumbling virgin, but his hands were shaking so much that Aaron had to help him tear open the condom wrapper.

Stop embarrassing yourself and act like a fucking alpha for once, man. Show him you know what you’re doing.

But, of course, Billy didn’t know what he was doing, and neither did Aaron. They didn’t have lube or lotion, so Billy rubbed a generous quantity of spit on his condom-clad cock and prayed for the best.

It didn’t work. Despite all the impassioned kissing and caressing, Aaron couldn’t relax; he bent down to conceal his face against Billy’s shoulder and tensed at every clumsily attempted intrusion.

Is it supposed to be this goddamn difficult? He doesn’t seem like he’s really enjoying this.

Billy stubbornly pressed harder, feeling perverse and sadistic for refusing to give up despite Aaron’s obvious discomfort.

If he really wanted this, wouldn’t his body just… let it happen?

"You gotta relax." Billy attempted a soothing whisper, but it sounded more like an irritated growl. "Just... breathe."

"I am breathing," Aaron muttered through clenched teeth, holding his breath. "And I am relaxing."

Billy didn't know if he wanted to laugh or scream in frustration. "If you were relaxing, I'd be balls-deep by now. Oh, shit... are you crying? You want me to stop?"

"Fuck you, I ain't crying."
“I’m sorry,” Billy mumbled against Aaron’s sweaty collarbone, stilling his hips. “I, uh… I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“It’s cool, B…” Aaron sighed as he slid off Billy’s lap, glancing over at him with a weary smile. “I dunno what’s so tricky about it, either; your dick isn’t that big.”

“Oh… thanks a lot, man.” Billy chuckled half-heartedly, his pride wounded by Aaron’s casual jab and unnerving expression.

*He looks… relieved. Like he’s glad we stopped. Jesus Christ, this isn’t how it was supposed to go.*

Frustrated and still maddeningly hard, he peeled off his condom and pulled Aaron’s head down onto his lap, but the older boy made a face, pointing out that Billy’s dick both smelled and tasted like latex. In the end, they licked their palms and settled for jerking each other off, kissing and panting until their fingers were sticky and the Camaro windows were completely covered in fog.

*One day, I’m gonna get him in my bed, and we’ll have all the space we need… we’ll use an entire goddamn tub of Vaseline, if that’s what it takes to open his heavenly gates, and I’ll fuck him ’til he moans my name louder than any lame omega bitch ever could. One day, everything will fit together and make sense. One day, he might even love me.*

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Mitch Murder- The Touch
Caged Bird

Chapter Notes

“Hoping for the best, prepared for the worst, and unsurprised by anything in between.”

-‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ by Maya Angelou

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June

A few days into summer vacation, Billy’s father came home from work with an overstuffed bag of Kentucky Fried Chicken. He whistled cheerfully as he set hot, fragrant containers of chicken, biscuits, and mashed potatoes on the kitchen table, and instructed his son to fetch plates and paper napkins.

Billy was immediately suspicious; his father usually came home from work much later, and they typically just ate microwave dinners, canned soup or bowls of cereal for their evening meal. He couldn’t imagine why Neil was acting so strangely.

Why’s he whistling and splurging on take-out? I haven’t seen him like this since Mom and Emily were alive.

As they sat down to eat their supper, Neil Hargrove asked his seventeen-year-old son about school and basketball. Taken aback by the sudden fatherly interest, Billy answered as politely as he could, feeling a growing knot of suspicion in the pit of his stomach.

Why’re you buttering me up, old man? I wasn’t born yesterday, I know you wouldn’t be nice for no reason…

After another few minutes of awkwardly formal conversation, Billy received an extremely unwelcome answer to his question; he nearly choked on a mouthful of coleslaw when his father abruptly announced that he had been courting a divorcée named Susan Mayfield for the last three months.

Wait, what?

“Chew and swallow your food, for Christ’s sake,” Neil scolded, reaching over to clap his spluttering son on the back. “Let’s be civilized, here.”

Billy spat a strip of half-chewed cabbage into his napkin and balled it up in his fist until his knuckles turned white.

“B-but if she’s divorced, she can’t be a—”

“That’s right,” Neil cut him off curtly, knowing precisely what his son was going to say. “Susan isn’t like us… she’s a beta.”

Billy was lost for words. It was preferable, he reasoned, that this new woman wasn’t an omega with any soulmate potential, but it didn’t make any sense; Neil Hargrove was a snob who had always
taken immense pride in his rare alpha status, so why would he settle for a common beta woman?

Maybe he doesn’t want another soulmate... maybe he just wants someone to cook his meals, clean his house, and warm his bed.

“Her daughter’s a regular gal, too, of course,” Neil added casually as he wiped chicken grease from his mustache with a paper napkin.

“Her… her daughter?” Billy shook his head slowly, unable to believe what he was hearing. “You’re telling me this lady’s got a kid?”

“That’s right,” Neil confirmed as he poured gravy onto his potatoes; he glanced over at Billy with a dangerously placid expression, as though daring him to object. “Her daughter’s name is Maxine… she’s a smart, pretty little thing, and she enjoys skateboarding, just like you. I’m sure the two of you will get along just fine.”

Billy gaped at his father, trying to think of the best words to convey his confusion and fury.

“Close your mouth, son.” Neil’s thin lips twitched up into a wry, mocking smile. “You look like a fish.”

“So, this Marlene kid, or whatever her name is…” Billy didn’t bother trying to keep the resentment from his voice. He suspected he already knew the answer to his question, but he asked it anyway, applying disdainful air quotes to the last nine words. “What do you mean, the two of us will get along just fine?”

“Because I’ve asked Susan to marry me, which makes Maxine your soon-to-be little step-sister… try to get her name right, at least.”

Oh, Jesus. Please, no…

“Dad,” Billy began weakly, feeling increasingly queasy; he desperately hoped he was just having a nightmare, but it felt too real. “You’re kidding, right? Is… is this a joke?”

“No, it’s not a joke,” Neil admonished crossly, pausing for a few moments to chew a bite of buttermilk biscuit. “I’m rebuilding our family.”

Rebuilding our family? Sure sounds like a joke to me.

“But Dad, people aren’t… our family isn't like some house that fell down in a damn earthquake, you can’t just fucking rebuild—”

“Hey!” Neil scowled, pointing his plastic fork at his son. “Watch your language at the dinner table.”

“Sorry,” Billy mumbled resentfully.

Neil frowned down at his plate as he used the rest of his biscuit to mop up some gravy.

“I don’t know why I expected you to handle the news like a man, Billy… you were always too dramatic for a boy, even when you were a toddler. Your mother used to talk about putting you into acting classes, ‘cause you were such a loud-mouthed little ham.”

He’s got some nerve, mentioning Mom at a time like this…

“But Dad, it hasn’t even been a whole year since—”
“That’s enough, now.”

“Jesus, Dad,” Billy said, his voice cracking as it rose; he knew every thought he voiced would just get him in more trouble, but he didn’t care. “You couldn’t at least wait ’til Mom and Emily were cold in the ground to—”

Neil brought his fist down on the table hard enough to rattle the salt and pepper shakers. “I said that’s enough!”

Billy could still vividly remember the time he caught his father weeping over an album of wedding photos. It was around Christmastime, just six months earlier, and it was the first time Billy could remember seeing his father cry; Neil Hargrove had manfully dabbed at the corners of his eyes at the funeral in October, but this had been very different. He was sobbing uncontrollably, and when he noticed Billy’s presence he looked away, trying to hide his puffy, bloodshot eyes. Billy had backed out of the room as quickly as possible, nearly knocking over a lamp in his haste and feeling deeply unsettled, almost like he had caught his father masturbating.

*How is it so easy for him to go from being a crying wreck to a whistling soon-to-be groom? It’s too damn fast.*

Billy knew that it didn’t actually matter how soon his father remarried; he wouldn’t have approved even if Donna Hargrove had been dead for five years, or ten, or twenty. His beloved mother was no longer around to feel any betrayal, so Billy felt it keenly on her behalf, angrily blinking away the hot tears stinging his eyes.

“How is it so easy for him to go from being a crying wreck to a whistling soon-to-be groom? It’s too damn fast.

Billy’s chair screeched against the linoleum floor as he abruptly stood up, tossing his balled-up napkin onto the table. “Speaking of things that make me sick, this whole conversation has—”

“Shut your mouth before I shut it for you,” Neil growled in a dangerously low voice, meeting his son’s eyes as he slowly rose to his feet. “Why do you always have to make everything about yourself? Can’t you do everyone a favor and just… try to be happy?”

“I was trying!” Billy shouted from across the kitchen table, not caring if his defiance earned him a smack. “I was trying, and it was working, but then you ruined everything!”

Neil was turning red and the corner of his mustache was twitching; his patience seemed to be wearing thin.

“What did I tell you,” he said with a wry, humorless smile. “The most dramatic prima donna I ever met.”

Billy could sense the invisible waves of alpha aggression radiating from his father; he had a deeply-rooted biological response to the strong, paternal pheromones in the room which demanded
immediate respect and obedience. The junior alpha silently ceded defeat, hanging his head in
submission as he mumbled an insincere apology to his father and left the room without another word.

Asshole… goddamn traitor.

He grabbed his keys and jogged outside to his car, rubbing tears from his eyes as he fumbled around
in his glove compartment for cigarettes and angry music— Metallica never disappointed. He drove to
the nearest 7-Eleven, parked in front of a pay phone and flipped through the tattered old phone
directory until he found Aaron Washington’s number towards the back.

After six rings, an elderly-sounding woman with a Southern drawl answered the phone (Billy
correctly assumed she was Aaron’s grandmother). The woman told him that Aaron wasn’t home,
and she didn’t know where he was.

Wondering why he didn’t think of it sooner, Billy investigated the basketball courts at the park and
smiled when he spotted Aaron. The attractive point guard wasn’t alone, though; he was playing with
several other guys, some from the high school team and some Billy didn’t recognize. Aaron grinned
back at him and tried waving him over to join the game, but Billy shook his head and walked over to
the bench beneath the oak tree.

A few minutes later, Aaron called his name as he jogged over and sat down on the bench, leaving
almost three feet between them.

“What’s up, B?” Aaron’s demeanor was unusually stiff and formal, since it was only six-thirty and
there were still people all over the park; he avoided making eye contact, but his voice was gentle
with concern. “Was it your pops?”

Billy nodded and crossed his legs on the bench, idly picking at the dirty laces on one of his Converse
high-tops.

Aaron glanced around, frowning at the boys on the basketball court and the people walking their
dogs on a nearby path. “I wish all these folks would go on home already… can’t get no privacy
around here.”

Billy impulsively reached over to briefly squeeze Aaron’s hand. He wasn’t especially surprised when
the other boy quickly jerked his hand away, but Billy still felt a little embarrassed, like he was some
gross creep trying to cop a feel.

“Not here, man,” Aaron hissed, scooting several inches further down the bench. “Did… listen, did
your old man hit you, or what?”

Billy shook his head and scratched a mosquito bite on his shoulder. It occurred to him that he hadn’t
said a single word since he got to the park, so he took a deep breath and spent the next half hour
recounting everything his father had said; he told Aaron that he would soon have a new step-mother
and step-sister, neither of whom he’d ever met before in his life.

Aaron sat there on the end of the bench, listening intently and occasionally offering a sympathetic
smile. When Billy had finished telling his tale, Aaron glanced around to make sure nobody was
watching before reaching over to playfully poke the side of Billy’s stomach.

“I’ve got a joint in my pocket… I was planning on passing it around with some of those fools over
there, but I’d rather split it with you.” He cocked his head, the irresistible pair of dimples punctuating
his mischievous smirk. “What do you say, B… wanna get high at the beach?”

Billy returned his smile, still glum but grateful that he had someone in his life who at least cared
Just for a few hours, it’d be nice to pretend that this was all a crappy dream… the fried chicken and that Susan bitch and whatever her brat’s name is… I’m just gonna go have a good time at the beach with Aaron tonight and pretend all that shit doesn’t exist.

July

Susan and Maxine did exist, though, and the wedding went ahead as planned. When Billy said he wasn’t interested in attending the small ceremony, Neil threatened to take his Camaro away, so he internalized his rebellious indignation and went without further complaint.

It was a second marriage for both Susan and Neil, so they opted to marry at the Van Nuys courthouse, with only their children in attendance. Susan wouldn’t have wanted to get married in the Hargrove family’s old church, anyway— she wasn’t even Catholic.

It was one of the worst days of Billy’s life, and he would never forget the helpless rage he felt on that hot summer morning, sweating in the black suit he’d last worn to his mother’s funeral and trying not to roll his eyes as he watched Susan Mayfield become Susan Hargrove. Maxine didn’t look very happy, either, standing stiffly at the side of the small room in a teal dress with puffy polyester sleeves.

What a fucking charade.

As always, Billy wore his mother’s favorite holy medal around his neck, beneath his shirt. He didn’t consider it a lucky talisman to ward off misfortune; it certainly hadn’t done anything to protect his mother, who was wearing it when she took her final breath. It was just a tiny reminder of her to carry with him wherever he went, close to his heart and never forgotten.

Susan and Maxine officially moved in after the wedding, and it immediately felt crowded in the modest suburban house, like there were six people living there: Billy, Neil, the ghosts of Donna and Emily, and now Susan and Maxine. Billy wanted to avoid seeing his newly-inducted family members as much as possible, so he steered clear of his house during the long daylight hours and began working at a neighborhood gas station.

It’s boring as hell, but at least I’ll have a few bucks for gas and taking Aaron out.

Between Billy’s part-time summer job and Aaron’s never-ending basketball practice, the boys didn’t get to spend much quality time together. Aaron would occasionally stop by the gas station for a quick chat and a cold Coke, but he had to sneak away whenever the cantankerous manager appeared. When his shift ended, Billy would often kill time by stopping at the basketball courts in the park, where Aaron spent several hours practicing each day. The talented point guard had accepted an athletic scholarship to UCLA, and Billy knew that meant they wouldn’t be able to see each other once summer vacation ended, especially since Aaron would be living in a dorm on campus with the rest of the Bruins.

He’s gonna have no choice but to lie and pretend; if they find out he likes boys, he’ll get kicked off the team.

On the second-to-last day of July, Billy impulsively treated himself to an overpriced haircut at a fancy salon in the mall and came home with his shoulder-length hair dyed blonde and cut into two distinct tiers: a shorter layer on top, with the remainder tapering down to the nape of his neck. It
didn’t look quite as amazing and rockstar-like as he hoped, so he wasn’t in particularly high spirits when he went home that evening. His mood worsened considerably when he walked into the living room and saw his step-sister sitting on the comfortable old armchair that had once been Emily’s favorite.

_Calm down… don’t get mad, it’s just a chair._

Billy took a deep breath and silently reminded himself that there was no point in getting upset, especially over something as trivial as furniture. He continued to walk past her, prepared to completely ignore her presence, but he stopped in his tracks when he heard a muffled, high-pitched giggle.

Billy turned to stare at Maxine, arching an eyebrow imperiously. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” she answered quickly, trying to hide her grin behind the Judy Blume book she’d been reading. “Uh… nothing whatsoever.”

_She really sucks at lying._

With some difficulty, Billy swallowed the venomous words on the tip of his tongue and composed his face into a brotherly smile. “If something’s hilarious, let me in on it. I can appreciate a good joke, too, you know.”

Still peeking over the top of her paperback book, Maxine giggled again and shook her head. “No, it’s not a joke or anything like that, it’s just…”

“Just what?” Billy prompted, reaching up to run his fingers through his tapered, wavy hair, which still felt unfamiliar and slightly crisp from the various styling products the woman at the salon had used.

“Your new hair, it’s… it’s very…”

“Very what?” Billy tried to keep his voice calmly indifferent; he would rather die than admit that a thirteen-year-old girl was making him feel self-conscious and unattractive.

“Very, uh… very cool.”

_Obnoxious little shit._

“It’s a hell of a lot cooler than that stringy, orange mess on your head.” Billy scowled as he spat out the words, wishing he could’ve come up with a better retort.

_I’m not gonna let some bratty beta bitch get under my skin._

…………………

The very next day, Maxine committed a second unforgivable offense: she broke a mug that Emily had made in ceramics class. It wasn’t a particularly beautiful object, but it meant a lot to Billy; his sister had worked hard on it, and proudly presented it to their mother on Christmas back in 1981. Now it lay in pieces, large and small, scattered all over the floor.

“Oh my God, I am so sorry,” Maxine stammered as she swept up the shards with a broom. “I wasn’t paying attention, and I didn’t realize it was there, and—”

“It’s all right, hon,” Neil had said, kneeling down to help her clean up the mess. “Don’t cry, it’s just a
mug.”

Billy watched the scene unfold from the doorway, his skin crawling at the way his father coddled Maxine.

_That stupid klutz is lucky it happened when Neil and Susan were home; if it was just the two of us, I’d really give her a piece of my mind._

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Overall, Billy was having a less-than-perfect summer, considering the lingering pain of losing his mother and sister, the frustrating incompatibility of his alpha status and sexual preferences, the unwelcome intrusion of Susan and Maxine, and even the oppressive heat.

He felt a little better when Aaron praised his new blonde, layered hairstyle, though Billy had no way of knowing if his boyfriend was just saying that to be nice, nor if “boyfriend” was the best term to describe him. They saw less and less of each other as Aaron increased his hours of basketball practice and Billy picked up additional shifts at the gas station to replenish his coffers after spending so much at the salon. Some of Billy’s wages went towards taking Aaron out to taquerias and In-N-Out, but the occasional outings didn’t really feel like dates since the boys couldn’t kiss or hold hands.

_He says he likes me, but... I don’t really think he likes me as much as I like him._

August

On the hottest day of the year, Neil Hargrove casually mentioned that he and Susan had been discussing the possibility of moving to a new house. When Billy voiced his outrage and begged him to reconsider, his father just shushed him sternly.

“Nothing’s been decided for certain, so don’t start with the dramatics again.”

“But where are we gonna go, Dad? We’ll still be in L.A., right?”

Neil held up his hand for silence. “Probably not, Billy. This city gets more crowded and expensive every year, so Susan and I have been looking into employment opportunities out of state—”

“Out of state?” Billy couldn’t believe what he was hearing; he loved California, and couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. “W-which state?”

_What kind of stupid square doesn’t wanna live in Cali?_

“Don’t interrupt me again, goddamnit. Why don’t you try thinking of someone besides yourself for five seconds? Then you’d understand why Susan and Maxine might want to live someplace new without any history, where they won’t feel like trespassers.”

“They are trespassers,” Billy snapped, ignoring the _shut up and submit_ elder-alpha pheromones emanating from his father. He immediately regretted his impertinence when it earned him a swift smack across the face.

_Fuck... fuck, fuck, fuck..._

Furious at his father and himself, Billy stormed down the hall, rubbing his stinging cheek and slowing his pace as he neared the doorway of what had once been his little sister's bedroom.
“Ain’t it good to know that you’ve got a friend, when people can be so cold?”

The bedroom door was wide open and Maxine was inside, standing in front of a domed birdcage and whistling to the green parakeet inside. Carole King’s ‘You’ve Got a Friend’ played softly from a record player on the dresser.

“Is that yours?”

Startled, Maxine looked over her shoulder and froze when she saw her step-brother standing there.

“Is that yours?” He repeated, nodding towards the black LP rotating on the record player.

“Um… no, but…” Maxine opened the birdcage, reached in and pulled out a sheet of newspaper. “I asked your dad, and he said it was okay.”

“I don’t give two farts about what he says is okay.”

_That was Mom’s favorite record… why is she touching my mom’s stuff?_

“Well, I’m sorry,” Maxine said with barely-concealed exasperation. She began crumpling the dirty sheet of newspaper so it would fit in the small wicker wastebasket at her feet. “I didn’t know you’d mind so much. Are you a big Carole King fan, or something?”

“Wait a minute, is that…?” Billy narrowed his eyes suspiciously and snatched the paper from her, looking down in disgust as birdseed shells, feathers, and tiny bits of dried parakeet feces fell on his blue Vans sneakers. “I was _wondering_ where my copy of the LA Weekly went… you took it so your stupid pet could have something to piss and shit all over, huh?”

Maxine’s brow furrowed and she crossed her arms defensively across her chest. “Well, jeez, I didn’t think anyone would _mind_, it was just sitting there on top of a big pile of—”

“Well, _I_ mind, Maxine… I mind.” Billy carelessly tossed the soiled LA Weekly on the bedroom floor and wiped his hands on his jeans.

“I’ve told you a million times, it’s _Max_,” she muttered under her breath, kneeling down to put the dirty paper in the wastebasket. “Besides, isn’t the LA Weekly, like, free?”

“That’s not the point, _Maxine_.”

_Annoying little smart-ass…_

Billy glanced around the once-familiar room, scowling when he noticed that his sister’s old ‘Twice Upon a Time’ movie poster had been taken down and replaced with a ‘70s-looking print of a teenage girl skateboarding on a half-pipe.

“Who the hell is that?”

“Oh, that’s Laura Thornhill!” Maxine brightened as she looked up at the long-haired girl dressed in corduroy shorts and kneepads. “Laura was a Cali legend, and she—”

“Yeah, whatever,” Billy cut her off brusquely. “So, what did you do with my sister’s poster? Did you use it to catch your bird’s shit, too?”

“What?” Maxine’s blue eyes widened in alarm. “No, it’s just that I haven’t seen ‘Twice Upon a Time’ before, so I, um… I rolled it up and put it under the bed. Do you, uh… want to hang it up in your room?”
“No,” Billy responded dryly, shaking his head as he walked closer to her. “What I want is for you to quit messing with stuff that isn’t yours.”

Not that it really even matters... if we’re moving away from here, everything’s gonna have to get taken down and packed up.

Maxine took a few steps backwards, stopping when she was on the other side of the birdcage. “You’re still mad about the mug, right? Look, I’m really sorry about that, I tried to glue the pieces together, but—”

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men, couldn’t put Humpty together again,” Billy murmured, watching his step-sister through the cage and slowly dragging his fingers along the thin metal bars to make an eerie sound, like piano wires.

I don’t want her here... I want my real sister back, not this red-headed imposter and her stupid, sloppy bird.

Billy was suddenly overcome by a wicked urge. He reached through the door of the birdcage, which Maxine had left open while she changed the newspaper, and wrapped his fingers around the green parakeet, pinning its wings to its sides and withdrawing it carefully.

Maxine let out an audible little gasp. “W-what are you doing?”

Billy ignored her and stared down at the bird, which chirped curiously and swiveled its brightly colored head to get a better look at its captor; he could feel its tiny heart beating rapidly beneath his fingers.

“I said, what are you doing, Billy? Are you listening?”

Billy smiled down at the beautiful bird; he had always liked animals, but his father had never let him have a pet of his own.

Why does she get everything he never let me have? Why does he like her more than he ever liked me?

Billy gently stroked the bird’s head with his thumb. “Relax... I’m just saying hello to this cute little dude.”

“It’s a girl,” Maxine corrected testily, resting her hands on her hips. “Her name is Kiwi. My dad got her for me.”

If your precious daddy’s such a great guy, why don’t you go live with him?

Observing that the bedroom window was open, Billy quickly crossed over to it and used his free hand to pop the entire screen out of the window frame; it tumbled down into the brown, dried-up flowerbed with a soft thunk.

“Billy?” Maxine’s voice rose steadily in both pitch and volume. “What the hell are you doing, Billy? Why’d you mess up my window?”

It’s not your window... none of this belongs to you.

Sensing the distress of its mistress, the parakeet suddenly chomped on the little web of skin between Billy’s thumb and forefinger.
“Ow!” Startled, he looked down at the bird, which returned his gaze with beady, unblinking black eyes. “Feisty little fucker, aren’t you?”

“Billy, please don’t hurt her, I’m serious.”

“Will you pipe down, already? Jeez, nobody’s hurting anyone.”

She probably thinks I’m the kind of psychopath who gets off on squeezing the life out of innocent creatures. She thinks she knows me, but she doesn’t know shit.

“Billy, shut the window, or she might fly away. What the hell is wrong with you?” Maxine was sounding increasingly panicked; she lunged at her step-brother and tried to take the bird from him. “Please put Kiwi back in her cage!”

“Is that really what she wants, though?” Billy mused, raising his captive high into the air, beyond Maxine’s frantic reach; he could feel the parakeet wriggling and pecking at his fingers. “You wanna go back to jail, little buddy, or you wanna be free, soaring through the sky the way God intended?”

Fuck it.

When Billy tossed the bird out the open window, Maxine shoved him aside roughly and leaned out into the backyard, calling out to her pet.

“Kiwi, where are you? Please come back!”

It was no use: the little green parakeet had flown away and was nowhere in sight.

“I can’t believe you did that.” Maxine’s voice quavered as she looked over her shoulder at Billy with red, watery eyes. “Was… was it just because I laughed at your hair and broke a dumb mug?”

“I don’t give a shit about any of that,” Billy lied. His step-sister’s pink, tear-streaked face was making him more uncomfortable than he cared to admit, so he walked back over to the empty birdcage and fiddled idly with the little door. “Look, I just did that bird a huge favor. You think it was happy, spending its whole damn life in this dinky, depressing cage?”

Maxine didn’t answer. She squeezed her eyes shut, causing two tears to roll down her freckled cheeks.

“Oh, and another thing,” Billy added, closing the tiny wire latch on the birdcage door. “You’re gonna tell your mom that Kiwi escaped by accident, alright?”

“Or what?” Maxine asked miserably, staring out the open window.

“Well, you’re fresh out of birds, so…” Billy glanced around the room for something else his step-sister might value, and his eyes landed on the Madrid skateboard propped up in the corner. “If you disobey me and tattle, I might have no choice but to start breaking things… starting with your board.”

“You wouldn’t,” Maxine whispered, her eyes widening in horror. “M-my dad bought it for me—”

Billy stuck his bottom lip out in a grotesquely exaggerated pout. “Oh, boo-hoo.”

Fuck your stupid dad and all the shit he bought you… maybe if he’d been a better husband, his dumb wife and bratty daughter wouldn’t be squatting in my house right now.

“Just don’t be a little tattle-tale bitch, and you’ve got nothing to worry about.” Sensing her seething
rage, Billy suddenly remembered the strange Australian movie he had watched with Aaron one night at the local drive-in. “Try not to look so mad, Mad Max.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Why not? It suits you.”

“I hate you so much,” she muttered darkly before clambering out of the open window to begin searching for her lost pet.

“Right back at you, sister dearest,” Billy called, slamming the window shut behind her.

That bird’s never coming back… and if it does, it’s a fucking idiot and deserves to be locked up in a cage.

Billy pulled his mother’s old Carole King LP off the record player, tucked it under his arm and stormed out of the room, trying to ignore the annoying twinge of guilt that wouldn’t stop pricking at the frayed edge of his conscience.

Chapter End Notes

 Recommended listening: Sex Pistols- No Feelings
"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves... for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' sayeth the Lord."
-Romans 12:19

See the end of the chapter for more notes

August

Max Mayfield couldn’t decide what to do about her problematic step-brother.

One thing’s for sure, though: I’m gonna hate that stupid jerk for as long as I live.

During the two hours she spent searching the neighborhood for her lost green parakeet, Max stewed in her loathing and debated whether or not to simply tell her mother and step-father that Billy had deliberately set her beloved pet bird loose and then threatened to break her skateboard if she tattled.

He’s hardly the apple of his dad’s eye… Neil would definitely believe me and punish that blond butt-face, no question.

Max was stubborn and proud, though, preferring to do things independently and on her own terms; she didn’t want to resort to being a “little tattle-tale bitch”, as Billy had phrased it. She wanted to bide her time and think of some clever way to exact her revenge.

But what?

Deep in thought, she continued to walk up and down the street, whistling and calling out “Kiwi!” until her throat was hoarse. She asked every neighbor she passed if they had seen a green parakeet flying around, and refused to give up on her search until the sky darkened and she heard her mother shouting her name from the Hargrove’s front porch.

“Where’d that stupid bird go?” Max muttered to herself, angrily kicking a rock down the sidewalk as she trudged back home. “Doesn’t she want to be found?”

Maybe Billy was right… maybe she never liked living in a cage. How do I know she isn’t happier right now, free and flying through the trees somewhere?

Susan Hargrove was very disappointed when she heard about her daughter’s lost parakeet.

“You were supposed to keep its wings trimmed, honey,” she chided sternly. “I told your father a pet was a silly idea; you’re still too young for that much responsibility.”

Max’s heart constricted at the mention of her father; she missed him terribly. Even though he lived in the Valley just like them, she only got to see him every other weekend because he was always so busy with work (and, she suspected, his young girlfriend). He was the polar opposite of her new step-father; where Neil was strict and humorless, Max’s father was laid-back and funny. When she visited him, he always went overboard trying to make sure she had a terrific time: he gave her dozens of quarters for playing video games at the arcade, let her eat Pringles and ice cream for dinner, didn’t
mind if she stayed up past midnight watching R-rated movies, and bought her wonderful gifts like the skateboard and the parakeet named Kiwi.

_I wish he and Mom could’ve tried harder to get along… they used to be so happy, so why did they just give up on each other?_

Unfortunately, the things that Max loved about her father seemed to be the same qualities her mother detested. Max remembered how her parents used to argue late at night, when they thought she was already asleep. She could still recall how angrily her mother had shouted when she found out Mr. Mayfield was taking Max to an empty parking lot and teaching her how to drive.

“For God’s sake, she’s just a child! What in the world were you thinking? Little girls don’t need to know how to drive!”

Max dreaded having to tell her dad that she had lost the parakeet he bought for her. She didn’t want him to think she was irresponsible, but she didn’t want to come clean and worry him by talking about her cruel step-brother, either.

He’s already got enough on his plate with the divorce and his job and everything… I’m gonna figure out a way to deal with Billy on my own.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to worry about facing him when she returned to the house that evening, because he had already left.

Good riddance… I wish he’d never come back.

Her mother announced that dinner would be ready soon, but Max politely declined; the smell of last night’s reheated tuna noodle casserole wafting from the kitchen wasn’t especially tempting.

“Sorry, Mom, but I’m just not very hungry… is it okay if I go to the arcade for an hour?”

Susan Hargrove pursed her lips uncertainly. “Well… is your room clean, at least?”

“Yeah, Mom.”

_It’s not really my room, though… it’s Emily’s._

Even though she didn’t believe in ghosts, Max despised having to sleep in a dead girl’s bedroom; it gave her the creeps, and she privately hoped her mother and step-father would someday move to a different house in the Valley.

_Living closer to the beach would be great, but I guess they can’t afford that._

After receiving reluctant permission from her mother to skip dinner, Max hastened to the little bedroom that would never feel like her own, where she hunted for quarters and grabbed her skateboard. Whenever she was feeling overwhelmed by stress or anger, her favorite place to go to let off steam was the local arcade. She was proud of her top-ranking scores; ‘Dig Dug’ was her favorite, and she could easily spend two or three hours inflating Pookas (tomato-looking monsters with yellow goggles) until they exploded and dropping rocks on Fygars (green fire-breathing dragons).

As she skated the four blocks to the North Hollywood arcade, Max thought about her unfortunate lost bird and plotted her revenge. She had dozens of ideas for teaching Billy a lesson, each more complicated and improbable than the last. The most satisfying schemes were those that would target his vanity; Max smirked to herself when she imagined pouring some kind of powerful chemical in one of his numerous bottles of hairspray to make his hair turn green and fall out, or finding some way
to slip a strong laxative into his food that would make him crap his pants in public.

*Fun to imagine, but impossible to pull off... I’ll try to think of something more realistic.*

At the amusement arcade, Max began a new game of Dig Dug, smiling wryly as she impulsively entered her name on the console as ‘Mad Max’. As much as she hated to admit it, the moniker Billy had casually assigned her *did* sound pretty cool.

*That stupid old shit-head thinks he’s seen me when I’m mad, huh? Well, I’m gonna show him. He’s gonna be sorry he ever messed with Mad Max.*

.....................

One sweltering afternoon in late August, a golden opportunity presented itself. Max wanted to use the phone to call her father, but the long, spiral cord was stretched over twenty feet, all the way from the plastic phone cradle on the kitchen wall to Billy’s bedroom halfway down the hall, pinched tightly in his closed door.

*Who’s he talking to? Does he have a girlfriend?*

Max tiptoed to her step-brother’s bedroom door and gingerly rested her ear against it, holding her breath and listening carefully. Her curiosity intensified when she heard her own name mentioned.

“...my old man and his new wife are taking Maxine to the zoo this Saturday, so I’ll have the place to myself for a few hours... hell, no, I’m not going. I fucking hate seeing all those animals caged up like that. What? Are you kidding? Nah, you don’t wanna meet my step-sister, trust me. She’s so damn annoying... so is her stupid old mom.”

*Screw you, barf-bag. I’m not annoying, and my mom isn’t stupid or old.*

“...we can’t go to your place, right? Alright, then... why don’t you just come over here? I heard my dad saying they were gonna take off around eleven... no, they’re gonna be gone for hours, Erin, I swear... relax, it’ll be fine. Okay, see you then. Yeah, me too. Later, babe.”

*So, her name’s Erin, huh? Bet she’s the blonde cheerleader type, with big boobs and the IQ of a hamster.*

Realizing that if she lingered outside Billy’s door for much longer she’d be caught eavesdropping, Max quickly retreated to the kitchen; she pretended to be rummaging in the fridge for a Pepsi just as her step-brother strolled in to hang up the phone.

“Pass me one, too, Maxine,” he said with uncharacteristic cheerfulness, humming under his breath as he ran his fingers through his layered, blond hair.

“Sure thing, *William,*” Max answered, emphasizing the name with a retaliatory smirk as she tossed him the cold can of soda.

He caught it easily and raised an eyebrow, surprised by her rebellious retort but apparently unbothered, even though he hated being called by his full name.

“Alright, kid... touché.” Billy leaned against the counter and chuckled as he cracked open the Pepsi and took a long swig. “You caught me in a pretty decent mood, so I’ll let that one slide... but don’t push your luck, okay?”

“Whatever,” Max said airily on her way out of the kitchen. She was in unusually high spirits, too,
because an idea was rapidly taking shape in her mind.

*I can’t punish him, but his dad can. If I can pull it off, Billy won’t even have to know I planned the whole thing.*

Max was aware of how strict her step-father was about people visiting the house when no adults were home to supervise. She had once overheard him telling Billy that he was forbidden to have any of his friends or girlfriends over when nobody else was home; her step-father would be livid if he found out that Billy had let a girl come over for some afternoon delight while everyone was at the zoo. Max hypothesized that if she could contrive some way for Neil to catch Billy and his mystery date in the act, her step-brother would be grounded for at least a month and think twice before tormenting her again.

She grinned at the mental image of Billy leaping out of bed in nothing but his tighty-whities, getting tangled up in a sheet and falling flat on his face as his father bellowed at him.

*He’ll be so embarrassed… he deserves worse, really, but this’ll be a good start.*

On Saturday, Max was filled with giddy nerves as she got ready to leave for the zoo, excited about her secret plot. Just like Billy had told his girlfriend on the phone, Neil and Susan were ready to leave by eleven o’clock. An accident on the freeway resulted in the journey to the Los Angeles Zoo taking twice as long as usual, and it was almost noon by the time they pulled into the large parking lot.

*Okay, Billy and Erin have had plenty of time to get drunk and start their make-out session or whatever… it’s showtime.*

Max groaned, slumped down in the backseat of Neil’s truck and wrapped her arms around herself.

Susan twisted around in her seat and looked at Max with concern. “What’s the matter, sweetie? Are you okay?”

“N-no… I don’t feel so good, Mom.”

“Uh-oh…” Susan glanced over at her husband and patted his arm. “Honey, I think she might be carsick.”

Mr. Hargrove stopped the truck and glanced in his rearview mirror. “Should we go home, Maxine?”

*Ding, ding, ding…*

“Y-yeah,” Max mumbled weakly, curling up into a ball on the backseat and closing her eyes. “I’m sorry we came all this way for nothing… I promise I’ll try not to ralph.”

“That’s okay, baby.” Susan Hargrove smiled sympathetically at her daughter. “We’ll go home and put you to bed, okay? Maybe some ginger ale will make your tummy feel better.”

Max nodded without opening her eyes, her heart beating faster in anticipation as she felt the pickup truck turning around to exit the zoo parking lot.

“If you need to throw up, let me know so I can pull over,” her step-father said with unusual gentleness in his voice.
“Okay, Neil… I’m so sorry about this.”

“It’s fine,” he assured her. “We didn’t pay for the tickets yet, so there’s no harm done. I’m not mad, pumpkin.”

_Not yet, anyway… you will be when we get home, if everything goes right._

Silently congratulating herself on her acting skills, Max continued to pretend she had a terrible stomachache as she shuffled up the Hargrove’s driveway. She leaned wearily against the wrought-iron porch railing as the front door was unlocked, then quickly made her way down the hall; there was reggae music playing from behind Billy’s closed bedroom door, and she could faintly smell weed, or cigarette smoke, or perhaps a little of both.

“Could you be loved? And be loved?”

Max knelt on the floor to press her cheek against the floorboards; there was about an inch and a half of space between the bottom of the door and the hallway floor, and it was just enough to peek inside Billy’s room.

_I don’t wanna see anything gross, but I have to make sure something’s going on in there before I tell Neil…_

She could see Billy sitting up in bed with his arms folded behind his head and his eyes closed; he was biting his bottom lip and appeared to be breathing heavily. He had a flannel sheet pulled up to his shirtless waist, and Max’s eyes widened when she realized someone was on the bed with him, concealed under the sheet but obviously doing… something.

_Oh my god, are they…? Ew! That must be his girlfriend under there, doing something gross…_

“Maxine? What are you doing down there on the floor?”

Startled, Max quickly scrambled to her feet. Neil was standing at the end of the hall with his arms crossed, looking at her curiously.

_Now’s my chance. Tell him before Billy wises up and sneaks his girlfriend out the window._

Max lowered her voice to a whisper and pointed at the door. “I think there’s someone in there with him.”

“What?” Neil’s forehead furrowed as he hastened to her side. “Someone’s in there?”

“Yeah, I think he might have a girl in his bed.” Max kept her voice as soft as possible, preferring that Billy didn’t hear her.

“Billy!” Neil barked loudly, rapping on the door with his knuckles. “Open up right now, young man. I mean it.”

Max smirked when she heard muffled whispers and swear words from behind the door, along with a thump, like someone had just fallen out of bed.

Neil turned to his step-daughter. “I thought you didn’t feel well, Maxine… why don’t you go to your room and lie down until you feel better? There isn’t anything going on behind this door that little girls should see. Run along, now.”
Even though she wished her stepfather would let her stay to witness the spectacle of Billy’s humiliation, Max nodded obediently and continued down the hall. She could hear her mother in the nearby kitchen, turning on the radio and noisily setting dishes on the counter to begin preparing lunch; Max closed the door that connected the end of the hallway to the kitchen.

_I wanna be able to hear what’s going on with Billy and Neil and what’s-her-face in there._

Max hovered in the doorway of her bedroom, just out of Neil’s line of sight and smiling to herself as she listened.

“Billy, I’m not gonna tell you again… I swear, if I have to break this door down, you’ll be paying for a new one out of your own pocket, so tell whatever whore you’ve got in there to make herself decent and get the hell outta here!”

_Is he really gonna have to kick down the door? This is even more exciting than I’d hoped…_

Billy must have relented a few moments later, because Max heard the click of the door opening, soon followed by Neil’s voice raised in shock and anger.

“What the hell is this?”

*What’s he talking about?*_

Wishing she could see what was happening, Max cautiously poked her head out into the hallway.

“Dad, calm down…”

“Don’t tell me to calm down. This is a goddamn disgrace.”

“Come on, Dad, just let Erin leave—”

“Erin, huh?” Neil’s voice was thick with scorn and disgust. “Is… Erin the buck or the bitch in this unnatural twosome? No, never mind, don’t tell me… I might vomit.”

_Huh? What the hell is going on in there?_

Max was thoroughly puzzled. She had no idea what her step-father meant by “buck or bitch” or “unnatural twosome”. Overwhelmed by curiosity, she crept down the hall, keeping her feet close to the walls so her footsteps wouldn’t make the old floorboards creak.

“Jesus Christ, Dad, you can’t just say shit like tha—”

“I can say whatever I want, you uppity pervert, and I’ll thank you not to use the Lord’s name in vain. Jesus would weep if He looked down from heaven and saw this, and so would your mother, God rest her soul.”

*What…?*_

“But, Dad, I—”

“Enough!” Neil shouted. “What kind of alpha are you, anyway? I never saw anything so pathetic!”

_Alpha? Like a wolf? I don't get it..._
“And Erin, or whatever your name is… you need to collect your shit and get the hell out of here, you little pillow-biting beta spook.”

Why would anyone bite a pillow?

Max didn’t understand what Neil was saying, and she hated feeling so confused and clueless. She didn’t have long to ponder what “spook” or “beta” could possibly mean, though, because a moment later there was a loud crash in the room.

“Erin, stop! C’mon, quit it, let’s just leave!”

Huh? What’s going on? Billy’s girlfriend isn’t… she’s not attacking Neil, is she?

Throwing caution to the wind, Max peeked around the doorway into Billy’s room. Her eyes widened when she saw her step-father flat on his back on the floor, with a black teenage boy she had never seen before bending over him, gripping a fistful of Neil’s shirt with one hand and hitting him with the other. Billy was tugging on the mysterious boy’s bare shoulders, trying to pull him away.

Billy’s hair was wild and messy and he looked frightened. “Get off! He’s not worth it, dude, he was riling you up on purpose! C’mon, stop!”

“Oh, my God…” Max whispered, raising her hand to her mouth as the shocking realization crashed over her like a wave. “There was never any Erin… it was Aaron.”

What… what was Billy doing with a boy in his bed? Is Billy… gay?

Raising his arms over his face to block the incoming blows, Neil suddenly noticed his petrified step-daughter standing in the doorway.

“Maxine! You’ve gotta… nng, gotta do something—”

Max couldn’t think clearly; she had never seen a fight like this in real life before, and it seemed unreal, like something from a movie. “Sh-should I go get Mom?”

I'm sure Neil wouldn't just let someone beat him up… that wouldn't make any sense.

“No!” Neil’s face was flushed with anger and there was a little blood trickling from his nose onto his mustache. “What’s Susan gonna do about it? Call the police, before this animal kills me! Go on!”

Billy stopped tugging on Aaron long enough to look over at his step-sister with pure, undisguised fear in his eyes. “Don’t do it, Max! Don’t you fucking dare!”

Max took a few uncertain steps backwards, retreating further into the relative safety of the hallway. The mysterious, shirtless teenager was still pummeling Neil, occasionally calling the older man a “punk-ass cracker” or “sack of shit”; his dark features were contorted in fury, and he looked like an athlete, with powerful arms and a muscular torso. Neil appeared to be no match for him, and even Billy wasn’t able to drag him off.

W-what should I do?

“Go, Maxine! Call the police, this is— go!”

Scared and confused, Max turned to sprint down the hall. She found her mother hard at work in the kitchen, busily preparing lunch. Between the bacon sizzling loudly in a skillet on the stovetop and
the oldies blaring from the radio on the counter, Susan Hargrove was blissfully unaware of the violent, dramatic scene unfolding in the back of the house.

"Feeling any better, sweet pea? I’m making club sandwiches; they'll be ready soon.” She glanced over her shoulder and frowned as Max dashed to the phone on the wall. “What’s going on?"

"No time to explain, Mom." Max may not have liked her new step-father very much, but that didn’t mean she wanted him to get beaten into a coma.

She hadn’t even finished dialing 911 when the sound of footsteps pounding down the hallway made her pause. Billy burst into the kitchen, ran to Max’s side and yanked the phone out of her hand.

"He's gone, okay?" Billy panted, his cheeks flushed. "Don't call the cops, he... he's leaving."

Sure enough, Max could hear the front door opening and slamming closed; she went to the kitchen window and peeked outside just in time to see the mysterious young man sprinting down the driveway and disappearing from view; he had put his t-shirt back on at some point. She could still hardly believe that he had been the same person who was under the sheets with Billy less than ten minutes earlier.

*I feel so stupid… but how the heck was I supposed to have known?*

"What's going on?" Max's mother piped up, switching off the kitchen radio and resting her hands on her hips. "Who's gone? Who's leaving?"

"Don't worry about it, Susan," Billy muttered darkly. "It's really nobody's business."

"Well, where's your father?" Susan persisted. "Will somebody please tell me what's going on?"

They all looked up sharply when Mr. Hargrove appeared in the doorway, pinching the bridge of his nose and looking infuriated.

"Where'd he go? Did you call the police, Maxine?"

Max shook her head and glanced over at Billy. "The guy just left, Neil, so-"

"He left?" Neil's brow furrowed in anger. "Well, where'd he go, goddamnit?"

*Jeez... you told him to leave, and he left, so just let it go.*

"Oh, Neil, honey... are you okay?" Frowning with concern, Susan rushed to the freezer and pulled out a bag of frozen lima beans. She offered it to her husband, who grudgingly pressed it against his bruised cheek. "These kids won't tell me what happened... did you ask Maxine to call the police about something?"

"I did, but..." Neil winced as he transferred the bag of frozen beans to the other side of his face. "If the little criminal ran off already, I suppose there isn't much we can do about it."

He turned to his son, who was staring out the kitchen window and looking deeply troubled. "That boy is never, ever setting foot in this house again, do you understand?"

Billy nodded glumly.

"I don't want you spending any more time with him. If I ever see him come within ten yards of you, I will call the police and have his ass sent to prison, is that clear?"
Billy nodded again, turning his face away so they couldn't see it.

Is he... is he gonna cry?

Max stood silently at the side of the room with her mother, feeling strangely sick to her stomach. The irony that her fake stomachache had turned into a real one because of the unexpected turn of events was not lost on her.

None of this would've happened if it wasn’t for me... if I hadn’t pretended to be sick, I’d be at the zoo right now with Mom and Neil, eating a snow cone and looking at all the cool animals, instead of being stuck in this weird, tense situation.

Susan reached over to touch her husband's shoulder. "Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you to the hospital, just to be certain your nose isn’t broken?"

“I’ll be fine, honey... it’s not broken, just a little sore. Don’t fret so much."

“Yes, Neil.” Max’s mother lowered her voice to a worried whisper and glanced over at Billy, who was still staring out the window. “Is he going to be okay, though?”

“I can hear you, Susan,” Billy muttered quietly, without turning away from the window. “And I’m gonna be just peachy, thanks.”

“Watch your tone, boy,” Neil snapped. “I’ve had it up to here with your insufferable attitude.”

Max’s mother looked at her husband with concern. “Is there anything I can do to help, Neil? What in the world happened back there in Billy’s room, anyway? Was he... smoking marijuana with one of his friends?”

Stop being nosy, Mom...

“Nothing a decent, God-fearing woman like yourself should worry about.” Neil smoothed his palms down the front of his shirt, which was badly wrinkled after the fight. “It was just something... unsavory that I’d rather not discuss.”

Billy mumbled something inaudible.

“I said shut up!” Neil shouted at him, making Max and her mother flinch. He approached his son and held out his palm. “You’re grounded, so hand over your keys. You can ride your skateboard to work, and if you mouth off again, I’ll take that, too.”

Billy wordlessly reached in the pocket of his Levi’s and handed over the keys to his Camaro.

“So,” Neil continued, glaring at his son’s back as he tucked the keys into his own pocket. “I’ve made my decision... we’re moving to Indiana.”

Wait, what?

Max looked over at her step-father, not wanting to believe her ears. “All of us?”

“Oh course, Maxine. You, me, your mother, and Mister Grounded-Until-Further-Notice over there.” Neil jabbed his thumb derisively in the direction of his son, whose shoulders seemed to be shaking slightly.

Wow, I think he might be crying.
Susan smiled and gave her daughter’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “A fresh start in a new town sounds exciting, don’t you think, sweetie?”

Max frowned skeptically; she didn’t think Indiana sounded remotely exciting. “Why do we have to move so far away, Mom?”

“Well, we were looking into a few places that were a little closer, like Phoenix, but…”

“We were also looking into Indiana,” Neil finished. “And after today’s absurdities, I’ve made up my mind. We’re getting the hell out of this overpriced, libertine cesspool of a state as soon as possible… we might even be able to move at the end of next month. October at the latest.”

That soon? I thought we weren’t gonna go anywhere ’til next year or something…

Max was still struggling to process everything, from the incident with Billy and his secret boyfriend to the revelation about moving to the middle of nowhere. “W-what about school, and my friends?”

“You’ll make new friends,” Neil said dismissively. “And one public school’s as good as another… hell, the schools in Indiana are probably better, because most of the kids and teachers there are actually American, unlike here.”

What the heck? What does he mean by “American”?

“I’m thirteen, Mom… you don’t have to say ‘tummy’ anymore.

You’d better go to your room, too, Billy.” Neil took the bag of frozen lima beans off his face and went to put it back in the freezer. “Oh, and be nicer to your little sister, for Christ’s sake.”

Jeez, why’d he have to say that? Billy’s gonna think I was complaining or something…

“Fine, Dad.”

“What?” Neil asked sharply.

“Yes, sir.”

Susan Hargrove looked over at her step-son, who continued to stare out the window. “Billy, maybe you could, um… show Maxine some skateboard moves or something one of these days, when you’re both feeling better and it isn’t quite so hot.”

As if I’d need that dumbass to show me how to skate… he’s way out of practice, and I could totally kick his ass.

“Just make sure she wears her knee-pads and doesn’t break any bones,” Susan continued with unconvincing airiness, smiling as she adjusted the barette in her long, red hair.

Please stop talking, Mom.

“I’ll handle this, hon,” Neil said pleasantly, leaning over to give her a light, quick kiss on her cheek. “Say, that bacon sure smells good, is lunch ready yet?”

“Does he want anything to eat?” Mrs. Hargrove persisted, glancing uncertainly over at Billy. “I was just fixing club sandwiches, and I wasn’t sure if he was hungry—”
“He doesn’t need any lunch,” Neil cut her off smoothly, his smile thin and insincere beneath his brown mustache. “He’s about to go to his room and reflect on his bad choices until dinnertime. Isn’t that right, Billy?”

Billy nodded, looking completely miserable.

“Isn’t that right?” Neil repeated slowly.

Billy’s posture stiffened and he raised his chin. “Yes, sir.”

“That’s more like it.”

Unable to handle any more tension, Susan went to the kitchen counter to busy herself with blotting fat from the bacon and slicing tomatoes. Max knew confrontations and arguments made her mother very uncomfortable; she didn’t even like watching people get into fights in movies and television shows.

“Now,” Neil continued, addressing his son. “Go to your room and don’t even think about creeping out the window, or I’ll sell that damn Camaro of yours and the piano.”

Billy finally turned away from the window; he wasn’t quite crying yet, but he wouldn’t be able to resist for much longer, judging by his pink cheeks and trembling chin; his wet eyes were an unnaturally bright, swimming-pool blue. “Dad, you… you’d really sell Mom’s piano?”

Neil scowled, noticeably bothered by the mention of his dead first wife; he glanced over at Susan, but she had her back to them and didn’t say a word. “Nobody plays that old thing but you, and I haven’t seen you lay a finger on it in months. It’s just an oversized knick-knack collecting dust and taking up space, so why should we drag it all the way to Indiana with us? Nostalgia won’t cover our moving expenses like the cash from selling that old piano would.”

For a few moments, pure hatred flickered across Billy’s face; he blinked away the tears in his eyes and clenched his fists tightly.

God, I hope he doesn’t snap and start hitting his dad… today has been crazy enough.

“Consider the consequences, boy,” Neil growled quietly, returning Billy’s cold stare until the boy finally lowered his eyes and relaxed his fists in apparent defeat. “That’s what I thought. Now, go to your room, and remember what I said about being nice to your sister.”

“Yes, sir,” Billy mumbled resentfully as he left the room.

Max wasn’t sure what to do; she was slightly afraid of her step-brother, but she didn't want to stay in the kitchen with her angry step-father and fretful, clueless mother, either. She decided to just shut herself in her room, turn on some melancholy music and write in her journal.

She was surprised to see Billy standing in the hall, staring vacantly into his bedroom without stepping inside.

“I don’t care what my shit-for-brains dad says,” he growled quietly, turning to look at her with loathing in his eyes. "You're not my sister... a real sister would never pull that shit.”

He misses Emily. And no, I probably shouldn't have done it. But Billy's still an asshole with plenty to apologize for.

Despite the August afternoon heat, Max could sense a lingering chill in the dimly lit hallway.
"Billy, I-

“Susan mentioned something about why you guys came home so damn early. What was that about?”

Uh, oh…

Max took a few steps backwards, stalling for time as she tried to think of the best response. “I… we, uh…”

Billy approached slowly, staring at her with cold eyes and lowering his voice to a disconcertingly emotionless monotone. “Did your little tum-tum hurt too much to go to the zoo? That’s a real shame.”

“Well, I got carsick, and it… it’s so hot today,” Max stammered, edging further away from him; the old floorboards in the hall creaked beneath her weight. Through the old, thin walls, she could hear her mother switch the radio back on in the kitchen. “Mom and Neil wanted to take me home, and I didn’t know…”

Billy cocked his head and looked at her with unblinking eyes. “You don’t seem very sick to me.”

“Look, I didn’t know that you were—”

“Save it,” Billy muttered, shaking his head angrily. “What you don’t know could fill the goddamn Grand Canyon.”

“But, Billy—”

Before disappearing into his bedroom to “reflect on his bad choices”, per Neil's instructions, Billy paused to give Max another one of his signature scathing glares. “I get that you’re still pissed about the stupid bird, but you almost got someone in a shit-ton of trouble today, for no good reason… there are a certain type of people that cops don’t go easy on, and Aaron’s one of them, in case you didn’t notice. Jesus, he could've lost his scholarship over this bullshit if you'd called the police.”

Oh, crap… really?

Max could feel guilt spreading through her like poison, but she still couldn’t bring herself to apologize.

What’s the point? It wouldn’t make him feel any better, or change anything. And he’s never said 'sorry’ to me for any of the crap he’s pulled, not even once.

In the end, Max just stood silently in the hallway and flinched when Billy slammed his bedroom door hard enough to rattle the walls of the Hargrove’s old house.

....................

September

Packing for the impending move was easy for Max and her mother; they had only recently moved in, after all. Some of Max's possessions were still packed up in boxes. For dull reasons she neither understood nor cared about, the house-selling and moving process all took longer than Neil had estimated, so even though Max was registered to begin taking classes at the middle school in Hawkins, they still hadn't moved by late September.

At this rate I'm just gonna randomly have my first day of school in October, and all the teachers
will have to introduce me to the class (they'll say Maxine every time, and I'll need to correct them). Everyone's gonna wonder why I'm starting school so late. God, why does everything suck so much?

Thus far, it had been the worst summer of Max's life. Her parakeet, Kiwi, had never returned, and her birdcage was sent to Goodwill. Her relationship with her step-brother was more strained than ever; they avoided each other as much as possible. She got her first period, which stained her favorite pair of underwear and introduced her to menstrual cramps.

*If this is what being a woman is like, I'm seriously not impressed.*

Max had no way of knowing for certain, but judging by Billy's consistently sour, rancorous mood, she guessed that his secret boyfriend, Aaron, had ended the relationship.

*I can't really blame him... I don't think I'd want to be with someone if their dad hated me and called me horrible names.*

Max hoped the boys could remain friends, but she had to remind herself that it was none of her business; she wasn't supposed to care what Billy did or if he was happy. After all, he didn't seem to care very much about her happiness, she reasoned.

*I always wanted a brother or sister, but not someone as impossible as him. He definitely doesn't want to be my brother... doesn't he say that all the time? "She's not my sister"?*

Max prayed that there would at least be a decent video arcade in Hawkins, Indiana.

Chapter End Notes

Well, Billy's grim little backstory is finally over. See you in Hawkins!

Recommended listening: Mitch Murder- Breeze (there's a video with great clips of talented lady skaters that made me think of Max, especially 'cause it was filmed in California, 1978)
Lust at First Sight

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the first of several that will follow along closely with canon (so closely that there will sometimes be entire exchanges written exactly as they appeared in the show, almost like a mini-novelization). My hope is that those word-for-word passages will help anchor the story in the world of 1984 Hawkins and make my embellishments feel more canon-compliant.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tuesday, October 30th, 1984

After surviving the worst summer of his life, Billy said a painful adiós to Southern California and spent the latter half of October driving his Camaro across six states and sleeping in cheap motels. He had often fantasized about going on a cross-country road trip, but his wanderlust-fueled dreams never involved following behind a large moving truck and his father’s GMC pickup. The long, lonely journey had a strangely transformative effect on Billy; after hundreds of hours spent listening to angry music and being alone with his thoughts, he arrived in Indiana determined to stop letting his troubles drag him down. He was tired of being depressed about everything that had happened back in California—the deaths of his mother and sister, his father’s remarriage, his doomed relationship with Aaron, and his involuntary relocation to Shitsburg, Nowhere—so he packed everything away in the darkest corner of his mind and slammed the door on it all.

I’m sick of thinking about that crap.

Billy wasn’t sure what to expect in Hawkins, but he was convinced it would suck. He envisioned a tiny, boring town with more churches than street lights, populated by small-minded, pasty Jesus freaks who liked Nascar and sauerkraut casserole.

Well, at least there’ll be plenty of beer.

Unlike his step-sister, Billy had zero concerns about the extra attention that would inevitably come with starting school nearly two months late. He was an alpha, so he wouldn’t have to worry about getting bullied or sitting alone at lunch. He certainly didn’t mind making a splash and titilating the locals.

Won’t be very hard to turn heads in a shithole like this… these lame, small-town hicks won’t know what hit ‘em.

Billy was more than a little surprised on his first day of school, though, when it was his head that did some turning. It was almost eight in the morning and he had just stepped out of his Camaro when his eyes were drawn to a slender boy leaning against an expensive-looking, dark red BMW.

Holy shit, that guy has great hair.

Billy knew he couldn’t stand there gawking like a creep, so he strolled off to the school office and tried not to wonder if he would have any classes with the beautiful boy he saw in the parking lot.
As luck would have it, he did, and it didn’t take long to discover the boy’s name: Steve Harrington. Billy couldn’t believe his good fortune when he saw him walking towards the red-brick gymnasium; P.E. was definitely the best class to share with a crush, since it was the only one that involved shorts, sweating, and showers.

*I’m gonna get to see him naked, probably. Naked and soaking wet.*

Billy was pissed off when he ended up missing that day’s gym class because there had been a stupid mix-up with his P.E. uniform.

The matronly woman in charge of such matters took well over half an hour to procure a pair of green shorts for him. “I’m afraid we’re out of shirts in your size at the moment, Willy…”

“It’s Billy,” he corrected testily, growing increasingly annoyed by the distant sounds of sneakers squeaking on polished hardwood and the rhythmic thump of a basketball being dribbled down the court.

“Yes, dear. As I was saying, I’m sure we’ll be able to find you a uniform shirt by tomorrow… Thursday at the latest.”

“And in the meantime, what? Should I play in just these, with no shirt?” Billy stared at the green garment in his hand, trying not to imagine how good the boy named Steve would look in his own pair of tiny shorts.

The woman pursed her crinkled lips in obvious disapproval. “I’ve observed that the coach usually has half the boys running around with no shirts on, so don’t worry, Benny… you’ll fit right in.”

“It’s Billy,” he reiterated through clenched teeth.

“Of course, dear. Here’s your gym locker combination… you might as well familiarize yourself with where it is and make sure nobody left any old socks or athletic supporters in it from last year. Run along, now.”

After P.E., Billy was approached by a dark-haired, freckled boy who introduced himself as Tommy. Unimpressed, Billy initially thought he was just a boring beta who was unwittingly being drawn to the new alpha in town like a moth to a flame; it was a good thing, though, that Billy resisted the urge to tell Tommy to fuck off, because he turned out to be a treasure trove of stories about Steve Harrington, the mysterious beauty from that morning.

Billy had never met such an eager, annoying beta before. Tommy’s attempts to show off and demonstrate that he could be useful were pitifully obvious; when he noticed Billy’s interest pique at the mention of Steve Harrington, the mysterious beauty from that morning.

“He used to run the whole damn school,” Tommy reminisced scornfully. “That was before he got serious with his stupid girlfriend and became the lamest square in town. Steve used to be a huge party animal, too… nobody’s beat his keg stand record yet. Some dummies even called him ‘King Steve’ back in the day, believe it or not.”

*Really? I kinda think he looks more like a princess than a king…*

And that was how Tommy became the first beta in Billy’s new pack, even though he was mean, dumb, and laughed like an asthmatic hyena.
His stupid, smug face makes me want to shove him down a flight of stairs, but he seems like he might actually be useful... I don’t know why the hell I care, but I wanna hear more about this so-called ‘King Steve’.

**Wednesday, October 31st, 1984**

Naturally, Billy feigned indifference when some blushing girl gave him an invitation to a Halloween party; in truth, he was excited. He had started gathering the components of a killer costume months earlier, when he had first seen the movie trailer for ‘The Terminator’. He was even more determined to go to the party when he heard Tommy mention that someone had bought a keg, and Steve would be there.

*Time to kiss that keg-stand record goodbye, your highness, ‘cause I’m coming for it.*

Billy’s second day at Hawkins High had gone smoothly, though he was annoyed when Steve was so tardy to P.E. that the coach made him run laps on the track outside as punishment; he was impatient to see how well Steve performed on the basketball court.

*C’mon, pretty boy... you’ve gotta face me sooner or later.*

At the end of the school day, Billy had to wait for Max in the school parking lot; he couldn’t help noticing that the dark red BMW had already left. He leaned against his Camaro, smoking pensively and getting more irritable with every passing minute.

“She’d better show up soon, goddamnit...” he muttered under his breath, tilting his head back to blow a long plume of smoke into the cool autumn air.

Billy and his step-sister were still barely on speaking terms. He hated that he was expected to drive her to and from school each day like he was some kind of chauffeur, but he knew better than to refuse.

*Dad could take my car away and sell it, just like Mom’s piano. If I piss him off enough, he might actually do it, and then I’d be stuck walking everywhere or taking the bus like a goddamn loser.*

When he finally heard the familiar sound of skateboard wheels approaching, he didn’t bother turning his face to look at Max. “You’re late again.”

“Yeah, I had to get catch-up homework.”

“Jesus, I don’t care. If you’re late again, you’re skating home, do you hear me?”

He took a final drag on his cigarette before flicking it away; he flung his canvas book bag in the backseat as he climbed into his car. When he switched on the radio, ‘Wango Tango’ blared from the speakers. Billy wasn’t a huge Ted Nugent fan, but he left it on because he knew the music would annoy Max, who despised heavy metal.

“God, this place is such a shithole,” he grumbled as he guided his Camaro down a long, quiet street.

“It’s not that bad,” Max said quietly, glancing over at him with a cautious smile.

“No?” Billy had expected her to agree. Annoyed, he reached down to press the button that lowered the passenger-side window. The cold air gusting into the car didn’t smell like anything but dead leaves and chimney smoke, but he inhaled dramatically and pinched his nose. “You smell that, Max?
That’s actually shit… cow shit.”

“I don’t see any cows,” Max retorted stubbornly as she pushed the button to roll her window back up.

“Clearly, you haven’t met the high school girls.”

Billy occasionally forgot that it was no longer necessary to fake interest in the opposite sex around his step-sister; to his extreme mortification, she had seen him with a boy, so there wasn’t any reason to pretend that he cared what the high school girls looked like.

“So what, you like it here now?” Billy demanded, irritated by the idea of her warming up to Hawkins so quickly. As far as he was concerned, Max had played a part in getting them stuck there, and Billy wanted her to suffer along with him.

“No.”

“Then why are you defending it?”

“I’m not.”

“Sure sounds like it.”

“It’s just… we’re stuck here, so—”

“You’re right. We’re stuck here.” Billy slowly turned his head towards her, his mood darkening as he remembered the day she exposed him to his father. “And whose fault is that?”

“Yours,” Max answered softly, her voice barely audible over the loud music and the noisy purr of the engine.

Mine? For fuck’s sake, is this kid for real?

“What’d you say?”

“Nothing.”

Liar.

“Did you say it’s my fault?”

“No,” she said quickly, shaking her head and closing her eyes regretfully.

Billy's jaw tensed as he recalled the terrifying moment when his blowjob was interrupted by his father's angry voice outside the door. He had only felt so powerless and trapped on a few other occasions, like the funeral for his mother and sister, and the day his father married Max's mother.

Goddamnit, Max. You could've just been a good kid and gone to the zoo that day, like you were supposed to. But you wanted to fuck up my life. Just admit it.

“You know whose fault it is. Say it.”

Max looked down at her lap and twisted her fingers together. She didn’t respond.

“Ma-aaaaax,” Billy persisted, lowering his voice to a dangerously low timbre. “Say it.”
When she still refused to speak, Billy ran out of patience. He twisted his entire body towards her and shouted, “SAY IT!”

Max remained silent, and Billy was tempted to slap her for defying him.

Stubborn little beta brat. Who the hell does she think she is?

He revved his engine and stepped on the gas, accelerating as fast as he dared in the hopes of frightening his rebellious step-sister.

Max tried to put on a brave face, but her pale blue eyes widened when she saw some kids on bikes fifty feet down the leaf-strewn road. “Billy, slow down.”

“Oh, are these your new hick friends?”

“No! I don’t know them.”

Liar… I think I’m gonna give her a good, old-fashioned Halloween scare.

“I guess you won’t care if I hit them, then, huh? Do I get bonus points if I hit ‘em all in one go?”

Max turned to look at him with round, worried eyes. “No, Billy, stop! It’s not funny.”

It kind of is, though. She really thinks I might actually do it, doesn’t she?

“Billy, come on, stop it!” Max implored again. “It’s not funny! Stop!”

In response, Billy pressed his foot down harder on the gas, smirking at the way the three kids on bikes were looking over their shoulders with panicked expressions and pedaling faster. When he was less than twenty feet from them, Billy could see that the boys were wearing matching ‘Ghostbusters’ costumes.

Better get the fuck outta my way, geeks.

“Billy, stop it!” Max screamed.

She reached over and grabbed the steering wheel, turning it sharply and making the Camaro swerve deftly around the three kids on bicycles.

“Yeah!” Billy crowed, high on adrenaline and laughing scornfully at the way the boys veered off the road; one of them even toppled over. “That was a close one, huh?”

Max twisted around in her seat to look out the back window as the car continued to roar down the street. Within a few moments, her classmates were nothing but specks on the side of the road.

“I seriously can’t believe you, sometimes,” Max muttered, her cheeks flushed with anger. “You could’ve killed someone.”

Billy rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right… don’t be so dramatic. Nothing happened.”

“You scared them! And me!”

“It’s Halloween, for fuck’s sake… isn’t that the point of this stupid holiday?” Billy looked at her with round eyes and a creepy, clownish grin. “Boo!”

Max grimaced and turned her face away.
She really thinks I would’ve done it, huh? It’s like that time she thought I might squeeze the life out of her stupid pet bird.

“You don’t know shit about me if you really think I’d crash into those nerds just for fun. Hell, I wouldn’t even be able to go on the lam, ‘cause my ride would probably get totaled, and then I’d go to jail for the rest of my life.”

And I’m way too good-looking for prison… alpha or not, I bet my ass would be toast.

“Someone could’ve died back there, Billy.”

“Jesus Christ, will you give it a rest? I knew they’d get out of the way.”

I prefer it when she’s giving me the silent treatment.

“What if they didn’t, though? W-what if I hadn’t grabbed the wheel in time?”

Billy shrugged indifferently. “What if this, what if that… could’ve, might’ve… life doesn’t work that way, Max. There’s just the shit that happens, and the shit that doesn’t.”

Max scowled, crossing her arms and slumping down lower in her seat.

“Besides,” Billy continued, quickly glancing down at his watch; it was a few minutes past three-thirty. “Colossal damage to my car and life imprisonment aside, I don’t have time for mowing down losers today… I’ve got a shitload of homework to start and a party at eight.”

“Are you gonna wear a costume?” Max asked quietly.

There’s no way she’s seen ‘The Terminator’ yet… it just came out, and it’s rated R.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Fine, forget I asked,” she sighed, turning away from him to stare out the window again. “I don’t care.”

As Billy parked his Camaro outside the modest house on Old Cherry Road, he thought about the outfit he’d carefully planned and wondered if Steve, the enigmatic rich boy with the red BMW, would be at the party that night to see it.

I’m gonna look like a million bucks and beat his keg stand record, so he’d damn well better show up.

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: The Buzzcocks- What Do I Get?
**Bullshit**

Chapter Notes

"Ladies who find my intentions ridiculous
Awkward, insipid, and horribly gauche
Pompous, pretentious, ineptly meticulous
Dull as the heart of an unbaked brioche
Floundering versicles feebly versiculous
Often attenuate, frequently crass
Attempts at emotion that turn isiculous,
For Christ's sake stick it up your ass."

-from 'The Triumph of Bullshit' by T.S. Eliot, 1910

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Halloween, 1984**

Steve knew something wasn’t quite right between him and Nancy, but he had successfully ignored the nagging feeling for months, hoping that everything would eventually get better with time and a positive attitude. His grandmother used to say that time healed all wounds, but Steve was skeptical. After all, plenty of time had passed since the terrifying, strange things that had happened, yet he still woke up most nights with his heart pounding and his shirt soaked in sweat, relieved that he was safe at home with no horrifying monsters or sinister government agents clawing at his window.

Nancy had nightmares, too; they used to talk about them, but that was months ago, before they agreed to try forgetting it all so they could move on with their lives.

*She never really moved on, though. Not even a little.*

Steve knew visiting Barbara Holland’s parents for dinner was a terrible idea from the moment Nancy had first suggested it. He’d felt so awkward and intrusive, sitting across from the parents of a girl he barely knew, munching on fried chicken and smiling encouragingly as they spoke of selling their house to pay some detective to help them find their missing daughter.

*Their dead daughter. Jesus, everything’s so messed up.*

Steve sympathized with Nancy, but he’d barely spoken ten words to Barb in his life; his only connection to the tall redhead, other than being her best friend’s boyfriend, was that she had disappeared in his backyard. He tried not to sound insensitive or dismissive about the tragedy, but he wanted to help his girlfriend move on. He cared about Nancy, and he missed the sweet, smiling girl he’d known before; the one who used to press her dainty lips against his and sigh softly when he wrapped his arms around her tiny waist.

*I can’t even remember the last time we slept together… was it last month, or the month before?*

Steve didn’t want to be the kind of jerk who pressured his girlfriend for bedroom favors even when she clearly wasn’t in the mood; he wanted her to be happy again, and he knew he must be doing something wrong, but he couldn’t figure out what it was. The Halloween party sounded like a fun,
harmless way to help Nancy relax, forget her worries, and let loose a little.

“It’s hard, but let’s just go to Tina’s stupid party, wear our stupid costumes that we’ve been working on for a stupid amount of time, and pretend like we’re stupid teenagers, okay?”

For Halloween that year, they had coordinated their outfits and dressed as Tom Cruise and Rebecca De Mornay from 'Risky Business'. Steve’s black Ray-Ban sunglasses were an integral part of his costume, but he felt silly wearing them at night; they looked cool, of course, but they also made everything so dark that he was practically tripping on his own feet, and he knew he’d probably end up taking them off.

Oh, well… at least I’m not wearing a kilt, or a clown wig.

By the time they arrived, the party was already in full swing; it seemed like every teenager in Hawkins was crammed into Tina’s spacious living room, dancing to Mötley Crüe’s ‘Shout at the Devil’ beneath toilet paper streamers. Steve had just closed the front door behind them when the crowd parted and he heard his name being shouted over the music.

“Hey!” Tommy called, sauntering over to him in a sleeveless black number from ‘The Karate Kid’.

What the hell does he want? We just got here, for Christ’s sake.

Steve and Tommy had been best friends, once upon a time. Now, they rarely spoke and Steve regretted wasting so much of his time hanging out with such a pitiful jerk.

“We got ourselves a new keg king, Harrington.”

A new what?

A couple of the other boys who had tagged along with Tommy backed him up with jeers of “Yeah, that’s right!” and “Eat it, Harrington!”

Steve barely heard what they were saying, and he didn’t notice that Nancy had disappeared from his side, at least not for several moments. He was distracted by the new guy. The first time Steve had seen Hawkins High’s latest addition was the previous morning, in the school parking lot. But that was very different. At high school, the new guy wasn’t bare-chested, glistening with cheap beer and standing so close that Steve could almost smell him.

Holy shit…

Trying not to stare, Steve couldn’t stop his eyes from flicking from the perfectly tousled layers of light-brown curls and little hoop earring down to the tight pants and black fingerless gloves. There was a lit Marlboro in the boy’s left hand and his hairless, muscular chest was on full display beneath his black leather jacket.

I don’t think I’d have the balls to try pulling off a look like that...

Intrigued and slightly intimidated, Steve took off his black Ray-Bans and reflexively moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

“I haven’t seen it yet,” he managed to say at last, referring to the Arnold Schwarzenegger action film that had just come out the previous week; he gestured awkwardly at the new boy’s costume. “You’re the Terminator, right?”

“It was way cooler than ‘Risky Business’,” Tommy piped up, crossing his arms against his chest in
an unconvincing attempt to look threatening.

Nobody’s talking to you, dipshit.

“Whatever you say, karate kid.” Steve smirked derisively at Tommy’s outfit. “Didn’t the Cobra Kai asshole get kicked in the face at the end of that movie?”

“Kiss my ass, Harrington. Anyway, like I said: Billy’s the new keg king. He terminated your record, man.”

So... his name is Billy, huh?

Tommy wasn’t quite finished. "He stayed on for forty-two seconds! You only stayed on for what, thirty-two? Thirty-three? I bet you ralphed afterwards, too.”

It had been a very long time since Steve had cared about anything as stupid as a keg stand record; after all the strange, terrifying things he’d seen, Tommy’s boasts and childish put-downs seemed laughably inconsequential.

He’s such a beta. He isn’t even bragging about himself; he’s just being a cheerleader for this hot-shot.

Steve shrugged indifferently, glancing back over at the boy called Billy. “It was thirty-eight seconds. But congrats, I guess.”

Why isn’t he saying anything?

Suddenly realizing that Nancy was no longer standing by his side, Steve glanced around the room, scanning the throng for a diminutive brunette in a snow-white blouse trimmed with black ribbon.

Shit, where’d she go?

Without another word, he turned away from Cobra Kai Tommy and Billy the Terminator, making his way towards the kitchen to look for his girlfriend. He spotted Nancy near the stove, standing beside a burly boy wearing a floral bedsheets as a toga and pounding his chest as he shouted “Pure fuel! Pure fuel!”

Steve assumed he was referring to the enormous glass bowl of dark red punch resting on top of a pizza box; he wasn’t sure what was in it, but he’d been to enough parties to know it probably contained at least three different types of booze, along with cranberry juice or Kool-Aid.

Nancy grabbed a red plastic cup and dunked it directly into the punch bowl, then proceeded to chug the entire cupful.

“Hey, whoa, whoa, whoa, take it easy,” Steve said, alarmed by how quickly her drink disappeared. “Take it easy. Nance, Nance, Nance…”

Nancy grimaced and stepped away from him as she swallowed the mouthful of punch; she looked annoyed, like he was keeping her from enjoying herself. “We’re just being stupid teenagers for the night… wasn’t that the deal?”

Well, yeah, but I wasn’t suggesting that we get totally hammered within five minutes of getting here…

Steve watched without further comment as she reached down into the punch bowl to refill her cup,
then tipped her head back and drained it a second time. She wiped a few stray ruby-red drops from her cheek, turned away from him and raised her slender arms above her head as she disappeared into the dancing throng.

*She seems pretty pissed off… Jesus, is this ‘cause we visited Barb’s parents? Is this how it’s gonna be all night?*

Even though they had just arrived, Steve had a bad feeling about the party. Normally, he would be working on getting drunk himself, but there was no such thing as “normal” for him and Nancy anymore. Acting like “stupid teenagers” for one night was simpler in theory than in practice; he glanced around him at his fellow party-goers, envious of the way they seemed to let loose so effortlessly, unhindered by thoughts of dead redheads and demogorgons.

*None of them have seen what Nance and I have seen… these kids don’t have the slightest idea what’s under our feet. We don’t really know anything either, but we know more than these poor assholes.*

Nearby, some girls were pouring vodka directly down a boy’s throat. The toga-wearing, “Pure fuel!” guy was still standing a few feet from Steve, using a sponge from the kitchen sink to wash his armpits. A couple standing near the oven were making out and groping each other.

*I can’t even remember the last time Nancy kissed me like that, with her mouth open. Like she couldn’t get enough of me.*

"……………….."

"*Lipstick cherry all over the lens as she’s falling, and miles of sharp blue water coming in…*"

Steve and Nancy were dancing to Duran Duran’s ‘Girls On Film’, surrounded by other costumed teenagers and working up a sweat. Nancy held her red plastic cup above her head as she danced; she hadn’t let go of it since she’d first picked it up, and she’d gone to the punch bowl to refill it at least three times. She assured Steve that the bright-red concoction was delicious, but when she pushed the plastic cup in his face and dared him to take a sip, he thought it tasted like cranberry cough syrup.

*Nance barely weighs ninety pounds… she’s gotta cool it with that stuff.*

When he stopped dancing and pivoting in place long enough to notice that Nancy was headed towards the kitchen yet again, he groaned wearily and pulled off his sunglasses, tucking them onto the neck of his black t-shirt.

*Shit. If she keeps this up, she’s gonna puke, or pass out… or both.*

“No, no, no,” he scolded, catching up to her quickly and grabbing her elbow. He tried reaching over to take her red plastic cup, but she jerked it away angrily.

“Get off,” she slurred, lurching towards the punch bowl.

Steve was starting to get annoyed and slightly embarrassed. He didn’t want Nancy to make a scene, and it wasn’t just for his own sake; he knew how mean and snotty everyone would be back at school if they witnessed her making a drunken ass of herself.

He gripped her wrist and tried to gently tug her back towards the dance floor. “No, you’ve had enough, okay?”

“Screw you!” Nancy twisted free and quickly dipped her cup into the punch bowl.
“Nance, I’m serious.” Worried and irritated, he reached over to try to pry the dripping, sticky cup from her grasp without spilling any punch on the floor. “Hey, hey, hey! Stop… no, I’m serious. Put it down.”

Her chin jutted out like a stubborn child who was about to throw a tantrum. “No!”

For Christ's sake...

“Nance, put it down.”

“Steve!” Nancy tightened her grip on the plastic cup, its crimson contents sloshing precariously. “Stop!”

Maybe I should just take her home if she’s gonna be like this.

Steve kept holding on, refusing to relent. “Stop… stop!”

He wasn’t sure how it happened, but a second later, Nancy’s lily-white sweater was splattered with ruby-red punch. For just a moment or two, a hush fell over the room and the only sounds were a few onlookers saying “Ohhh” and Duran Duran playing on the stereo.

Oh, shit.

Without realizing it, Steve and Nancy had backed away from each other until there were five feet between them. Nancy glared down at her ruined white sweater, then looked up at Steve like he had done it on purpose.

“What the hell?”

“Nance,” he said helplessly as she stormed away. “Nance…”

Everyone stared as he followed her to the bathroom, which was filthy; there were empty beer cans and Cheetos scattered across the sink. He tried to think of the right thing to say as he closed the bathroom door and watched her soak a white hand towel in the sink.

“Nance, I’m sorry.”

She glowered at her reflection in the large bathroom mirror, scrubbing inexpertly at the stain and making it both lighter and larger.

“That’s not coming out, Nance.”

“It’s coming,” she muttered stubbornly, refusing to look at him as she rubbed the washcloth up and down her chest; Nancy had the barely-there bosom of a ballerina.

It’s a shame about that sweater… Nance doesn’t look anything like Lana, but she did a great job with her costume. Too bad it’s wrecked.

“Come on, let me just take you home, okay?” He cautiously rested his hand on the small of her back and kept his voice soft and gentle, like he was coaxing a feral cat into trusting him. “Come here. Let me take you home.”

“You wanted… you wanted this,” she whined, looking down miserably at the sink.

I just wanted us to relax and have fun at a dumb party… I wasn’t signing up to fight with a drunk girl all night.
“No, I didn’t want this,” he countered, refusing to let her blame him for the way things had turned out. “I told you to stop drinking.”

“Bullshit,” she spat angrily. Her lips were stained an unnatural red from the punch and her eyes were rimmed with coal-black makeup.

“No, it’s not bullshit, okay?”

“It’s bullshit,” she repeated, raising her eyes defiantly to meet Steve’s.

“No, it’s not bullshit, Nancy.” He wasn’t even completely sure what they were bickering about anymore.

“No, you.” She continued to look directly into his eyes. “You’re bullshit.”

“What?” Steve shook his head slowly, unwilling to believe what he was hearing. He and Nancy had never argued like this before, and he was caught completely off-guard.

*How long has she felt like this?*

“You’re pretending like everything is okay. Y’know, like we didn’t…” Her voice rose slightly and her brow furrowed with remorse. “Like we didn’t kill Barb.”

Steve could only stand there like a speechless idiot with his mouth hanging open, baffled and hurt.

*Jesus, she thinks we killed Barb? We didn’t kill anyone!*

Nancy wasn’t finished; her expression was taunting and scornful. “Like, it’s great. Like, we’re in love and we’re partying. Yeah, let’s party, huh? Party. We’re partying. This is bullshit.”

Steve felt an invisible, heavy weight on his shoulders, crushing him down. One thing Nancy had mentioned was already stuck in his mind on a loop, like a badly scratched record.

“Like we’re in love?” He repeated slowly, inwardly wincing at the painful implication of her words.

Almost out of habit, he reached over to stroke her smooth cheek, trying not to wonder if it was the last time he’d ever be able to touch her so intimately.

*But... yesterday, she said she loved me. Was she just humoring me all this time?*

“It’s bullshit,” she said again, ignoring his fingers lingering on her jaw.

Steve shook his head again and let his hand fall to his side. “You don’t love me?”

*Say you didn’t mean it. C’mon, Nance, tell me that’s not what you meant.*

Without looking away, she repeated herself a final time. “It’s bullshit.”

They stood there at an impasse for what felt like an eternity, staring at each other; Steve couldn’t stand the way she suddenly seemed like a stranger.

*I’ve gotta get out of here.*

He sighed, pushed past her, opened the door and slammed it loudly behind him. His head was swimming and hot tears burned behind his eyes; he blinked them away furiously as he made his way back through the crowd of dancing teenagers and out the kitchen door.
Don’t cry like a damn baby in front of all these people. Wait ’til you get to the car, at least.

He slammed the door behind him and paused for a moment to look up at the starry night sky, feeling in his blazer pocket for his pack of cigarettes.

“Need a light, Risky Biz?” A deep voice spoke suddenly beside him, startling Steve so much that he took a quick step backwards and nearly tripped on a jack-o-lantern.

It was Billy, Hawkins’ newly-annointed keg king; he emerged from the shadows and stood beneath the porch light, puffing on a Marlboro.

“Just for the record… I don’t really care about any of that ‘keg king’ crap,” Billy said quietly, wisps of smoke curling from his lips. “I know it’s bullshit.”

Nancy’s voice echoed in Steve’s mind, the wounds still smarting.

“It’s bullshit… you’re bullshit.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Steve muttered, sniffling a little as he lit a cigarette and took a long, soothing drag.

He briefly considered just ditching Nancy at the party, even though she was soaked in punch and too drunk to walk in a straight line. Steve didn't want to see her again that night, but he couldn't bring himself to leave her there, either; he knew what inebriated, horny teenage boys were capable of doing to pretty girls who passed out at parties.

What am I supposed to do if she doesn’t want to leave with me, though? Just toss her over my shoulder and carry her out of Tina’s house kicking and screaming about how I’m bullshit and I killed Barb?

Anxiously running his hand through his hair, Steve sighed heavily and went back in the house. He found Jonathan Byers as quickly as he could and, without delving into too much detail about what had happened, asked him to make sure Nancy returned home safely.

It felt strange asking a boy who had once beat him up for a favor, but Steve knew he wouldn't mind. It was no secret that Jonathan had carried a torch for Nancy Wheeler for a pitifully long time; he stared at her in the hallway and had even taken photos of her, before Steve put an end to it by breaking his camera. Steve recalled the night he had snuck up to Nancy’s window the previous year, only to discover Jonathan Byers sitting with her in the pretty pink bedroom. He had been overcome with jealousy then, but when he pictured Jonathan laying Nancy down on her bed and helping her take off the high-heeled boots she was wearing that night, there was no envy or resentment in his heart.

Whatever, I don’t care. I’m tired and I... I can’t think about any of it anymore.

.................

Steve kicked his shoes off as soon as he closed the front door behind him and just left them there, even though he knew his parents couldn’t stand it when he did that. His mouth was dry and tasted like an ashtray, so he headed straight for the kitchen to get something to drink. He stood in front of the open fridge, glugging orange juice directly from the carton and feeling sorry for himself.

“Would it kill you to get a glass, Steven?”

Startled by his mother’s voice behind him, Steve choked on the mouthful of juice he’d just
swallowed.

“Sorry, Mom,” he chuckled sheepishly, opening a cabinet and reaching for a cup.

“That’s better.” Lillian Harrington filled the kettle at the sink and set it on the stove to boil, moving silently in her soft slippers. She was wearing a long, blue bathrobe over her silk pajamas, and her dark hair was secured in six large curlers. “How was the Halloween party?”

Steve shrugged. “It was fine, I guess.”

_Actually, it was pretty damn shitty._

“You’re home earlier than I expected; it’s barely ten. Were all the other boys and girls dressed up in costumes?”

“ Pretty much. Not Jonathan Byers, but everyone else, yeah.”

Mrs. Harrington gestured at Steve’s dark blazer and smiled. “Who are you supposed to be? A character from a TV show?”

“It was a movie, actually… probably not something you’d want to see, though.”

His mother hardly watched any movies or television; she was always too busy with work and spent the little free time she had reading or gardening. Steve knew she wouldn’t be impressed by a film about a rich teenager who took advantage of his parents’ absence by sleeping with a call girl and wrecking the family Porsche.

Lillian Harrington sat down at the kitchen table to wait for the kettle to boil. “Did you take Nancy to the party with you?”

_Jeez, we don’t have to talk about her right now, do we?_

“Yeah,” Steve admitted, leaning against the counter and looking down into his glass of juice. “We planned our costumes together; she was the girl from the movie.”

His mother laced her fingers together and looked at him with concern. “Is something the matter, hon? You don’t sound happy.”

Steve was in no mood to discuss his relationship with anyone, least of all his mom. “I’m actually pretty tired, so if it’s okay I’m just gonna head upstairs and—”

“Not so fast, Stevie.” She gestured to the table and smiled warmly; her eyes were dark brown, like her son’s, but with a few fine wrinkles in the corners. “Sit with me for a minute while I make my tea, at least. We haven’t had a chance to talk lately.”

_Why does it have to be tonight? She has the worst timing._

Steve sighed as he sat down across from her. “Fine… what do want to talk about, Mom?”

She reached over to pat his hand sympathetically. “You seem a little out-of sorts about something. How are things with Nancy?”

“Fine,” Steve lied, growing more uncomfortable by the second; all he wanted was to go upstairs to his room, shut the door, and sleep for a hundred years. “We just had a… a little miscommunication at the party, that’s all.”
“Ah, I see. That’s too bad.”

Steve made a point not to mention how drunk Nancy had gotten; his mother presumably knew what went on at high school parties, but that didn’t mean she wanted to hear all the punch-soaked details.

**Besides, Mom never seemed to like Nancy very much.**

The Harringtons were an old, prosperous family of alpha men and omega women; consequently, Steve’s parents weren’t impressed when they discovered that their only son was dating Nancy Wheeler, a regular beta girl. His father, in particular, had an embarrassing tendency to be very snobbish about their family’s “superior genetic stock.”

“You know, your dad had a beta girlfriend or two, before we were introduced,” Mrs. Harrington said, as though she’d read her son’s mind. She chuckled wryly, though her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “It was never anything serious, of course… just practice, or fun. Omega girls aren’t that easy to find, after all, and it’s unrealistic to expect a teenage boy to wait until his soulmate comes along…”

“Jeez, Mom.” Steve tried not to think about his buttoned-up father as a horny, heart-breaking douchebag back in the early sixties, killing time by laying pipe until he was introduced to Steve’s mother. “I wasn’t using Nancy for practice.”

“I didn’t say you were, honey.”

“Maybe me and Nance would’ve gotten together even if there was an omega my age in Hawkins,” Steve added stubbornly, unsure why he was leaping to the defense of a girl who, barely half an hour earlier, had called him bullshit and said she didn’t love him.

Mrs. Harrington shook her head and sighed. “I think you’re overestimating how much say you have in the matter, Steven. If a suitable omega crossed your path, I’ll bet you’d forget all about Nancy Wheeler in three seconds flat.”

“There aren’t any omegas my age in this dinky town, though,” Steve said glumly, polishing off his glass of orange juice.

“You’ll meet one in college, especially if you’re in a big city like Indianapolis or Chicago.”

Steve tried to picture a future that didn’t have Nancy in it, and came up empty-handed. “I don’t think any colleges are gonna want me, Mom.”

She rubbed his shoulder encouragingly. “Sure they will. You just need to bring your grades up a little… let me know if you need help with your homework, okay?”

Steve’s mother was brilliant in ways that he knew he would never be; she was a successful doctor and had graduated at the top of her class, whereas her son struggled to keep pace and earned more Cs than Bs (the only A he ever got was in P.E.).

*I don’t want to have to ask my mom to read my essays, the way Nance used to.*

“You never liked Nancy, just because she’s a beta,” Steve said quietly. “And neither did Dad.”

“For heaven’s sake, we never **disliked** the poor girl. We just couldn’t see it lasting very long, that’s all… you have too many differences. It’s not just that the Wheelers don’t have the gift, they’re… well, they’re Lutheran, for one thing, and I saw a Reagan sign on their lawn.”
“Only you care about boring stuff like that, Mom,” Steve scoffed, rolling his eyes at how absurd she sounded; those were criticisms of Ted and Karen Wheeler, not Nancy herself. “Lutheran, Presbyterian… Republican, Democrat… it’s all basically the same, right?”

“I know differences like those may seem small at first, but they get much, much bigger once you grow up and have kids—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Steve interjected hastily, feeling his cheeks turn warm; it was impossible to imagine Nancy with a large, pregnant belly. “Hold your horses, Mom… I’m a long, long way from having kids.”

The kettle on the stovetop began to whistle shrilly, interrupting the awkward silence. Lillian Harrington rose from the table to turn off the burner and pour hot water in a mug.

“Glad to hear you’re taking precautions, at least,” she murmured, pulling a tea bag from a small box and dunking it carefully in her cup. “That’s really important, especially for people like us.”

“Well, you and Dad don’t have anything to worry about,” Steve muttered crossly as he stood up from the table and set his glass down in the sink. “Because I don’t think Nancy wants to be with me anymore.”

“See, I always knew there was something odd about that girl,” Mrs. Harrington said sagely, setting her steaming mug of tea on the counter and extending her arms to her son. “Who wouldn’t want to be with such a handsome, sweet young man? Try not to worry too much, honey, and give me a nice hug before you go upstairs.”

Steve stood there stiffly, tolerating the motherly embrace and only scowling a little when she reached up to smooth his hair back and plant a kiss on his forehead.

“Alright,” she yawned, picking up her mug of chamomile tea and inhaling the wisp of steam appreciatively. “Now go to bed so you won’t be a zombie tomorrow at school.”

That night, Steve’s nightmares were even worse than usual. His head swam with terrifying images of Barb screaming and thrashing as a demogorgon pulled her into his swimming pool, but instead of water, the pool was filled with foamy, blood-red punch. In addition to Barb’s helpless shrieks, he could hear his own heartbeat pounding along to ‘Shout at the Devil’ and Nancy’s bitterly unhappy voice on an endless loop.

“Bullshit… like we didn’t kill Barb… bullshit… like we’re in love… bullshit…”

He wasn’t sure how he got from his pool to Tina’s house, but he found himself on her front lawn, sprinting away from one demogorgon and raising his nail-studded baseball bat to take a swing at a second one. No matter how many demons he attacked, there was always another sneaking out of the shadows; he shouted for help but nobody heard him, and he ran around Tina’s yard until he was soaked with sweat and too tired to run anymore. The only light came from the moon and the colorful Christmas lights that were strung everywhere, blinking chaotically.

“Stop it… make it stop!”

Struggling to catch his breath, Steve dropped to his knees and closed his eyes, awaiting sharp teeth and a swift death; his dream was so real that he could almost feel the cold dew on the grass seeping through his pants. When he heard the unmistakable click of a gun being cocked, his eyes snapped open and he looked up. There were no monsters in sight; there was only the boy from the party,
wearing his leather jacket and holding a pistol like the one Arnold Schwarzenegger had in the trailer for ‘The Terminator’.

Billy.

He looked down at Steve with cold, judgmental eyes, his full lips curving into a cruel smile; when he finally spoke, it was in Nancy’s girlish voice, slurred and stinging.

“You’re bullshit.”

Steve bolted awake with a strangled gasp; his blanket was wrapped tightly around him and he was soaked with sweat. He pressed his palm on his chest, willing his heart to stop hammering.

"Jesus," he muttered to himself, squeezing his eyes shut in a useless attempt to get the image of Billy's blue eyes and intimidating, leather-clad body out of his head. "He's gonna be trouble."

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Bobby Pickett- Monster Mash
Shut Up and Play the Game

Chapter Notes

"All extremes of feeling are allied with madness."
-from 'Orlando' by Virginia Woolf

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thursday, November 1st, 1984

Even though Billy Hargrove had only been attending Hawkins High School for a mere two and a half days, he couldn’t shake Steve Harrington from his mind.

What were the odds that one of the best-looking dudes in the whole damn country was hiding in such a boring shithole?

When the boys in his gym class were divided into opposing teams, Billy didn’t mind going topless, thanks to the near-daily workouts he’d been forcing himself to do for the past several months. He also didn’t mind that Steve was assigned to the shirt-wearing team; as nice as it would’ve been to watch the lanky beauty running around half-naked, it was even nicer to have a socially acceptable excuse to crowd him aggressively from behind and get into his personal space.

There’s no rush; I’ll have plenty of chances to see him topless in the locker room. I bet a million bucks he’s got some seriously cute nipples under that shirt.

Despite his messy hair and sweat-soaked P.E. uniform, Steve was a sight to behold. His long legs were slim without being scrawny, and even though they were surprisingly hairy and almost laughably pale, Billy enjoyed picturing them spread apart and wrapped tightly around his own sweaty body.

Man, messing with him is gonna be way too much fun.

“Harrington, right? I heard you used to run this school. That true?” Billy hovered behind Steve and taunted him experimentally, hoping to provoke an entertaining reaction. “King Steve, they used to call you, huh?”

C’mon… say something. Put up a fight.

“Then you turned bitch,” he added with a smirk, resisting the urge to close the gap between them by pressing against his shapely little ass.

“Hey,” Steve looked over his shoulder at him, panting as he continued to dribble the ball; he smelled like sweat and some kind of top-shelf cologne. “Maybe you should just shut up and play the game.”

You asked for it, pretty boy.

Quick as a fox, Billy lunged for the ball and snatched it away, elbowing Steve roughly and knocking him to the floor like a toppled bowling pin. He sprinted to the other end of the court, amused when he glanced back and saw Steve hurriedly scrambling to his feet. Impulsively deciding to show off a little, Billy leapt up and passed the ball under his leg, tossing it high into the air; he raised his arms in
triumph when it fell straight down into the basket.

_Perfect! Nothing but net. He saw that, right?_

Coasting on a victorious high, Billy grinned at Steve from across the court, sticking his tongue out suggestively. He heard someone behind him whoop and yell, “That’s what I’m talking about!” but Billy barely noticed; he only had eyes for the quiet, sweaty boy in blue Nikes.

Steve just stood there staring back at him with disbelief, resting his hands on his narrow hips and breathing heavily; his thick brown hair stuck up in disorderly waves and his face glistened with perspiration.

_No need to be jealous, babe… all you gotta do is ask nicely, and I’ll show you every trick I know._

Billy’s confident grin faded when he noticed a skinny brunette standing near the gym entrance; he vaguely recognized her as the girl Steve had brought to the Halloween party the previous night.

_What the hell is she doing here?_

The girl hadn’t smiled much at the party, and she didn’t look any happier now. When she called out to Steve, he made sure the coach wasn’t paying attention before following her quickly out the door.

Billy shook his head resentfully as they disappeared. “Christ, how pathetic.”

“I know, right?” Tommy nudged his arm and snickered. “Look at him running after Princess Penny Loafers like a whipped bitch.”

Even though they were on the same team, Billy was tempted to knock Tommy to the floor and “accidentally” step on his fingers.

He can say whatever he wants about that little rich chick, but the only one who gets to call Harrington a bitch is me.

Determined to win the game whether or not Steve was around to see him score points, Billy spent the next five minutes playing fast and dirty, sinking basket after basket until one of the boys from the opposing team ran outside and returned a minute later with Steve following close behind.

He looks kinda down in the dumps. Maybe he broke up with that girl… I doubt I’m that lucky, though.

“Uh-oh, King Steve came back to kick our asses,” Billy called sarcastically from across the court, smirking as he set up yet another perfect jump shot; his team was ahead by twenty points and there were less than eight minutes on the clock.

“Yeah, we’re in big trouble now,” Tommy cackled and held up his hand for a high-five, which Billy deliberately snubbed as he charged after the ball.

_Screw you, loser._

Billy tried not to stare at Steve too much or wonder if he was newly on the market; instead, he focused on leading his team to a crushing thirty-two point victory.

“You really stank today, Harrington,” Tommy sneered as all the boys trooped to the locker room to shower and change. “I was embarrassed for you, to be honest… my granny could’ve played better, even with her cataracts and bad knees.”
Billy rolled his eyes at his teammate’s childish jibes and glanced over at Steve, unsurprised that he was just staring straight ahead and stoically ignoring them all.

The gym showers in the Hawkins High locker room were unlike any Billy had ever seen before. Instead of faucets spaced three feet apart on a tile wall, separated by small privacy partitions like those he remembered from his years at North Hollywood High, there were several foot-wide steel pipes, each with half a dozen showerheads. Billy couldn’t help but notice the complete absence of partitions in the steamy room with orange walls; there was nowhere for anyone to hide.

Perfect.

Much to his annoyance, though, Steve hastened to the last available faucet at one of the odd shower-pillars, so Billy ended up stuck next to Tommy and a few other irritating beta boys vying for his favor.

“How’d you learn to play so good, Billy?”

“Yeah, man, are you gonna join the varsity team or something? They could really use talent like yours.”

“That party last night was epic, Hargrove!”

“Yeah, that was the best keg stand I’ve ever seen! Tommy dared me to try it last night, but it was embarrassing as hell… I only made it to eighteen seconds ‘cause the beer started comin’ outta my nose.”

“Gross,” Billy muttered, barely listening to any of them. His attention was fixed on Steve, who was staring glumly at the floor as he washed himself, completely naked and just eight feet away.

Wish it could just be us in here, so we could have a conversation without these nosy dickheads butting in.

Billy couldn’t get an uninterrupted look at Steve; there was another boy standing in the way and the bathroom was steamy and badly lit. What he did manage to see, though, would definitely be on his mind the next time he jerked off: the long, elegant curve of Steve’s back sloped down to a slim waist and a round, pale ass with both Venusian dimples and a few moles.

Christ, he’s a work of art.

When Steve kept his body angled so that his crotch was obscured from view, Billy reminded himself that there would be plenty of opportunities to get a good look at what he was certain would be a perfect dick.

His lewd thoughts were soon interrupted by Tommy, who leaned over to prod Billy’s shoulder.

“I still haven’t gotten over how long you rode that keg, dude. Most guys would be hung-over as hell the day after drinking all that brew, but not Hawkins’ new keg king!”

“It was no big deal,” Billy lied with a modest shrug; the “keg king” moniker was lame, but he didn’t exactly dislike all the praise, especially when Steve Harrington was within earshot. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

Naturally, he didn’t mention that immediately after Steve had gone running off to follow his little
girlfriend to the kitchen, Billy had snuck back outside just long enough to discreetly puke behind a
garden shed. He felt a thousand times better after spewing out what seemed like an entire gallon of
undigested cheap beer; it was a relief to not have to worry about being too wasted to drive home,
thousands of empty calories that would turn into belly fat, or feeling like his head was full of hornets
the next morning.

“How ‘bout you, Harrington?” Tommy called loudly.

Steve paused as he rubbed a bar of soap under his arm, looking over at them warily. “Uh... what
about me?”

“You hung over from Tina’s party last night?”

Steve shook his head and raised his arm to rinse off the suds. His slim, mole-dotted body was so
beautiful that Billy was torn between staring shamelessly and looking away so he wouldn’t get hard.

*It’s gonna be inconvenient as fuck if I start popping a boner every time I see him.*

Tommy apparently wasn’t finished taunting Steve yet. “So, what’d the princess need to talk about
that was so important, Harrington?”

Steve’s jaw tensed, but he didn’t respond.

“Our new keg king here might have an iron stomach, but I bet lil’ Nance-Pants feels like ralphing
after last night.” Tommy smirked as he pantomimed tipping his head back and pouring a drink down
his throat. “Did she really spill all that punch on herself? It was hard to tell from where I was
standing, but it looked like you threw it at her… figured she was probably mouthing off, the way
bitches always do.”

“Why don’t you mind your own business, asshole?” Steve snapped, switching off his faucet with an
angry flick of his wrist.

Grateful for the thick shroud of steam in the room, Billy carefully angled his body away to conceal
his half-hard dick as Steve wrung the water from his dripping hair, wrapped a towel around his
waist, and stormed off without another word.

"Jeez, what a touchy guy." Tommy looked over at Billy and rolled his eyes. “Sounds like there’s
trouble in paradise.”

*Good.*

………………

Tommy’s long-time girlfriend, Carol, had a close friend named Vicki Carmichael who immediately
set her sights on Billy and hovered around him like a pesky gnat. Even though she was annoying,
Billy reluctantly agreed to take her to Hamburger Heaven after dropping off Max that afternoon. He
didn’t want to, of course, but she had brazenly asked him in front of several people. Billy knew his
carefully cultivated alpha-male persona and the smudge of red lipstick he’d dabbed strategically on
the sleeve of his denim jacket might not be enough to mislead everyone, especially people as nosy as
Tommy; he needed to be seen taking girls out once in a while, even if it was just to the local burger
stand or a movie. It occurred to Billy that if he *really* wanted to put Vicki to good use, he could even
bring her home for an innocent hour or two of snacking, studying, and watching MTV on the couch;
he would just have to make sure to time it right, so Neil would come home and witness the
performance.
Maybe he’ll get off my case if he thinks I’ve snagged myself a girlfriend… Vicki’s no omega, obviously, but she’s a chick and she’s white, so by my old man’s fucked-up metric, she’d score a two out of three.

After school, Vicki followed him to the parking lot, where they stood together in uncomfortable silence, leaning against his Camaro while Billy smoked and stared in the direction of Hawkins Middle School. After fifteen minutes, there was still no sign of a thirteen-year-old redhead on a skateboard.

“So… is your sister coming, or what?” Vicki asked, impatiently tapping her long, lacquered nails against the books in her arms.

Billy glanced down at his watch. He was ravenously hungry and despised having to wait for Maxine like some kind of chauffeur. He knew ditching her might infuriate his father, but since she really was taking forever, Billy decided that even if she dared to snitch on him, he couldn’t be blamed for taking off without her.

“Screw it,” he muttered, flicking aside his cigarette and spitting on the asphalt. “That little shit can skate home.”

Who the hell does she think she is, making me hang around this damn parking lot all day?

“And don’t call her that,” he added angrily as he stormed around to the driver’s side of the car.

“What?” Vicki’s eyes widened, unaware of what she had said to make him snap at her.

“Sister. She’s not my sister.”

She had the good sense not to ask him for clarification and slid meekly into the passenger seat. Billy switched on some loud heavy metal and peeled out of the parking lot, bitterly wishing he lived in a world where he didn't have to march to the beat of his father’s drum... a world where Steve Harrington could be the one sitting beside him, stealing glances and smiling shyly.

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Ramones- I Don't Care
"I would tell you that I loved you
if I thought that you would stay;
but I know that it's no use
and you've already gone away.

Misjudged your limits,
pushed you too far,
took you for granted,
thought that you needed me more, more, more..."

- 'Boys Don't Cry' by The Cure (1979)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Friday, November 2nd, 1984**

Steve Harrington wasn’t having the best week. On Tuesday, there was the uncomfortable dinner with Barbara Holland’s parents; Steve *did* love KFC, but he didn’t love eating it with his depressed girlfriend and the painfully optimistic parents of her dead best friend. Then, there was the Halloween party on Wednesday, which Steve tried not to think about too much, followed by a tense argument with Nancy on Thursday.

*At least there haven’t been any monsters trying to kill me this week... it could be worse, right?*

As if the problems with his love life weren’t enough, he also wasn’t doing well in school. Even gym, which had always been his favorite class, was becoming more of a challenge since the arrival of Billy Hargrove. Steve was no longer the best player on the basketball court; he had never seen anyone play as aggressively as Billy, and he had a few bruises on his hips and ass from all the times he’d gotten knocked to the floor.

*He’s like a tank... a cocky, Californian tank that I’m kind of starting to hate.*

Steve went to P.E. that Friday determined to win the basketball game, no matter what. But Billy was an unstoppable force, handling the ball with an effortless confidence that Steve couldn’t quite match. When Steve attempted to intercept a pass, Billy easily maneuvered around him and grabbed the ball, chuckling as he dribbled it leisurely.

“All right!” He crowed, taking his time and looking directly at Steve. “All right, all right! King Steve, everyone!”

*What the hell is his problem?*

“I like it,” Billy taunted. “Playing tough today.”

“Jesus!” Steve snapped irritably, glaring at him. “Do you ever stop talking, man? Come on!”

“What?” Billy laughed. “You afraid the coach is gonna bench you now that I’m here, huh?”
Shut up, you arrogant piece of shit. I’ve never been benched in my life.

Billy suddenly charged forward, shoving Steve roughly as he sprinted towards the basket. Steve fell onto his back, feeling as helpless as an upside-down tortoise as he watched Billy score yet another two points for his team.

Goddamnit.

Billy high-fived one of his fellow shirtless teammates, then sauntered over to where Steve was still sprawled on the floor, embarrassed and wincing from the dull pain in his shoulder.

Oh, just go away.

Steve was slightly surprised when he reached down to help him up; he instinctively took Billy’s hand, which was warm and sweaty. As Steve sat up, Billy squeezed his hand tightly and leaned down until their faces were barely a foot apart; the Catholic-looking necklace he always wore dangled between them. He was so close that Steve could smell his Old Spice deodorant, a little sweat, and something else that was pleasant but impossible to identify.

“You were moving your feet,” Billy said quietly, looking down at him with blue eyes framed by unbelievably long, dark lashes. “Plant them next time, draw a charge.”

He’s, uh... really close. Too close.

Billy abruptly released his hand, letting him fall back down to the floor. Baffled, Steve watched him jog to the other side of the court; he tried not to notice how enviably tan and muscular his legs were compared to his own thin, pale ones.

Yeah, I’m definitely starting to hate him.

………………

When the coach finally blew his whistle to indicate that basketball was over for the day, Steve hastened to the locker room, where he peeled off his sweaty P.E. uniform and headed for a shower in the corner of the room. He was only able to enjoy luxuriating beneath the warm spray of water for a few moments, though, before Tommy and Billy joined him.

I can’t even take a damn shower in peace.

Billy looked over at Steve with a strange smile. “Don’t sweat it, Harrington. Today’s just not your day, man.”

After a brief rinse beneath the warm water, Billy switched off his faucet and grabbed his towel from a hook on the wall.

“Yeah,” Tommy chimed in with a knowing smirk. “Not your week.”

Steve tried to ignore them, but Tommy wasn’t finished.

“You and the princess break up for one day, and she’s already running off with the freak’s brother.”

Running off with... who?

Steve wanted to smack the self-important smirk off Tommy’s face and tell him to shut the hell up about Nancy, but there was also a tiny, curious part of him that wanted to hear the gossip.
“Oh, shit… you don’t know,” Tommy continued smugly, obviously pleased to be the one to break the news. “Jonathan and the princess skipped yesterday. Still haven’t shown. But that must just be a coincidence, right?”

Steve feigned indifference, too proud to ask for more details; he didn’t think Tommy was the most reliable source of information and wouldn’t put it past him to spread fake rumors just to stir up trouble.

Like when he painted ‘Nancy-the-slut-Wheeler’ on the movie theater that day, and it ended up not being true… that was mostly my fault, though. I shouldn't’ve jumped to conclusions.

Apparently delighted to be the bearer of bad tidings, Tommy cackled on his way out of the shower. Billy’s blue eyes followed him as he left; he had been standing there drying himself with his towel for what seemed like longer than necessary, and Steve couldn’t help but wonder why he continued to linger.

“Don’t take it too hard, man… pretty boy like you has got nothing to worry about.”

Wait… what the hell did he just call me?

Steve was glad that he was lathering up his hair with shampoo, so he had a good excuse to keep his eyes closed; he hoped he wasn’t turning red.

“Plenty of bitches in the sea,” Billy added.

Steve had no choice but to open his eyes when his shower head was suddenly turned off a moment later; if he didn’t know any better, he might have thought Billy was trying to force him to pay attention to what he was saying.

“Am I right?” Billy asked with a little smirk.

Dripping and soapy, Steve just stood there staring sullenly at Billy, who reached over to give his shoulder a quick, manly pat.

“I’ll be sure to leave you some,” he said on his way out, not even bothering to wrap his towel around his waist.

Jeez, even his butt is tan.

…………

As he went through the motions of the rest of his day at school, Steve tried not to worry about what Nancy was doing. He didn’t give a second thought to Tommy’s strong hints that she and Jonathan were hooking up because he knew that wasn’t her style.

She’s always been a goody two-shoes… she wouldn’t just skip school for no good reason, especially not to screw around with Jonathan Byers. They’d better not be off dealing with another one of those demogorgons without me, though.

He also tried, unsuccessfully, not to think about Billy Hargrove or his unpredictable, baffling behavior. Sometimes he didn’t say a single word, like at the Halloween party when they first met, and at other times he couldn’t seem to shut up. When he wasn’t knocking Steve to the floor, taunting him, and turning off his water, he was offering basketball pointers and calling him pretty.

He was obviously just talking shit, but still…
The remaining hours and minutes of the day dragged on forever and Steve was getting increasingly antsy for the final bell to ring. To his dismay, there was a pop quiz in sixth period physics for which he wasn’t remotely prepared; he knew he’d get an F as soon as the teacher began writing the question on the blackboard.

*I’m so screwed.*

It seemed to take a hundred years, but the dismissal bell finally rang at 3:15. Steve glumly handed in his paper, which was mostly blank, except for his name in the corner and a few hastily scribbled lines of wild guesses. He was sick of school, sick of thinking about Nancy, sick of being taunted by Tommy and sick of whatever strange, one-sided game Billy Hargrove was playing with him.

*“Plant your feet and draw a charge”? Cocky bastard thinks he knows everything.*

The hallway was crowded with students, all talking and laughing at once and the air was filled with thank-God-it’s-Friday excitement. Steve made his way through the throng and jerked open his locker, groaning in dismay when a small avalanche of folders, papers, and books fell to the floor. He hastily scooped everything back up, scowling when someone stepped on his navy-blue binder and left a dusty sneaker print. His eyes widened when he spotted a Polaroid photo that had fluttered to the floor; it was a photo of Nancy, wearing a pretty polka-dot dress and smiling happily.

*Maybe she wasn’t really happy, though. Maybe I just wanted to think she was.*

Just as Steve reached out for the Polaroid picture on the floor, a black leather boot nearly crushed his fingers, and someone with a black watch and rings on several of his tanned fingers picked it up.

*“Hey, Harrington.”*

*Seriously? Him again?*

It was the inescapable Billy Hargrove, wearing a white button-down beneath a denim jacket and a very tight pair of jeans. Steve stood up quickly, holding all the books and folders he’d just picked up in one arm and reaching out with the other to try to take back his photo.

*“Cleaning out shit like this after a breakup is a good place to start,”* Billy said sagely, holding the picture just out of Steve’s reach and glancing up at it ruefully, like it was of little interest. *“Not healthy to hang onto bad memories, y’know?”*

*Christ, he’s annoying.*

*“By the sound of it, things are really steaming up between her and whoever the hell Jonathan is… be pretty depressing to hold onto this.”* Billy nodded in the direction of a large trash can next to a classroom door. *“Want me to throw it away for you?”*

*“No!”* Steve snapped, finally snatching the Polaroid out of Billy’s hand. *“Jesus, man, what the hell do you want?”*

*“Whoa, whoa,”* Billy raised his palms defensively and smiled as he pulled a slightly crumpled index card from the pocket of his jeans. *“Chill, dude… I don’t want anything.”*

*“Then why are you here?”* Steve demanded testily, tucking the photo safely into his book bag.

Billy pointed to a locker next to Steve’s and held up the index card in his hand; there were three numbers written on it, separated by dashes. *“Those numbskulls in the front office finally got their shit together and assigned me a locker… looks like we’re gonna be neighbors.”*
“Oh…” Steve muttered, feeling slightly foolish. “Lucky me.”

“Lucky you,” Billy agreed with a maddeningly smug nod. “Anyway… you going to the party this weekend?”

“What party?” Steve asked distractedly, trying to figure out which books and folders he could put back in his locker and which ones he needed to take home for studying and homework.

“There’s some kid named Greg… you know him?” Billy frowned in concentration as he fiddled with the combination lock. “Well, I heard his parents are gonna be away on Sunday night so he’s throwing a rager.”

Steve still hadn’t recovered from the events of the Halloween party two nights earlier. “Didn’t we just have one on Wednesday?”

“Who knew a boring shithole like this would have such a thriving nightlife scene?” Billy mused absently, smiling triumphantly when the locker door finally clicked open.

“Hawkins isn’t that bad,” Steve mumbled defensively.

“It doesn’t hold a candle to L.A., but you’re right.” Billy leaned casually against the lockers and looked pointedly at Steve. “It’s not... that bad.”

Steve wasn’t sure why, but he could feel his cheeks growing warm. He shoved one last notebook into his book bag, slammed his locker closed, and turned to leave.

“Where’s the fire, buddy?” Billy took a quick step sideways to block his path. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

Billy snapped his fingers in front of Steve’s face, startling him. “The party, Harrington. You going, or not?”

“Uh…” Steve couldn’t think of a decent excuse, and didn’t know why he felt like he needed to come up with one. “Probably not… I’ve got a lot of studying to do.”

Billy raised his eyebrows skeptically. “Studying, my ass. Don’t be a fuckin’ wet blanket, dude.”

“I just bombed a physics quiz. If I flunk the class, my parents are gonna—”

“You mean that dumb quiz about the Doppler effect, right?” Billy snorted derisively. “That thing was easy as hell.”

Great, so he’s good at basketball AND physics? Know-it-all asshole.

Steve looked down at the floor as he adjusted the strap of his book bag on his shoulder. “Why do you care so much about whether I go to some stupid party, anyway?”

“I don’t care,” Billy scoffed with an imperious little tilt of his chin. “Excuse me for being nice.”

Steve sighed and rested his hands on his hips. “Which one is it, man? You wanna be nice, or you wanna talk trash and knock me on the floor every day?”

“Oh, that’s what’s got your panties in a twist.” Billy grinned, revealing perfectly straight, white teeth. “You want me to go easy on you in gym?”
“No!” Steve protested irritably, shaking his head. “That’s not what I—”

“Just plant your feet, dude, and you won’t keep falling over.”

Fall over? Gimme a break. He pushed me and he knows it.

“Look,” Steve snapped, growing increasingly annoyed at the way Billy seemed to insist on misinterpreting everything he said. “I don’t need any basketball pointers from you, and I don’t feel like going to a party this weekend, so give it a rest.”

“You’d rather stay home moping over that chick who dumped you, huh?”

“She didn’t… th-that’s not official yet, okay?” Steve glared at him. “And I don’t mope.”

“Yeah, right.” Billy held up his thumbs and forefingers to form a little rectangle, which he pretended to peer through. “I can picture it now: King Steve, moping in his big, fancy bedroom, getting drunk by himself while he stares at photos of his old flame and listens to ‘Boys Don’t Cry’ on repeat—”

“That’s actually a really good song,” Steve interjected hotly. “And my room isn’t fancy, for Christ’s sake.”

Billy snorted and rolled his eyes. “Rich, pampered boy like you? I wouldn’t be surprised if you had a chandelier and a grand piano in there.”

“Who do you think I am, Liberace? And I’m not gonna mope or stare at photos or any of that other shit.”

“So prove it,” Billy said with a maddening smirk. “Come to the party.”

Jesus, he’s persistent. Why does he care?

Steve chewed uncertainly on his bottom lip, wondering why he was still standing there, willingly having this conversation. “You know I’m not gonna do any stupid keg stands, right?”

“No? And why the hell not, may I ask?” Tommy appeared suddenly like a poltergeist summoned by the mention of a keg stand; he stood beside Billy and reached over to give Steve’s shoulder a not-so-friendly punch. “C’mon, Harrington, you’ve gotta try to win back your crown. I could use a good laugh, watching you humiliate yourself.”

Billy spoke quietly, without taking his eyes off Steve. “Hey, Tommy… do me a favor and fuck off for a minute.”

“Yeah, but I was—”

“Fuck. Off.”

Tommy’s grin faded into disbelief and he let out a short, nervous chuckle. “What, seriously?”

Billy turned slowly to glare at him, speaking in a dangerously low voice. “Are your ears broken, pal? You really gonna make me repeat myself again?”

The tension in the noisy hallway was almost palpable: hot, threatening waves of aggression radiated from Billy, with a sour hint of sullen defeat from Tommy.

“Okay, man, okay.” Looking down at his sneakers, he retreated a few steps. “Guess I’ll, uh… go see what’s taking Carol so long.”
As Steve watched Tommy dissolve into the crowded hallway, he remembered the cold, humiliating day last November when their friendship had come to a screeching halt. After exchanging a few heated words in a convenience store parking lot, Tommy had shoved him, threatened to finish the beating that Jonathan Byers started, and called him a little pussy. Angry and ashamed, Steve had gotten back into his car and fled the scene, feeling like a cowardly disgrace to all alphas.

*How is it that this cocky guy from California can just show up, and after a couple days Tommy’s rolling over for him and following orders?*

Steve hated to admit it, but he was more than a little impressed by how quickly and effectively Billy had gotten Tommy to back down; it was remarkably similar to the alpha trick of mentally asserting dominance over betas. His father had told him that it just happened naturally, but so far Steve hadn’t figured out how it worked; none of the friends he’d ever had, least of all Tommy, had deferred to him like he was someone to be respected and obeyed.

*Could Billy be a…? No, no way. He’s a bossy, intimidating prick, but that doesn’t make him an alpha. Right?*

“Right, so…” Billy continued, turning back to fix his blue eyes on Steve. “You’ll swing by the party on Sunday?”

“Yeah, okay,” Steve answered without thinking.

*Crap. I’d better not regret this.*

“Cool,” Billy said simply before slamming his locker and walking away without another word.

Steve tried not to be annoyed by the way most of the female students stared as Billy strutted down the hallway; he noticed that even a few guys were looking at him with a combination of curiosity and envy.

Just a few feet from Steve, a girl standing with a cluster of friends licked her lips and groaned wistfully. “Oh my god, is he seriously for real? Have you ever seen anything so gorgeous before?”

“I knowww…” One of her companions agreed, clutching her binder against her chest and sighing longingly. “He could be, like, a model. You think he’s a good kisser?”

“Are you kidding? Have you seen his lips? Of course he’s a good kisser… and good at everything else in that department, too, I bet.”

*Ugh, why is everyone so obsessed with him? I’m getting the hell out of here.*

Steve brushed past the giggling group of girls and continued down the crowded hallway, carefully remaining several paces behind Billy; they were both headed to the school parking lot, and he didn’t want to catch up with him and end up getting stuck in another aggravating conversation.

*What's his deal? I can't figure him out at all.*

Chapter End Notes
Recommended listening: Erasure- Love to Hate You (1991)
Bad Boys Like to Rock n' Roll

Chapter Notes

This chapter picks up immediately after the last one left off, on Friday after school.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Billy strolled to the school parking lot and leaned against his Camaro to wait for Max; tapping his foot impatiently, he ignored the two girls giggling and whispering near the station wagon parked beside him. When he spotted Steve Harrington walking towards his dark red BMW, Billy gave him a quick, casual nod of acknowledgment. His instincts told him it was too soon in their tenuous acquaintance for waves or smiles, but when Steve looked across the parking lot and raised his hand in an awkwardly uncertain parting gesture, Billy had to smile. Ever the shameless flirt, he also couldn’t resist adding one of his signature tongue-wags, his smile broadening into a mischievous grin when Steve looked down hastily and ducked into his car.

What’s the rush, pretty boy? You afraid you might see something you like?

As the BMW sped out of the parking lot, Billy inwardly congratulated himself for working up the nerve to ask Steve about going to the party; he had successfully managed to confirm that he would be there without going out on a limb and risking rejection by actually inviting him.

Wonder how much he would’ve blushed if I had big enough balls to just say, “Hey, Harrington, wanna go to a party with me on Sunday?”

Billy reminded himself for what felt like the hundredth time not to get overly excited or expect anything particularly interesting to happen at the party. He tried not to imagine hypothetical, wildly improbable scenarios in which Steve got so wasted that he let Billy get a little touchy-feely, or in which Billy heroically volunteered to carry Steve’s limp, inebriated body to an upstairs bedroom to sleep off the effects of his overindulgence.

I wouldn’t go overboard or anything. I’d be a gentleman and just… take his shoes off and tuck him in. Maybe roll him over, too, so he doesn’t choke on his puke the way Jimi Hendrix did. Anyway, it’s pointless thinking about shit that’ll never happen. He barely even drank at the Halloween party… maybe Tommy’s right about that Wheeler chick turning him into a boring old goody-goody who’s forgotten how to let loose.

Shoving his daydreams to the back of his mind, Billy glanced down at the digital display on his black leather watch; only a few minutes had passed, but it felt like longer, and he had much more important things to do than stand in a parking lot all afternoon.

I’ll give that lousy little squirt five more minutes… she’d better not be late again.

He squinted at the steady stream of kids pouring out the front doors of Hawkins Middle School until a red-headed girl carrying a skateboard finally appeared. Billy frowned when he noticed that she was walking rapidly and being closely followed by a black boy her age wearing jeans and a corduroy jacket; the kid seemed to be trying to talk to her even though she was storming away from him.

Wait, is he one of the nerdy losers I scared off the road on Halloween? Hard to say for sure, but he
Billy couldn’t hear most of what they were saying over the noise of all the other students in the parking lot and the rumble of car engines, but they were definitely arguing. When Max was less than twenty feet from the Camaro, she abruptly whirled around to face the boy pursuing her. Billy heard her yell, “No, I don’t understand!” followed by a few things he couldn’t hear and then, “You just treat me like garbage!”

Whoa, what the hell is going on with that girl? It’s only been four days and she’s already got boys chasing after her?

The boy kept raising his hands like he was pleading his case and after another minute of arguing, Max turned and walked away from him; he yelled her name, but she didn’t look back.

As much as he’d prefer to not have a step-sister at all, Billy couldn’t help feeling a twinge of protective alpha anger at the sight of someone from his family being harassed. He didn’t like Max one bit and was certain he never would, but she had become a member of his pack whether he liked it or not, and he pinched the unlit cigarette he was holding so tightly it was in danger of snapping in half.

She said he treats her like garbage... what did he do?

“That kid you were talking to, who is he?” Billy demanded as Max approached the car.

“He’s no one.”

Billy didn’t believe her for a second. “No one?”

“This kid from my class,” Max said hastily as she opened the passenger door and slid into her seat.

Billy lingered outside for a moment or two, noting the way the boy continued to look over his shoulder at Max before disappearing from view. Surprised and bothered by how unsettled he felt, he sat down in his Camaro, slammed the door and finally lit the cigarette he’d been holding, savoring the familiar warmth in his throat. “Why was he talking to you?”

“It was just about a stupid class assignment.”

Liar. Why is she protecting him?

“Then why’re you so upset?”

“I’m not!” Max retorted hotly.

“He causing you trouble?”

“What do you care?”

“Because, Max,” Billy began scornfully, annoyed by both her stubborn attitude and his own sense of familial obligation. “You’re a piece of shit, but we’re family now, whether we like it or not, meaning I’m stuck looking out for you.”

Max rolled her eyes and raised her hands mockingly. “What would I ever do without y—”

“Hey!” Billy reached out suddenly to grab her wrist. “This is serious shit, okay?”

Seeing that he had Max’s wide-eyed, undivided attention, he continued. “I’m older than you, and
something you learn is that there are a certain type of people in this world that you stay away from, and *that* kid, Max? That kid is one of them.”

Max tried to jerk her arm away, but he gripped it tightly.

“You stay away from him, you hear me? Stay away.”

He released her wrist and took another drag on his cigarette as he switched on the ignition and pulled out of the school parking lot. He felt the tiniest twinge of guilt when he saw her face turning pink and her chin trembling.

“Aw, Christ,” Billy sighed, tapping the ash off the end of his Marlboro. “Gonna switch on the waterworks now, huh? So much for not being upset…”

“I’m *not* upset,” Max insisted quietly, her voice wavering and indignant; she looked down and rubbed the place on her left wrist where Billy had dug his fingers. “And if I am, it’s not because of anything *he* did.”

“Why are you defending him?” Billy scowled. “I just heard you say he treated you like garbage.”

Max looked uncomfortable and pursed her lips. “It’s not polite to listen in on people’s conversations.”

“Oh man, that’s rich,” Billy laughed bitterly, shaking his head incredulously at the irony of her words. “First of all, you’ve got a lot of nerve to lecture me about eavesdropping, you nosy little brat. Do I really need to remind you about the time you listened in on a *private* phone conversation of mine and used it for your sneaky schemes?”

“But you were being so—”

“Second of all,” Billy continued, ignoring her attempts to interject. “I wasn’t listening in on *shit*, okay? I was just standing there minding my own business, waiting around to drive your pampered ass home, I might add. What the hell was I supposed to do while you two were yelling at each other ten feet away from me, plug my ears and start humming?”

Max wiped a stray tear from her cheek and stared sullenly at the passing trees; strands of orange hair flew chaotically around her face from the wind gusting through the open window.

Billy glanced over at her. “What did you mean when you said he treated you like garbage, anyway?”

“N-nothing,” she stammered. “He doesn’t treat me like anything. I… I don’t know why I said that. I was just mad.”

“Mad about what?” Billy demanded, growing increasingly exasperated. “And don’t lie to me again and say it was about a stupid class assignment. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

Max sighed heavily, still staring out her window. “It’s really no big deal… my first day here, I thought he was kinda weird, because he and a few of his friends kept following me around and staring at me.”

“They were what?”

“Anyway,” Max continued hurriedly, “I thought he wanted to be friends because he likes video games, too, but then he was being really secretive, so I told him to forget it and have a nice life. End of story.”
Billy frowned. “What could an eighth-grade dweeb like him possibly have to be secretive about?”

“I don’t know, obviously,” Max retorted. “It’s a secret.”

“You’d better watch that snotty attitude, shitbird,” Billy snapped, blowing a stream of cigarette smoke out of his open window. “Should I pull over and make you walk the rest of the way home?”

“No,” she muttered sullenly, without looking at him.

“You sure you don’t have a crush on that kid, Max?”

“No,” she answered emphatically, her cheeks turning a slightly redder shade of pink. “I seriously don’t! I barely know him.”

Christ, she’s naïve.

“Unless that kid isn’t into girls, he’s probably already got the hots for you, so you’re gonna need to be careful because that ‘Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner’ crap doesn’t usually have a happy ending in real life.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Max asked, her brow crinkling with confusion. “I haven’t seen that movie, but isn’t it about a black guy and white lady who are engaged, or something? I just said I barely know him and you’re talking like we’re about to get married or something.”

Billy took a deep breath, willing himself to be patient as he tried to organize his angry, jumbled-up thoughts. “Look… I’m a senior, so I’m getting out of this shithole soon, but you’re gonna be stuck here for years, and you pubescent pipsqueaks won’t be thirteen forever… ‘I barely know him’ can turn into ‘Frenching under the bleachers’ in no time.”

“Ew, gross!” Max’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I'm not interested in Frenching anybody, and I still don’t get what that has to do with—”

“Why do I have to spell every little thing out for you, huh?” Billy hesitated for a moment, taking a fortifying drag on his Marlboro before continuing. “Have you already forgotten about how crazy my old man got when he saw… when you made sure he came home early that day?”

Max looked over sharply at her step-brother, clearly surprised that he had brought up the unpleasant events of that fateful summer afternoon— the day she was forced to see certain hidden truths more clearly.

“I haven't forgotten, but I... I’m a girl,” she stammered uncertainly, eyeing Billy warily like he was a dangerous animal in an unlatched cage. “Neil wouldn’t have any reason to go ballistic about me hanging out with a boy, would he?”

Billy snorted with laughter, grimly bemused by her innocence. “You’re even dumber than I thought if you seriously think the only reason my dad was pissed was because there was a dude in my room. Use your brain, Max… what kind of dude was he?”

“You’re saying… you’re saying that your dad doesn’t like black people?” Max’s eyes were round with naïve astonishment. “W-why?”

“Fuck if I know,” Billy muttered contemptuously. “He’s an ignorant shithead, okay? He doesn't like Jews or Mexicans, either. So all I’m saying is, you can spare yourself a world of trouble by staying away from certain types of people, at least until you get out of here and go to college, far away from
Neil.”

Max sat silently for a few moments, deep in thought, before suddenly blurting out, “What’s a ‘beta’?”

Shit, she heard that, too? Way to go, Dad.

“It’s the second letter in the Greek alphabet,” Billy answered flatly, staring straight ahead and deliberately evading her question. “Like in the word ‘alphabet’, or sororities like Gamma Phi Beta or whatever.”

Max didn’t look convinced. “When Neil said it, though, it sounded like an insult.”

“Well, it can also be a stupid put-down guys sometimes use on each other,” Billy acknowledged carefully. “Don’t worry about it.”

“But—”

“I said don’t worry about it,” he growled through gritted teeth; he had reached the end of his patience. “We wouldn't be having this stupid conversation if you'd minded your own business in the first place.”

The memories of that awful afternoon had filled Billy with fresh, seething resentment. He despised that his father somehow had the power to sour his mood and pollute his thoughts even when he was miles away at work, presumably going about his day and not giving his wayward son a second thought.

I bet he’ll still be able to do that even when he’s dead and gone. Assuming the wound-up old bastard doesn’t snap and murder me someday…

Max cleared her throat and spoke cautiously. “I… you know I’d never tell anyone about what happened that day, right?”

Billy took one last drag on his cigarette, then flicked it out the window. “Well, I should fucking hope not.”

Before Max could say anything else to make him angry, he popped his Saxon cassette into the tape player and cranked up the volume until she put her hands over her ears and glared at him.

“Step right up and ring the bell, this carousel’s goin’ straight to hell! When the metal’s hot and the music’s loud, your head is spinning round and round! Bad boys like to rock n’ roll!”

“Billy! Turn it down!”

“Sorry, can’t hear you!” Billy shouted back, swatting her hand away when she tried reaching out for the volume knob on the stereo.

The deafening music did little to smother the dark thoughts that had been dragged to the surface of his mind, and he pressed his foot down on the gas pedal a little harder, hoping that the adrenaline from an extra ten miles-per-hour on top of his already excessive speed might do the trick.

“Oh my god, Billy! Are you trying to kill us? Slow down!”

He ignored his step-sister’s shrill protests and a minute or two later, he pulled up outside the slightly shabby house on Old Cherry Road. Intending to drop Max off and run some errands, he didn’t
bother turning off the engine.

“Home sweet home,” he announced unenthusiastically, glancing at his reflection in the rearview mirror. “Now beat it.”

Max rolled her eyes as she gathered her backpack and skateboard in her arms and opened the passenger door, pausing to look back at her step-brother. “You’re not coming?”

“Nope,” Billy replied succinctly without looking away from the mirror. “I’ve got shit to do.”

“But Mom hasn’t had a house key made for me yet,” Max whined. “How am I supposed to get inside?”

“Jesus,” Billy muttered, turning down the music and scowling as he fiddled with the keychain dangling from the ignition; he kept his fingernails trimmed short, so it took several frustrating moments before he could successfully free his own house key and toss it at Max. “You’d better not lose it, shitbird. Don’t test me.”

As soon as his step-sister slammed the car door shut and stuck up her middle finger at him in her customary parting gesture, Billy sped away towards Main Street in the center of town. His father and step-mother didn’t like Max to be alone in the house, but it seemed to be mainly a nighttime concern, and there were still two or three hours of daylight left. He resented being asked to watch over her all the time because it reminded him too much of the old days, when he looked after his real little sister; he hated remembering her smiling, mischievous face and the way he always used to complain about being asked to babysit her for free. The guilt was too painful.

Looking back, there’s nothing I wouldn’t give to see her again. I’d look after her for the rest of my life without asking for a single goddamn cent in return.

“What Susan and Neil are so damn overprotective,” Billy grumbled to himself. “As if anything bad could happen to their precious Maxine in such a boring little town. Nothing remotely interesting ever happens here… I bet nobody even gets kidnapped or robbed. And besides, she’s fucking thirteen, not three. If she’s too dumb to look after herself, that shouldn’t be my problem.”

Billy didn’t feel like discussing his plans with his step-sister, of course, but he was actually on an important mission: he needed a job. There were only a few five dollar bills left in his wallet, and when those were gone he wouldn’t be able to buy cigarettes or gas and oil for his car. He regretted wasting money on taking Vicki out to eat earlier that week; he had ordered an inexpensive hamburger combo for himself, but his “date” seemed to want the priciest things on the menu, and infuriated Billy by not even finishing her deluxe bacon cheeseburger and strawberry shake. He was too proud to say anything, of course, but he silently resolved not to take any other fawning high school girls out until he had saved up some more cash.

I bet Harrington’s never had to worry about money a single day in his charmed life. Wonder where rich, pretty boys like him go on dates… probably not the greasy old burger stand.

As he made his way down the quiet, tree-lined streets, Billy thought about the upcoming party and wished he could afford to buy something new. Since he was limited to the few garments he already owned, he’d already decided that he would wear his short-sleeved, dark red button-down. As far as pants and shoes went, he had even fewer choices, and would inevitably opt for a tight pair of jeans and his trusty black motorcycle boots.

Whatever, it doesn’t really matter… as long as I don’t look like I’m trying too hard.
A few of the shops and businesses along Main Street were hiring, but they were all places like hair salons and dental offices that were probably looking for people with specific qualifications or cute, bubbly counter girls. When he drove past ‘Hawkins Vinyl & Cassette Emporium’ and spotted what looked like a small ‘Help Wanted’ sign displayed in the window, Billy braked so suddenly that a Volkswagen beetle almost crashed into him from behind.

The elderly woman driving the VW shook her fist angrily as she maneuvered around the stopped Camaro, and she cranked her window down enough to bellow, “I ought to report you to the authorities for reckless driving, young man!”

“Yeah, yeah… kiss my ass, you crusty old hag,” Billy muttered absently, making a few other drivers honk at him as he put his car in reverse to back into a parking spot in front of the record store.

Feeling optimistic and slightly nervous, Billy double-checked his appearance in the mirror and pulled a résumé from his book bag; he had spent lunch in the library that afternoon, typing up all his relevant personal information and practically non-existent job experience on a typewriter, then paying five cents per page to make copies on the ancient Xerox machine. He really liked the idea of working in a record store; as far as easy, minimum wage jobs went, it seemed infinitely cooler than flipping burgers or sweeping up spilled popcorn in the movie theater.

The dress code’s gotta be pretty lax at a record store, too… bet I won’t have to flatten my hair under some stupid uniform hat or take off my earring.

Billy didn’t want to admit it, but if he was being completely honest with himself, there was one other not-so-insignificant reason he hoped to be hired at Hawkins Vinyl & Cassette Emporium. The previous day, when Tommy had been gossiping a mile a minute during lunch, Billy heard him mention that Steve Harrington was a huge music fan and had frequented that record store for years.

Wonder what kind of music he likes? Probably cheesy pop bullshit like Wham! and Journey.

Pushing thoughts of his mysterious, brown-eyed classmate from his mind, Billy took a deep breath and pushed open the door of the record shop; a cluster of jingle bells duct-taped to its upper corner jangled noisily to herald his arrival.

“Whoa,” he murmured to himself, gazing around with the wide-eyed wonder of a little kid stepping into Disneyland.

Billy had been to plenty of record stores back home in Los Angeles, of course, but he wasn’t expecting a sleepy town like Hawkins to have such an impressively well-stocked establishment. It was a medium-sized shop with scuffed blue carpet and five long aisles of tall shelves crammed with records and cassette tapes. There were dozens of posters tacked to every surface, including the ceiling; he recognized the bright blue Adolescents poster immediately, as well as several others portraying everyone from Sid Vicious to Bob Marley. Inhaling slowly, he could smell a strange combination of tobacco, incense, and coffee. “Rock the Casbah” by The Clash played from speakers mounted in each corner.

“Welcome to The Emporium,” a soft, slightly raspy voice spoke suddenly behind him. “You new around here, honey? I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”

Startled, Billy turned on his heel and saw a woman standing behind the counter. He couldn’t be sure, but she looked like she might be in her late thirties, and possibly of Native American heritage, given her high cheekbones and beautiful copper skin. Her dark eyes appeared slightly magnified behind a large pair of glasses and her straight, jet-black hair was streaked with grey and tied up in a haphazard bun on top of her head. Silver and turquoise jewelry dangled from her ears and wrists, and her short,
pleasantly plump frame was squeezed into a Pink Floyd t-shirt and purple leggings.

_Hawkins continues to suprise me…_

“Yeah, I guess you could say I’m the new kid in town,” Billy answered, flashing what he hoped was a confident, winning smile. “This is a pretty sweet place you’ve got here… are you the manager?”

The woman smiled broadly in return, revealing a little gap between her front teeth. She set her mug of coffee down on the counter and spread her hands, proudly gesturing to the whole store. “Sure am, hon… since ’72, if you can believe it.”

After giving him a quick up-and-down glance, her dark, bespectacled eyes settled on the sheet of paper in his hand. “You interested in the job opening?”

“Yeah, definitely.” Billy stepped up to the counter and handed her his resumé, then stood there awkwardly while she peered at it.

After just a few seconds, she shrugged and looked up from the paper. “Well, this all seems fine… you’ve worked a cash register before, huh? At this gas station in California, or whatever?”

“How old are you, hon?”

“I’ll be eighteen in a few months.”

“You’re only seventeen?” The woman raised her eyebrows incredulously. “Man, there must be something special in the water over in California… I would’ve guessed twenty, at least. Does that mean you go to Hawkins High?”

“Yeah… just started on Tuesday.”

“I was a Hawkins Tiger, myself, way back in the day… class of ’64,” she informed him, turning around briefly to tuck the resumé in a filing cabinet, which Billy was surprised to notice had a black cat curled up on top of it. “Anyway, I need someone who can work late afternoons and evenings. The pay starts at three-fifty… if you show up on time and don’t steal anything, we can talk about bumping it up to four. Can you start Monday afternoon, after school?”

Billy could hardly believe his excellent fortune; he kept his expression politely casual, but in his mind he was whooping and turning cartwheels. “I just have to drop my step-sister off, ma’am, then I’m all yours for as long as you need me.”

She waved her hand dismissively; the silver bangles on her wrist tinkled like tiny bells. “You can forget all that “ma’am” crap. My name’s Juniper, but everybody calls me June.”

Billy reached over and shook her small, soft hand, looking directly into her eyes the way he knew most women couldn’t resist. “Pleasure to meet you, Miss June. That’s a beautiful name, if you don’t mind me saying so. Mine’s Billy… Billy Hargrove.”

“Well, aren’t you the cutest, most charming thing?” June chuckled heartily, resting her hands on her ample hips and beaming at him. “I think we’re gonna get along just fine, Billy. Handsome young man like you will bring in plenty of business, I bet… you’re probably already popular with all the girls at school, huh?”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Billy demurred, smiling modestly at his new employer.
“Ha! Gotta love a good-looking fella who isn’t boastful… you sure don’t meet those every day.” June reached up to pet the black cat on top of the filing cabinet; it opened its light green eyes drowsily and purred at her touch. “You’re not allergic to cats, are you? We had a teensy-weensy rodent situation a few years back, so I got this sweet gal from the pound to take care of ‘em and she’s stuck around ever since.”

Billy shrugged indifferently. “Nah, I’ve got no problem with cats.”

“Great!” June sat down on the padded stool behind the counter and picked up the copy of Rolling Stone she’d evidently been reading before Billy came in. “If you can spare a few minutes, why don’t you poke around the store for a while? Go ahead and familiarize yourself, ‘cause you’re gonna have to know where we keep everything.”

“Okay, thanks.” Billy decided that asking about the possibility of an employee discount mere moments after being hired might seem tacky, so he tucked his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket and strolled down the center aisle. He spotted the punk and heavy metal sections immediately, and in an amazing coincidence that felt like pure kismet, the mixtape blaring from the stereo began playing ‘Bad Boys (Like to Rock n’ Roll)’ by Saxon.

Oh, hell yeah… I think I’m gonna like it here.

Chapter End Notes

-Recommended listening: Saxon- Bad Boys (Like to Rock 'n' Roll)
-I'm not usually much of a metal fan, but I've gotta admit this one is a banger.
-Thanks for reading and leaving kudos! :)}
Here We Go Again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, November 3rd, 1984

Despite having several homework assignments that were due the following week, Steve Harrington stayed up past midnight on Friday listening to the radio, reading magazines, and idly strumming his guitar. When he finally went to bed, his nightmares woke him up over and over again: the memories from that night at the Byers' house were all twisted together in a confusing, disjointed tangle of haunting sights, sounds, and smells. He kept picturing the blinking Christmas lights, the wide-eyed fear on Nancy’s face, and the huge, slimy thing crashing down through the living room ceiling. The sounds of gunshots, other-worldly growls, and his own panicked shouts still rang in his ears, and there was no escaping the acrid stench of gasoline, burnt carpet and charred alien flesh.

“Go, get out of here! Run!”

Steve had only driven over there that night to make things right with Nancy, but he’d ended up leaping over bear traps and battling a seven-foot-tall demon. His last-minute heroics had been incredibly stupid, in hindsight; unable to simply drive away and abandon Jonathan and Nancy to their fates, he had impulsively sprinted back to the house with no weapon besides his trembling fists.

I should be dead... thank God for that spiky baseball bat Jonathan dropped on the floor.

No matter how hard he tried, Steve couldn’t forget the sickening sound the bat made each time it connected with the creature’s powerful body and the way the sharp nails sank into it, tearing its slimy skin when he pulled the bat away for another frantic swing.

“This is crazy, this is crazy, this is crazy!”

Regardless of what had actually happened that night, Steve never felt like a hero in his nightmares… just a petrified child, small and weak in the presence of that towering thing. In his nightmares, he saw what could have happened if he hadn’t gone to apologize to Nancy that night, or if he had arrived a mere five minutes later; sometimes she and Jonathan were mauled, bloody, and lifeless on the floor, and other times there were no bodies at all.

Dragged away to God-knows-where and gone forever, just like Barb... their families destroyed by grief.

As the sun rose on Saturday morning, Steve jolted back to consciousness in a sweaty, dread-filled panic for the fourth time, then fell back into an exhausted and mercifully dreamless sleep that lasted almost eight hours. The next time he opened his eyes, late afternoon sunlight was shining through the slit between his curtains and the clock on his bedside table confirmed that he had slept way too long.

Two-thirty? Crap, I wasted the whole morning... why didn’t anyone wake me up?

Discouraged that the day had already gotten off to such an unproductive start, Steve stayed in bed for over half an hour just staring at the ceiling, and when he finally dragged himself out of bed, it was only because he urgently needed to pee.

He took a long shower to wake himself up and bolster his spirits, singing loudly as he lathered up his hair with his tried-and-true favorite shampoo, Fabergé Organics. When he stepped out of the water
and wrapped a luxuriously thick towel around his trim waist, he lingered in the warm bathroom for a few minutes, staring critically at his body in the large mirror.

_Wonder how much I’d have to work out for that cocky shithed from California to quit knocking me down every chance he gets?_

Feeling a little childish, Steve raised his fists and flexed his biceps; there were visible muscles, but they weren’t particularly impressive and he wished they were larger and more sharply defined. He pulled on a clean pair of underpants and got down on his bedroom floor, inspired to do some quick exercises.

He wedged his feet under his dresser and did one hundred sit-ups, all the while trying to convince himself that his sudden interest in improving his physique had absolutely nothing to do with the irritatingly tan, well-built boy in his gym class.

_I’ve been meaning to work out more for a long time, and there’s no time like the present… it’s got nothing to do with that prick. Absolutely nada._

He grunted and groaned his way through the last fifteen sit-ups, then rolled over onto his stomach and tried to do fifty push-ups, though he had only made it to twenty-three when his arms started shaking uncontrollably and he collapsed face-first onto the carpet.

_God, this sucks… I’m really out of practice._

“Steve?” A voice called from outside his door, accompanied by a gentle knock. “Did you finally wake up, honey?”

His mother pushed open the door before Steve had a chance to respond. She was wearing a crisp white blouse tucked into dark blue slacks, with shiny Prada penny loafers.

Mrs. Harrington glanced around the bedroom before she spotted her son lying face-down on the floor in his briefs. “What in the world are you doing down there, sweetie? Exercising?”

“Just a little,” Steve admitted, trying to catch his breath as he hastily scrambled to his feet to get dressed. “You can’t just barge into my room, Mom… haven’t you ever heard of a little thing called privacy?”

“I knocked first,” Mrs. Harrington said dismissively as she walked over to her son’s desk and began tidying the books and schoolwork he’d plopped there the previous day. “Besides, I’ve seen it all before… I can still remember the way you used to run around the house after bathtime, naked and dripping water everywhere ‘cause you didn’t want to put your pajamas on and go to bed. Your dad and I had to chase you like you were a monkey who’d escaped from the zoo.”

“Yeah, well, that was a long time ago, Mom,” Steve muttered as he pulled on a dark t-shirt and stuck his long legs into a pair of jeans. “Can you please stop moving my stuff around?”

His mother smiled and raised her hands apologetically, stepping away from the desk. “Did you get a lot of studying done last night, hon?”

“Uh… not really,” Steve answered sheepishly as he selected a grey Members Only jacket from his closet. “I’ve got an errand to run now, then I’m gonna finish my homework.”

“Well, it’s nice to hear you’re taking things seriously, sweetheart.” Mrs. Harrington smiled affectionately at her son and nodded towards one of the textbooks stacked on his desk. “Physics was one of my favorite subjects in school. If you ever need any help, just let me know.”
“When exactly are you gonna help me?” Steve tried not to sound bitter, but he wished he had inherited whatever gene it was that made his mother so smart. “You’re never home.”

“That’s not fair and you know it, Steven,” she retorted with a stern little frown, resting her hands on her hips. “I’ve been home all morning and most of the afternoon, but someone wanted to spend half the day sleeping. I’ve told you a hundred times not to stay up so gosh-darn late.”

“Sorry,” Steve mumbled, feeling guilty because his mother, as usual, had a good point, even though she didn’t have all the facts; he had never told her about the terrifying nightmares that kept him up several nights a week and made him afraid to go to sleep. “So… are you going to work soon?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a pretty long shift, so I’ll stay overnight… probably won’t be back ’til pretty late tomorrow.” Mrs. Harrington smiled wistfully at her son and reached out to tousle his damp hair. “I wish we could spend more quality time together, dear. I miss our talks.”

“It’s okay,” Steve shrugged. He was used to it; his mother had been the head of the OB/GYN department at Hawkins General Hospital for as long as he could remember. In the past decade and a half, Dr. Lillian Harrington had delivered at least half the kids in town, including Nancy’s little sister, Holly, and Jonathan Byers’ little brother, Will.

“Well, I’d better get going if I don’t want to be late,” she sighed, glancing down at the dainty Hermès watch on her slender wrist. “Not one, but two of my nurses are home with the flu this weekend, if you can believe it, so I’ve got a lot on my plate.”

“Okay, Mom… see you later.” Steve leaned over to give her a quick peck on the cheek and a one-armed hug, breathing in the familiar, comforting fragrance of Ponds cold cream and Chanel perfume. “Drive safe.”

When his mother had closed the bedroom door softly behind her, Steve turned to scrutinize his reflection in the mirror above his dresser. He ran his fingers through the thick, dark hair that was so long it brushed the top of his shoulders.

I can’t even remember the last time I got it trimmed… I kinda like it this way, though.

Steve would rather die than admit it to anyone, but his hair (inherited from his father, whose mane was just as thick as his son’s, though it was cut more conservatively and streaked with silver) was his pride and joy. It was still damp from his shower, which was ideal for applying his secret weapon: Farrah Fawcett hairspray. He had been using it for years (initially borrowed discreetly from his mother’s bathroom, before he started buying his own), and four puffs was all it took to tame his thick mop of hair without making it look crispy or like he had spent too much time on it.

Downstairs in the kitchen, he made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, which he washed down with a glass of milk while he scanned the sports and funnies in the newspaper. His mother had left for the hospital and his father was miles away at his real estate company’s main office in Indianapolis, so Steve locked the front door on his way out, humming under his breath as he trotted down the driveway to his maroon BMW. Despite the moderate Saturday afternoon traffic, it only took ten minutes to drive to Main Street, where he planned to stop by the florist for a nice bouquet before continuing to Nancy Wheeler’s house.

Girls can’t resist flowers, right? I can’t remember if Nance has a favorite kind, though… pink ones, maybe? Yellow?

Steve missed having a girlfriend more than he thought he would, and he wasn’t really sure what he was supposed to do in this situation; usually he was the one who ended things, not the other way
around. He wished there was a way to know for certain if Nancy wanted him to bring her flowers and apologize; he dreaded the possibility of rejection, but knew he had to at least try.

*I can't just shrug it off and let her go like the last year didn’t even happen... like she was just some week-long fling who never meant anything to me.*

When she had confronted him in gym class two days earlier, Steve had referred to Jonathan Byers as her “other boyfriend” without knowing if that was actually true; at the time, she had seemed baffled by the suggestion and didn’t even remember being taken home by someone else. Steve felt guilty about it afterwards; he had been the one who asked Jonathan to drive her home, after all, so it wasn’t fair to blame her for that. He knew it also wasn’t fair to automatically believe the things Tommy had insinuated about her skipping school with Jonathan. There was no question about it: if Steve didn’t want to make the exact same mistake he had last year when he jumped to conclusions about Nancy’s involvement with another boy, he had to listen to her side of the story.

*You know what? I’m gonna try to be optimistic about this whole thing... I’ll swallow my pride, go over there and just spit it out. What’s the worst that could happen? I’ll say sorry and she’ll probably say it back, and if she’s in a good mood I can ask her to help me study. And who knows, maybe she’ll even want to come to that party with me on Sunday... the one that stupid asshole from California wouldn’t shut up about. I’ll just have to make sure Nance doesn’t overdo it with the punch this time.*

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Steve was fortunate enough to score a good parking spot on Main Street, but he found himself strolling right past the florist’s shop and stepping into the record store, instead.

*The flowers can wait a few minutes... I’m not putting anything off, I just wanna see if any cool new albums have come out since the last time I stopped by.*

As to be expected on a Saturday afternoon, there were several other people in Hawkins Vinyl & Cassette Emporium, flipping through crates filled with records and browsing the massive selection of tapes. “Somebody to Love” by Queen was blaring from the stereo.

June Stillwater, the Native American woman who had managed the store for longer than Steve could remember, greeted him with a warm smile. “Hey, there! How’s it going?”

Steve waved and returned her friendly greeting. Despite an age difference of at least twenty years, he’d always gotten along well with June, who knew more about music than anyone else in Hawkins. Steve had been one of her regular customers since he was old enough to pedal his bicycle to Main Street and spend all his pocket money on the latest pop must-have.

“*Everyday I try and I try and I try, but everybody wants to put me down... got no common sense, got nobody left to believe in...*”

“Can anybody find me somebody to love...” Steve sang softly under his breath as he meandered down the center aisle, looking around at all the tapes to see if anything caught his eye.

After browsing for over half an hour, Steve noticed Tommy and Carol walking in and decided it was as good a time as any to be on his way. He raised his chin and ignored his former friends as he headed to the front counter, though Tommy couldn’t seem to help himself and roughly bumped into Steve as he passed.

“Better watch where you’re going, Harrington,” Tommy said with an obnoxious smirk, wrapping an
arm around Carol’s waist and making her giggle.

Don’t answer… he’s not worth it.

“Hi, June.” Steve plastered on a cheerful smile as he placed the cassette tapes he’d selected on the scratched glass countertop. “How’s business?”

“Oh, can’t complain… keepin’ busy.” The silver bracelets on the kind shopkeeper’s wrist clinked as she gestured at the crowded store. “I just hired a new kid yesterday, actually, to help me stock the shelves and everything. He goes to school with you, I think.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s good,” Steve answered absently as he pulled his wallet from his jacket pocket. “What happened to the girl that used to work here?”

“She moved away… got a better job in the city, I guess.” June shrugged. “What can you do? It’s hard to convince you kids to stick around in a small town like this.”

“You stuck around, though,” Steve pointed out as he placed a crisp ten-dollar bill in her palm.

“Bloom where you’re planted, that’s what my mama always used to say.” June quickly counted out some change from the cash register. “Besides, I couldn’t leave this shop behind… someone’s gotta keep this town singin’ and tappin’ their toes, right? Anyway, see you soon, hon. Don’t be a stranger.”

The record store door swung shut behind Steve with a loud jingle and he stretched his arms over his head, sighing heavily. He couldn’t postpone his original errand any longer.

*Just go buy the stupid flowers… quit stalling like an idiot and get it over with. She’ll probably love ’em.*

Fifteen minutes later, Steve was driving towards Nancy Wheeler’s house, listening to one of his new cassette tapes and glancing occasionally at the bouquet on the passenger seat beside him; the woman in the flower shop had talked him into buying a dozen overpriced red roses.

*Seems kinda Valentine’s Day-ish, but they’re a classic, right? You can’t go wrong with a classic.*

Steve parked by the curb and strolled across the Wheeler’s front lawn, holding the bouquet and muttering to himself, unsure why he even cared about rehearsing an apology for a girl who had called him bullshit and refused to say that she loved him.

“Listen, I love you, and I’m sorry… what the hell am I sorry for?”

He stopped in his tracks when he saw Dustin Henderson walking towards him; he assumed the boy had been visiting Mike, Nancy’s little brother.

“Are those for Mr. or Mrs. Wheeler?” Dustin asked, indicating the roses Steve was holding.

*Wait, what?*

Steve looked down at the bouquet, momentarily struggling to imagine any remotely plausible scenario in which he would present either Ted or Karen Wheeler with roses.

“No…?”

*This kid is seriously weird.*
“Good.” Dustin promptly snatched the bouquet from him and began walking briskly towards Steve’s BMW.

“Hey!” Steve hadn’t expected that. “What the hell? Hey!”

“Nancy isn’t home.”

*She isn’t? How does he know?*

“Well, where is she?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Dustin declared. “We have bigger problems than your love life.”

>We do? What problems, exactly? I don’t like problems.*

Dustin opened the passenger door of Steve’s car and stood there waiting for him to catch up. “Do you still have that bat?”

“Bat? What bat?”

“The one with the nails,” Dustin elaborated impatiently, looking at him like he was an idiot.

“Why?” Steve asked warily, wondering why Dustin could possibly need a deadly weapon.

Of course Steve still had the baseball bat, but he had hoped he would never have a reason to use it again. Dustin and the other kids had been fascinated by it the previous year when they learned about the fight with the demogorgon at Will Byers’ house. Mike wanted to keep the bat, since it had originally belonged to him (a relic from the days when Ted Wheeler dreamed of transforming his decidedly unathletic son into a Little League champion) but Nancy had flatly refused, instructing Steve to “keep it somewhere safe… just in case.”

>Why the hell does Dustin want it, though? Is he gonna try to scare away a bully, or something?

“I’ll explain it on the way,” Dustin said importantly as he slid into the passenger seat.

Steve couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so confused. “What, *now*?”

“Now!”

Dustin slammed the car door shut and Steve had no choice but to follow him. It didn’t even cross his mind to tell the presumptuous younger boy to get the hell out of his car so he could drive around town searching for Nancy. In truth, he was more than a little relieved that she wasn’t home and that Dustin was providing a distraction from his so-called love life problems.

*I’ll go see what this kid is yammering about, then I’ll drive back here… that way I’ll have more time to figure out what I want to say. Where is she, anyway, if she’s not home? It’ll be dinnertime soon.*

He tried not to think that she might be with Jonathan and told himself that she was probably just out shopping with her friends. Steve still felt guilty whenever he recalled the “Nancy the slut” incident from the previous year, and he was determined to give her the benefit of the doubt.

*Even if we officially broke up— which we didn’t— I know Nance, and she wouldn’t jump in the sack with another guy after just a couple days.*

As he drove away from the Wheeler’s house, Steve wondered how he managed to get himself into such strange situations, and why he was suddenly taking orders from middle-schoolers.
Why’s it always gotta be ‘Steve to the rescue,’ huh? I just wanted to have a nice, normal weekend… buy some new tapes, mend fences with Nance, and finish my homework. Was that really too much to ask?

The sun was setting behind the trees, and Steve turned on his headlights as he drove down the long, tree-lined streets towards the Henderson’s house. “Hammer to Fall”, one of his favorite tracks from his newly-purchased Queen tape, played on the stereo. Dustin had been talking almost non-stop, telling Steve about a newt-like creature called a “pollywog” that he had apparently discovered in a trash can outside his house; he said he had checked every book he could find, but still didn’t know what species it was. He wanted Steve’s help because the pollywog had escaped and Dustin claimed it was dangerous.

Steve was skeptical, to say the least. “Wait a sec… how big did you say this thing was?”

“No way… he’s gotta be exaggerating, right?”

“I swear to god, man, it’s just some little lizard.” Steve was trying to be both mature and optimistic; the best-case-scenario, he thought, would be if Dustin was just letting his imagination run away with him.

“It’s not a lizard,” Dustin insisted stubbornly.

“How do you know?”

“Because his face opened up and he ate my cat,” Dustin replied matter-of-factly.

“Well, shit… he could’ve mentioned that part sooner.

Steve didn’t know what to say. Once upon a time, he wouldn’t have believed a story about a large, cat-devouring lizard for half a second, but that was before he’d seen the terrifying monster at Jonathan Byers’ house last November. He shivered a little, recalling the vivid nightmares that had haunted his sleep the previous night.

I can still remember the way that thing smelled… there’s no way it could’ve come back, right? I thought we killed it.

After pulling into the Henderson’s driveway, Steve retrieved a flashlight and the nail-studded baseball bat from his trunk, then followed the curly-haired boy around the house to the backyard, where there was a cellar entrance: double metal doors painted orange, with their handles ominously chained together and padlocked.

Steve paused for a few moments and listened intently, but there were only the sounds of Dustin’s breathing and an owl in the nearby woods. “I don’t hear shit.”

“He’s in there,” Dustin insisted.

Steve stuck the bat out and reluctantly gave the metal doors a little tap. When nothing happened, he swung the bat down with a loud bang. Again, there was silence. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting— the sound of an angry creature snarling and lunging at the doors, perhaps— and he was starting to feel silly.
What the hell am I doing out here? This is crazy...

He pointed the flashlight in Dustin’s face, forcing him to close his eyes. “Alright… listen, kid… I swear, if this is some sort of Halloween prank, you’re dead.”

“It’s not a prank,” Dustin muttered. “Get that out of my face.”

Steve sighed, deciding that it wouldn’t kill him to spend a few seconds properly investigating the cellar. “You got a key for this thing?”

He’s probably just imagining things, right? I’ll take a quick look, and when I don’t find anything down there I’ll let Dustin know I’m gonna kick his ass if he wastes my time again… then I’ll head back to Nancy’s place to give her the stupid flowers.

Dustin fished a key out of the pocket of his jeans and knelt down to unfasten the padlock. The heavy metal door creaked as it was pulled open, and Steve aimed the flashlight beam down into the darkness, revealing nothing but a short flight of concrete steps.

“He must be farther down there,” Dustin speculated with noticeable worry in his voice. “I’ll stay up here, in case he tries to escape.”

Oh, you’ll stay up here, huh?

Steve really didn’t want to go down into the cellar, but he didn’t want to act like a chicken and embarrass himself in front of a little kid, either. So he sighed again and descended the stairs carefully, shining the flashlight around and gripping his bat tightly on the off-chance that something sinister actually was lurking in the shadows. When he saw a single lightbulb on the ceiling, he pulled the string and turned it on, bathing the small concrete room in yellow light.

Whoa… w-what the hell is that?

On the floor right next to his Nikes, there was a pale, sticky-looking pile of… something. It reminded Steve of his elementary school days, when kids used to smear Elmer’s glue on their hands and peel it off in long, filmy strips. Grimacing in disgust, he picked it up with the tip of his baseball bat; it resembled a torn-up wet plastic bag, translucent and dripping with some kind of revolting mucus.

“Oh, shit,” Dustin muttered when he joined Steve in the cellar and saw it for himself.

Don’t lizards shed their skin like this? I think I saw a nature show about that once… goddamnit, I knew it was a lizard.

“Oh, shit,” Dustin repeated when his eyes landed on the freshly-dug hole in the corner of the cellar. “No way…”

Several concrete cinderblocks had been tugged away from the wall, and the boys stepped over them cautiously to crouch down in front of the foot-wide hole. When Steve shone the flashlight inside, they saw a long tunnel, twisting out of sight.

Jesus Christ…

“So, your freaky little pet’s on the loose, huh? That’s just great, man. Really great.”

“He’s not little anymore,” Dustin corrected gloomily. “He keeps molting, so he’s gonna be even bigger now… like, the size of a cocker spaniel or something.”
“Fantastic,” Steve grumbled as he tried to shake the gross clump of skin off the end of his bat, scowling when it got stuck on one of the nails. “So… what the hell are you gonna do, Henderson?”

Dustin sighed heavily and turned to head back up the stairs. “Obviously, we’ve gotta find him before he hurts someone.”

_Hang on, what’s all this “we” stuff?_

“Hurry up, Steve!” Dustin called over his shoulder. “We need a plan, and you’re gonna help me.”

“Yeah, but… I don’t know shit about giant, cat-eating slugs,” Steve protested, reaching up to turn off the lightbulb before ascending the stairs two at a time. “How the hell am I supposed to help?”

“Seriously?” Dustin snapped impatiently, holding up fingers as he rattled off Steve’s qualifications. “One, you’ve got that cool bat and you know how to use it. Two, you have a car. Three, you have money. Four, you—”

“Money?” Steve frowned, completely baffled. “Why do we need money? You planning to bribe that thing to leave town or something?”

“You’re killing me, Steve…” Dustin slammed the cellar doors and locked them again. “We might need to go buy some bait, obviously. How much do you think, like, twenty pounds of meat might cost? And when do you think the supermarket opens tomorrow morning?”

_Wow, he’s really not kidding around…_

“It’s a good thing you’ve already seen a demogorgon,” Dustin continued, pacing back and forth with his hands shoved in the pockets of his maroon zip-up hoodie. “That means you probably won’t panic and shit your pants when you see one again.”

“W-wait, you think that… thing is a…” Steve lowered his voice, glancing around as if someone might be eavesdropping on them in the Henderson’s dark backyard. He had a sickening, heavy feeling that his nightmares were about to come true: the monster had returned, ready to kill again. “You seriously think it’s a demogorgon? Like, a baby one?”

_Holy shit, this is bad…_

Dustin rolled his eyes and looked exasperated. “Well, what else would it be, genius? I’ve been doing some research, and there isn’t a single species on this planet with such an accelerated growth rate, impressive tunnel-digging abilities, and a face that opens up like a freakin’ Venus flytrap… oh, and did I mention that his hind legs just spontaneously popped out of his body the other day? I told you it wasn’t a lizard… nobody ever listens to me.”

“Jesus Christ,” Steve groaned weakly, wondering how the simple desire to give Nancy some flowers had taken such a strange and possibly dangerous turn.

_I can’t just ditch Dustin and let him deal with it on his own… what if he got himself killed? I’d feel guilty about it for the rest of my life. God, this is exactly like last year, when I had to help Nance and Jonathan… I can’t just drive away and say "It's not my problem."_

He shivered in the chilly November night air and pulled up the zipper on his grey jacket, steeling himself for whatever lay ahead. “Well, screw it… here we go again.”
Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Stranger Things theme song (C418 remix)
Sunday, November 4th, 1984: Part I

Billy regretted breaking his step-sister’s skateboard the moment it happened. It had all started earlier that day, after Neil had taken Susan out for a long afternoon of shopping at Sears, going to the movies to see ‘The Razor’s Edge’ and whatever else it was that boring people in their forties liked to do on dates; they had asked Billy to keep an eye on Maxine, claiming that they would return home by about four o’clock. Max was practicing her moves outside in the driveway and happened to botch a kick-flip attempt just as Billy was glancing idly out the window at her; the skateboard shot out from under Max’s feet and hit the side of the Camaro, which was parked just a few feet away from her. Bothered by the imminent possibility of nicks or scratches marring his beloved car’s pretty blue paint, Billy joined his step-sister outside to tell her she’d better be more careful if she didn’t want to seriously piss him off. In hindsight, he should’ve left it at that, but because he was bored he decided to linger on the back porch steps, criticizing her techniques and pointing out every single mistake. Predictably, Max grew tired of that pretty quickly and her temper flared up. At one point, she went so far as to snap, “Well, if it’s so easy why don’t you do it, hot-shot? It’s been, like, a hundred years since you stepped foot on a board; I bet you can’t even do half of those tricks anymore.”

It wasn’t in Billy’s nature to turn down a challenge, especially from someone he disliked as much as his step-sister. He ignored her protests and snatched her board to demonstrate a few kick-flips, each a little higher and more ambitious than the last. He had just wanted to show off, not cause any serious damage, but at the end of a particularly tricky three-sixty, he landed awkwardly and didn’t distribute his weight correctly.

CRACK!

Hours later, he could still picture the dismayed horror in Max’s clear blue eyes when she heard the sound of splintering wood slicing through the cold, November air. After a long, tense silence during which they both just stood there staring down wordlessly at the ruined skateboard, Max sniffled back tears, tucked it under her arm and stormed back into the house.

Billy wasn’t thinking about potential outcomes and consequences; he just wanted to put the snotty redhead in her place for daring to question his shredding abilities. He’d threatened to break her skateboard before, of course, but he wasn’t actually going to do it, because there would be no way to hide something like that from Susan and Neil.  

Now, I've either gotta convince Max to tell them she broke it on her own, which would involve
making a lot of shitty threats, or I’ll have to save up a ton of money at the job I haven’t even started yet to buy her a new one (and there’s no way in hell I’m doing that). Jesus, what a pain in the ass.

Even though he loathed the idea, Billy knew the simplest solution would be giving her his own skateboard, which was tucked away in a box somewhere, disused but still in fine condition and treasured like an old, trusted friend.

It’s no Camaro, but that board got me around L.A. for years and I’d hate to give it away.

He decided not to let the unfortunate events of that morning spoil the rest of his day. The thought of Max sulking in her room, crying over her broken skateboard and plotting ways to murder him in his sleep made him uneasy, so he shoved it all to the back of his mind along with everything else he preferred not to think about.

I’m not gonna let anything get between me and having a great time partying with a certain someone tonight.

Cracked skateboards aside, Billy was in pretty high spirits. He had spent a satisfying hour working out his arms while watching MTV, and Max stayed out of his way all afternoon, holed up in her room with her resentment and a roll of duct tape. After cooling himself off with one of Neil’s beers, Billy took a long, refreshing shower, during which he jerked off to the thought of pretty brown eyes pinched shut in ecstasy and little green gym shorts pulled down around pale, trembling knees. Back in the sanctuary of his bedroom, he spent over an hour selecting an outfit for the party that night and perfecting his hair.

“The horsemen are drawing nearer, on the leather steeds they ride, come to take your life…”

One of his favorite Metallica songs, ‘The Four Horsemen’, blared from his boombox and pumped him up for the night ahead, which he was determined would be a success; he planned to flirt aggressively with Steve and get him either drunk or stoned enough to forget all about the pesky Wheeler girl.

He shouldn’t be wasting time pining over some chicken-legged bitch who’s too stupid to see what a prize he is… not when he could have someone who knows how to treat him right. I bet that stuck-up rich chick didn’t even like to give him head.

He glanced over at his window, a little surprised that his party preparations had taken so long that it was already dark. He lit a cigarette and took a long drag, then set it down on the ashtray next to his array of cologne and hairspray bottles, staring into the mirror as he gave his hair a final spritz of Aqua Net. To his mild annoyance, the curl on his forehead was frizzy and refused to be teased into perfectly-coiled submission.

It looked better this afternoon, but whatever… I look foxy as hell, and I bet Harrington will think so, too.

He dabbed some cologne on each wrist, then put a little on his fingers and thrust his entire hand down the front of his jeans to rub some where, in the fortuitous event of a blow job, it could be appreciated without making his cock taste like Paco Rabanne Pour Homme.

No harm in being optimistic, right? You never know what could happen… I’ve got a good feeling about tonight.

He turned to the side and scrutinized his reflection in the mirror, admiring his figure-hugging outfit and even popping his hip a little, grinning at himself. He was pleased to see the effects of all the
squats and lunges he’d been doing and resolved to add even more of them to his workout routine.

Damn, my ass looks nice… maybe not as perfect as Harrington’s, but I think his just looks that way naturally. That lucky bastard probably doesn’t even have to work out.

Billy bent down for an extra-close examination of his face in the mirror, impressed with how well his recently-purchased bottle of face wash had cleared up the blackheads that peppered his chin and the tip of his nose. He puffed on his cigarette and gave himself a flirtatious little wink.

Yep, he’s not gonna know what hit him when I walk into the party tonight—

His narcissistic thoughts were interrupted by a sudden knock on the door, followed by his stepmother’s shrill voice calling his name.

“Billy?”

Ugh… what the hell does she want?

“Yeah, I’m a little bit busy in here, Susan,” Billy responded flatly without taking his eyes off the mirror.

The next voice he heard was his father’s, loud and angry. “Open the door, right now!”

Goddamnit, are they both lurking outside my room? This can’t be anything good…

Annoyed, Billy stuck his cigarette in the ashtray and opened the door to face his stern father and worried step-mother.

“What’s wrong?”

Neil Hargrove glanced over his son’s shoulder into his room, frowning with disapproval at the loud heavy metal and strong smell of Marlboros, hairspray and cologne. “Why don’t you tell us?”

Christ, he’s annoying.

“Because I don’t know,” Billy snapped impatiently.

“We can’t find Maxine,” Susan explained sadly.

“And her window’s open,” Neil added. “Where is she?”

Her window…? I thought she was in her room this whole time…

“I don’t know,” Billy replied earnestly.

“You don’t know?”

That’s what I said, asshole.

“Look, I’m sure she just…” Billy paused to think quickly about where Max could possibly have gone with no skateboard. “I don’t know, she’s probably at the arcade or something. I’m sure she’s fine.”

They’d better not try to make me go search for her… I don’t have time for this shit.

Billy hastened to his closet to select a jacket, tensing when his father stepped into the room. Susan
just lingered awkwardly in the doorway.

“You were supposed to watch her,” Neil reminded him.

“I know Dad, I was,” Billy insisted defensively, keeping his back to his father as he pulled on a distressed leather jacket. “It’s just… you guys were three hours late, and… well, I have a date.”

Billy didn’t actually have a date, of course, but he knew his strict father wouldn’t object to him going out to dinner (provided that it was with a girl) nearly as much as he would object to the idea of his son going to a wild high school party on a school night. Billy hadn’t actually been watching Max, either; she had been so quiet in her room for the past few hours that he’d almost forgotten she existed.

*So the little brat ran off to play Dig Dug or some shit and Dad thinks that’s my fault, huh? What does he want from me, an apology?*

Billy tried to sound appropriately penitent. “I’m sorry, okay?”

“So...” Neil looked pointedly at Billy's earring, carefully styled hair, and the red shirt that was unbuttoned to his navel. "That’s why you’ve been staring at yourself in the mirror like some faggot instead of watching your sister?”

*Screw you, asshole.*

Billy struggled to hold on to his last thread of patience, aware that he was treading on thin ice. “I have been looking after her *all* week, Dad, okay? She wants to run off, then that’s her problem. She’s thirteen years old and she shouldn’t need a full-time babysitter.”

Preparing to storm out the door, he switched off his boombox, plunging the room into sudden silence. All he wanted was to go to the party, get drunk, and toy with Steve. He had no interest in being insulted for daring to care about his appearance, nor in being scolded for daring to take his eyes off Max, as though she was a newborn baby rather than a teenager.

“And she’s *not* my sister!”

Billy knew he shouldn’t have added that last part, but he couldn’t bite back the words before they escaped his lips. In less than a second, Neil grabbed him by the lapels of his leather jacket and shoved him roughly against the wooden shelves built into his bedroom wall.

“What did we talk about?”

When Billy didn’t answer immediately, his father punched him in the face.

“What… did… we… talk about?”

Billy’s cheek throbbed with pain and he wondered if he'd have to go to the party with a nasty bruise. “Respect… and responsibility.”

“That’s right. Now, apologize to Susan.”

*Apologize to her for what? I didn’t say shit about her... all I said was that her daughter isn’t my sister, which is fucking true and she knows it.*

“I’m sorry, Susan,” he forced himself to mutter, wishing he could just wrap his hands around his father’s stupid throat and put an end to him, once and for all.

Susan remained standing in the doorway, looking extremely uncomfortable. “It’s okay, Neil,
“No, it’s not okay,” Neil snapped. “Nothing about his behavior is okay... but he’s gonna make up for it. He’s gonna call whatever whore he’s seeing tonight and cancel their date. And then he’s gonna go find his sister like the good, kind, respecting brother that he is. Isn’t that right, Billy?”

Billy was still leaning against the wooden shelves, quivering with rage and clenching his fists. He was too angry to open his mouth to speak, and he was terrified he might start crying; salty tears burned behind his eyes, threatening to fall at any second.

“Isn’t that right?” Neil bellowed in Billy’s face.

“Yes, sir,” he managed to whisper, continuing to will himself not to cry.

Neil sighed and stepped even closer. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

Billy swallowed the lump in his throat and raised his voice. “Yes, sir.”

“Find Max,” Neil growled on his way out, taking Susan with him and shutting the door.

Billy squeezed his eyes shut and felt hot, humiliated tears running down each of his cheeks.

I hate him… I hate him so fucking much. Why couldn’t he have died instead of Mom and Emily? It’s not fair. God, I hate him.

Billy recalled Max’s dubious claim that there were “talkative Mormons” at the front door, and suspected the kid named Lucas had something to do with her disappearance. She couldn’t have gone far without her skateboard, he reasoned.

First I’ll check the arcade, and if they’re not there I’ll try that kid’s house… maybe those idiots are necking in his room or something.

He looked up the Sinclair’s address in the phone book and scribbled it down on a scrap of paper before setting off, hoping that he wouldn’t even need it and that he would simply find Max at the Palace Arcade.

Neither of them were at the arcade, though, and they weren’t at Lucas’ house, either. Mrs. Sinclair was kind enough to write down directions to the Wheeler’s house, explaining that her son and his friends could often be found there, playing Dungeons & Dragons in the basement.

Jesus Christ, this is getting ridiculous. Max better be at this next place...

Within ten minutes, Billy was standing on the doorstep of a very nice two-story house in Loch Nora, the wealthiest neighborhood in Hawkins.

Wonder if Steve lives around here? He sure as hell doesn’t live in my part of town.

Billy rang the doorbell, and when nobody answered the door he tried again. There was definitely somebody home, because he could see the flickering glow of a television screen through one of the windows.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” he muttered impatiently under his breath, jabbing his finger repeatedly against the doorbell.

The door finally opened, revealing a flustered, middle-aged woman in a purple velvet robe.
“Oh, hi,” Billy said simply, plastering on a broad smile.

“Hi.” The woman sounded surprised, and her hand fluttered self-consciously to her chest, which was rather bony and still glistening with moisture from her bath.

*Should be easy, getting some helpful information from this one... hope she’s not too pissed about being dragged out of the tub on my account. Time to turn on the charm, I guess.*

“I, uh... didn’t realize Nancy had a sister.”

The woman chuckled and smiled modestly.

Billy lowered his voice to the deep, manly timbre he knew most women couldn’t resist. “What’s so funny?”

“I’m Nancy’s mother,” she clarified, obviously flattered.

“No,” Billy said with as much playful skepticism as he could muster. “Mrs. Wheeler?”

“Yes,” she confirmed, girlishly twirling the ends of her hair. “Um, I’m sorry, and you are...?”

“Billy... Billy Hargrove.”

Mrs. Wheeler shook his hand. “You must be here for Nancy.”

*Christ, she’s clueless...*

“Nancy?” Billy repeated, thinking briefly of the skinny, prissy-looking brunette in penny loafers; he had to laugh a little, because the suggestion was almost comically absurd. “No, no, no. Not my type. Actually, I’m looking for my little sister Maxine. She’s been missing all day, and to be honest with you, I’ve been worried sick, so...”

“Oh,” Mrs. Wheeler said with an oblivious, sympathetic smile.

“I thought she was at Lucas’, but Mrs. Sinclair said your house is the designated hangout, so...” Billy kept his best megawatt smile switched on and leaned in closer, amused by the way the middle-aged woman looked like she was about to melt into a gooey puddle. “Here I am.”

Unfortunately for Billy, Lucas and Max weren’t there, and he struggled to contain his irritation as he followed Mrs. Wheeler to her spacious kitchen, forcing himself to smile graciously when she invited him to help himself to the contents of a large ceramic cookie jar on the counter.

*Wonder how many times Harrington has been to this house? Did this lady offer him cookies and bat her eyelashes at him, too? That’d be pretty wild, considering he was fucking her daughter.*

On his way to the kitchen, Billy had spotted a doughy, bespectacled man in a turtleneck and patterned v-neck sweater snoring on an armchair in the corner of the living room. The man was illuminated by the soft, blue glow of the TV screen: the very picture of bourgeois mediocrity.

*So this is what marriage looks like for betas, huh?*

Mrs. Wheeler flipped through a leather-bound address book and quickly wrote down some directions in neat cursive to the house of someone named Will Byers, handing the slip of paper to Billy. “Their driveway is pretty dark this time of night, so drive slowly.”

“Always,” he assured her.
More like never... going slow is for old people and pussies.

“And when you see Mike, tell him to come home already, okay?” Mrs. Wheeler’s cheeks were flushed with desire, and she looked at Billy like she wanted him to untie the sash on her ruffled, eggplant-colored velvet robe and ravish her right there on the kitchen table.

She’s really got no clue she’s barking up the wrong tree, huh? My acting must be better than I thought.

“You’re a real lifesaver, you know that?” Billy maintained eye contact as he finally took a bite of the small vanilla sandwich cookie he’d selected from Mrs. Wheeler’s cookie jar, trying not to make a face when he realized it was hard as a rock.

Jesus, you’d think rich people would have nicer snacks than this stale crap.

She smiled brightly. “Anytime.”

“I’ll see you later,” Billy said with his mouth full, unwilling to swallow the hard cookie.

When he turned to walk back out the door, he knew Mrs. Wheeler’s lonely brown eyes were glued to his ass, but he didn’t mind.

Look all you want, lady, but you’re gonna have to ask Mr. Turtleneck in the La-Z-Boy over there if you’ve got an itch that needs to be scratched, ‘cause I’m not on the market... not your market, anyway.

Once he was outside, Billy spat out what was left of the stale cookie into a nearby rose bush, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. When he saw a “Reagan/Bush ’84” campaign sign stuck on the front lawn, he couldn’t resist giving it a hard kick, not even caring if Mrs. Wheeler was watching him from a window.

“Republicans can eat shit,” he muttered, smirking with satisfaction as the offending lawn sign sailed through the air and plopped onto the grass several feet away.

Billy got back in his car and drove away, glancing down at his digital watch to check the time; it was only eight-thirty, so he still had plenty of time to make it to the party, but he was getting increasingly pissed off about his missing step-sister.

If that little AWOL troublemaker isn’t at this next house, I swear to god I’m gonna lose it… this is taking way too long.

Cursing under his breath when he got stuck at a red light, Billy suddenly remembered the half-pint bottle of gin stashed in his glove compartment; he had shoplifted it from a convenience store in Nevada during his drive across the country three weeks earlier. He looked around to make sure there weren’t any cop cars nearby, then uncapped the bottle and took a quick, surreptitious swig; the strong liquor tasted like poison and burned the back of his throat, but that didn’t stop him from taking a second sip, and then a third.

“Jesus,” he complained aloud as he screwed the cap back on the bottle and burped. “Is this stupid light gonna stay red all fucking night, or what?”

He turned up the volume on the Saxon cassette playing on his car stereo, filling the car with the frenetic beat of ‘Power and the Glory’, which never failed to make him want to punch someone in the face… especially when paired with alcohol.
“I’m a soldier of fortune, I’m trained and I’m ready to kill… I’ve got no emotions I’m living with thunder and steel… I don’t hear your lies all I hear are your battle cries…”

When the light finally turned green, Billy floored the gas pedal and peeled through the intersection, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel as he sped down the street. Within ten minutes, he realized that he was lost and had to turn around, forcing himself to drive a little slower and pay more attention.

“Goddamnit, I really hate this hick town,” he grumbled, squinting at each street sign he passed and taking yet another swig of gin, grimacing as he polished off the eight-ounce bottle. “Is this it? Yeah, this has gotta be it…”

Max better be there, ’cause I’m not driving anywhere else tonight except that party.

He lit a cigarette and turned onto a dark, narrow road, driving carefully until he found the house: a basic, unimpressive residence with an equally unimpressive car parked on the expanse of weed-speckled dirt that had once, perhaps, passed for a lawn. The lights were on, and Billy prayed that his step-sister would be inside so he could escort her home and finally go to the party.

She’d better think twice before making a big, dramatic scene about coming with me, ‘cause I’ll grab her stupid orange hair and drag her to the car, if that’s what it takes…

He parked his Camaro and switched off his headlights just as the front door of the house opened, but it wasn’t his step-sister who stepped out onto the porch. Wondering if the gin was playing tricks on his mind, Billy rose slowly from his car and pulled the cigarette from his lips.

No fucking way…

Steve Harrington was standing on the porch with his hands on his hips, looking irritatingly perfect in a dark shirt, grey jacket, jeans, and Nikes. His dark red BMW was nowhere in sight, though; the only car parked in front of the small house was an ugly Toyota Camry, which definitely wouldn’t belong to a rich guy like Steve.

What the hell is going on here?

Billy managed to conceal his shock and keep his expression neutral, but his brain was buzzing with a million questions.

Where’s his car? Why isn’t he at the party? Is he seriously standing there, or did I overdo it with the booze?

“Am I dreaming, or is that you, Harrington?”

“Yeah, it’s me… don’t cream your pants,” Steve responded flatly, sounding almost bored.

Cream my pants? This smug asshole’s making fun of me, isn’t he?

Holding his cigarette securely between his lips, Billy quickly took off his jacket and tossed it into the car; it was a chilly night, but all the strong liquor was making him feel hot and sweaty.

“What are you doing here, amigo?”

“I could ask you the same thing… amigo,” Steve replied as he walked towards him.

“Looking for my stepsister… a little birdie told me she was here.”
A horny old birdie named Mrs. Wheeler, to be exact.

“Huh, that’s weird. I don’t know her.”

Even in his intoxicated condition, Billy was sharp enough to notice Steve’s defensive posture, with his arms crossed tightly across his chest; he could almost feel the nervous tension radiating from the other boy, along with that ever-present, intriguing smell. His eyes were briefly drawn away from Steve by a tiny movement behind a window in front of the house, where he spotted Maxine peering at him along with two or three boys.

Ha! I finally found the little shit.

He impulsively decided to give Steve another chance to be honest and looked away from the window, pretending that he hadn’t seen anything noteworthy.

“Small?” Billy elaborated, holding up his thumb and forefinger to indicate something tiny, then pointing to his hair. “Redhead? Bit of a bitch?”

C’mon, pretty boy, don’t lie to me. I really hate liars.

“Doesn’t ring a bell. Sorry, buddy.”

What the hell is he hiding? Why’s he at this random house with a bunch of thirteen-year-olds? Is he the kind of dude who has a creepy interest in kids, or something?

“Y’know, I dunno, this… this whole situation, Harrington, I don’t know. It’s giving me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Oh, yeah? Why’s that?”

Still lying like a rat. I don’t care if he’s beautiful, he’s still a goddamn lying rat.

Billy took another drag on his cigarette and shrugged. “My thirteen-year old sister goes missing all day. And then I find her with you in a stranger’s house… and you lie to me about it.”

“Man, were you dropped too much as a child, or what?” Steve chuckled. “I said she’s not here.”

Oh, he’s playing with fire… he must be trying to get his ass kicked, talking tough like that.

The gin had loosened Billy’s inhibitions, and his tongue felt like it had a mind of his own; he licked his lips slowly and smirked at the way Steve’s eyes were drawn to the erotic movement.

“I don’t know what you don’t understand about what I just said,” Steve continued smoothly. “She’s not here.”

He sure thinks he's slick, doesn't he?

“Then who is that?” Billy asked, pointing his cigarette at the window.

Steve’s dark eyes widened as he turned to follow Billy’s gaze and saw four small faces peeking out; they all popped down behind the couch like groundhogs, but it was too late.

Steve knew he was busted. “Aw, shit… look—”

Billy shoved him forcefully to the ground, uninterested in hearing more lies. “I told you to plant your feet.”
So, he was just gonna skip the party and blow me off without a second thought, huh? Even though he said he’d be there?

Billy drew his foot back and gave him a swift kick to the stomach, hoping to convey his anger and feelings of betrayal without actually breaking a rib or rupturing any internal organs.

That’s for lying to me, asshole… be grateful I didn’t kick your stupid, pretty face.

He left Steve behind, groaning and doubled up in pain on the concrete walkway. Fortunately for Billy, the kids weren’t smart enough to lock the front door, so he flung it open, gritting his teeth when he saw Max standing there with Lucas and two other boys.

*Popular little lady, huh? We haven’t even been in this crappy town one week and she’s already got herself a whole damn fan club…*

He was almost tempted to smack her like the spoiled, problem-causing brat she was. After all, she was the one who had snuck out of the house in the first place, resulting in Neil hitting and humiliating Billy and forcing him to waste his whole evening driving around town and questioning all the local housewives like an idiot. Billy knew he couldn’t lay a finger on his step-sister, though; if she returned home with a bruise on her freckled cheek, he’d get the beating of a lifetime when Neil inevitably found out.

*Lucas is probably to blame, too… he’s the one who brought her here, I just know it. She might not have even left the house if it wasn’t for him.*

“Well, well, well,” Billy said flatly as he slammed the door behind him. “Lucas Sinclair, what a surprise… I thought I told you to stay away from him, Max.”

He glanced briefly around the shabby little house, baffled and slightly disturbed by the hundreds of strange, childish-looking blue drawings taped to every surface, including the floor and even some of the furniture.

Max turned up her chin defiantly. “Billy, go away.”

*Did this brat seriously just tell me to go away? After I’ve spent the last hour tracking her down, like I’ve got nothing better to do?*

“You disobeyed me… and you know what happens when you disobey me.”

Billy could almost hear his father’s familiar voice in the back of his mind, snarling, *“You’d better learn some respect and responsibility, boy, or I’ll show you what happens when you disobey me.”*

Max had the good sense to look frightened, her pretenses of bravery evaporated. “Billy—”

“I break things,” he concluded dramatically, suddenly reaching out to grab the lapels of Lucas’ corduroy jacket and pushing him back into some shelves.

“Get off of me!” Lucas yelped, wriggling and wincing.

A vague sense of cautionary déjà vu prickled in the back of Billy’s mind, reminding him of the way he was grabbed and shoved against some shelves barely an hour earlier; the thought that he was turning into his father only fueled his anger.

“Since Maxine won’t listen to me, maybe you will. Stay away from her, you hear me?”
Fuzzy and barely intelligible over the effects of the alcohol, the voice in the back of Billy’s head warned him not to take things too far. He knew that beating up a kid half his size would be a special, crossing-the-line level of pathetic that would likely get him ridiculed at school once word spread. It was infuriating that he couldn’t properly punish Max or Lucas for messing up his evening without getting himself into a huge amount of trouble, either at home or at school.

“I said get off me!” Lucas shouted, quickly bringing his left knee up into Billy’s groin.

_Ow, fuck! FUCK!_

Billy felt a shooting pain in his balls and groaned in barely-contained agony.

“You are _so_ dead, Sinclair! You’re dead!”

_I wasn’t gonna hit him before, but now I’m definitely gonna—_

His violent thoughts were interrupted by a hand firmly gripping his shoulder and pushing him aside.

_Well, look who’s back… maybe I should’ve kicked him a little harder._

Steve stepped up to him, ready to pick up the gauntlet and be a Hollywood-style hero. “No, you are.”

The brief touch of knuckles on Billy’s face stung like an electric shock; it hurt and brought blood to his nose, but it wasn’t the same humiliating pain he felt when his father had socked him an hour earlier, or when Lucas had rammed his bony knee into his balls. This was a pain he could savor, because it was Steve.

_Do it again, you beautiful asshole. Go ahead. Gimme your best shot, I can take it._

“Looks like you got some fire in you after all, huh?” Billy goaded with a drunk cackle. He hated how raspy and shrill his own voice sounded, compared to the deep, sexy timbre he’d pulled off so well with Mrs. Wheeler. “I’ve been waiting to meet this ‘King Steve’ everybody’s been telling me so much about.”

“Get out,” Steve commanded, reaching out with his left hand to push him away; the tips of his fingers lingered for a moment on Billy’s chest, pressing against the pendant from his mother.

_Don’t wanna fight me, huh? Goddamn pussy… does he really think I’m some beta bitch who’ll tuck tail and scamper off, just ‘cause he said so? I’m a fucking alpha!_

Billy took a slow step back, staring at Steve for a few moments and pondering his next move before suddenly rearing back to take a wild swing. He was surprised and a little impressed when Steve ducked, easily dodging the incoming blow and returning it swiftly with one of his own.

_Ow… Jesus, that hurt._

“Yes! Kick his ass, Steve,” one of the boys shouted encouragingly. “Get him!”

The sound of Steve’s middle-school cheerleading squad made Billy see red.

_Maybe I should’ve run over those weak, shit-talking brats on Halloween when I had the chance…_

“Murder the son of a bitch!”

“Get that shithead!”
“Kill the son of a bitch!”

Yeah, yeah, everyone wants me dead… what else is new?

Billy laughed hysterically as though Steve was cracking jokes instead of landing punches and wondered if he’d finally snapped and lost his mind. Nothing felt like it mattered anymore. He didn’t even fight back, letting Steve hit him a few times until he ended up cornered in the kitchen. It wasn’t until he saw a glint of cocky triumph in Steve’s dark eyes that his anger took over again; Billy snatched a dinner plate from the sink and brought it down with a loud crash on top of his pretty, perfectly-coiffed head.

If everyone’s already decided I’m the villain here, there’s really no reason for me to fight fair, right?

Just like that, Billy had regained the upper hand. He punched Steve, swinging his fist so violently that he almost lost his balance and had to grab onto a nearby bookcase. Steve was hunched over in pain, staggering backwards into the front room and clearly struggling to stay on his feet.

What’s he trying to do, escape? I don’t think so, coward… get back here.

Billy seized him by the sleeves of his grey Members Only jacket and looked into his frightened brown eyes. Steve’s right wrist was pressed feebly against Billy’s chest, and his left hand rested heavily on his shoulder; at any other time, Billy would be thrilled by the near-embrace, but he was far too drunk and angry to feel anything but bitter, seething resentment.

“No one tells me what to do.”

Billy threw him down so forcefully that Steve actually skidded a few feet across the hardwood floor, curled defensively onto his right side. Billy whooped as he stormed over to him, rage and adrenaline pulsing through his veins. He knelt down and rolled Steve onto his back, caging his helpless, slender body between his own muscular thighs.

Who’s the king now, bitch?

He hit him.

You and these fucking snotty kids will never respect me, though.

He hit him again.

You all think I’m just a villain who deserves to die.

And again.

You want me to be the bad guy? Well, here you go.

And again.

I’ll be your bad guy, if that’s what you want. I’ll make you wish you’d never met me.

And again.

Just like I wish I’d never met you.

And again.

Fuck you, Steve Harrington.
And again.

_Fuck you and everyone who loves you._

And again.

_I hate your stupid, pretty face._

And again.

_It won’t be so pretty once it’s caved in, though, will it?_ 

And again.

_Then you’ll be ugly, just like me, and nobody will love—_

Suddenly, Billy felt a stabbing pain in his neck, and he stilled his fists.

_W-what the fuck?_

He rose to his feet and turned around. Max was standing in front of him, but his vision was already beginning to blur, like he was underwater or his eyes were crossed. There was definitely something stuck in his neck, and for half a moment he thought it might be a knife.

_Seriously? Did this crazy bitch just stab me?_

He reached up and winced as he yanked a hypodermic syringe from the right side of his neck.

_“The hell is this?”_

_Maybe it’s heroin… it sure as hell isn’t insulin… Jesus Christ, am I… am I gonna die?_

He took a few unsteady steps towards Max, but she kept backing away, eyeing him with the cautious triumph of a hunter who just felled a lion. The entire room was spinning and getting fuzzier by the second.

_“You little shit, what did you do?”_

_Uh-oh…_

Unable to support his own weight for a moment longer, Billy’s knees buckled and he collapsed onto the hardwood floor with a loud _thud_. He was dimly aware of Steve sprawled lifelessly just a foot away from him, and the thought that this would probably be the closest they’d ever get to lying down together made him laugh.

_Guess we won’t be making it to that party after all…_

Max reappeared suddenly, looking impossibly tall as she loomed above him, wielding the scariest baseball bat Billy had ever seen. “From here on out you leave me and my friends alone, do you understand?”

_Syringes… bats with nails… this girl is fucking nuts._

_“Screw you,”_ Billy muttered, glaring up at her and struggling to maintain a scrap of dignity. He could barely move; every bone and muscle in his body felt like it had been turned into Jell-O.
Max didn’t like her step-brother’s reply. She swung the bat in a quick downward arc, smashing it into the wooden floor between Billy’s immovable, spread-apart legs, a mere three inches south of his crotch. “Say it!”

_Say… say what, again?_

Summoning his last reserves of strength, Billy lifted his head to look down at the baseball bat, alarmed by the imminent threat to his manhood. He heard the sound of nails being forcefully ripped from floorboards as Max raised the bat again.

“Say you understand! Say it! SAY IT!”

_Jesus, quit screaming… my head is killing me._

“I… understand,” he mumbled resentfully, his words slurred from the combined effects of cheap gin and whatever was in that syringe.

“What?”

Billy wasn’t completely positive Max wouldn’t use the bat on him. She certainly seemed angry enough to do it, especially considering that she had just stabbed him in the neck. Billy didn’t want to test his luck and he was too exhausted to fight anymore.

“I understand.”

His eyelids felt heavier than half-dollars, like he hadn’t slept in days. Billy knew he should try to keep his eyes open, get up, and take charge of the situation, but every cell in his body was urging him to quit fighting and just let it all go. He knew he should be concerned about what was in the syringe and whether or not he was dying, but every thought in his brain was drifting away, just beyond his reach. His face and knuckles didn’t hurt anymore, he couldn’t remember anything that had ever happened to him, and he felt completely untethered from earthly concerns. He didn’t know his own name, where he was or how he had gotten there, and he didn’t care.

_It feels… good… to not feel anymore…_

Everything faded to black.

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Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Metallica- Fade to Black
Sunday, November 4th, 1984: Part II

Billy Hargrove jolted awake from a heavy, dreamless sleep, blinking up at the ceiling as his eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness; he was in an unfamiliar room that was completely silent except for the distant, rhythmic sounds of a ticking clock and a dripping faucet. The moonlight shining through the windows illuminated the bizarre blue crayon drawings taped everywhere, making them look even more sinister than they had when the lights were turned on.

Wait… whose house is this again? How did I end up on the floor?

Billy’s head throbbed with each thought; he could actually feel his heartbeat pulsing behind his temples. Even the smallest movement hurt and he was tempted to just continue lying there indefinitely, but the hard floor made his back and shoulders ache and he was desperately thirsty.

“Ugh… shit…”

His mouth and throat were so dry that it was difficult to muster any sound but a raspy groan. Billy forced himself to sit up slowly, wincing at the sudden twinge of pain on the side of his neck as he tried to remember what happened.

Max… I think it was her…

“How many times did I hit him? Where is he? Where’s… everyone?”

Memories were seeping back into Billy’s pounding head like murky water into a cracked boat, and every ache on his body had a barely-legible signature scrawled on it. The sore spot on his neck, for example, had something to do with his step-sister, and Billy was almost positive that the dull pain on his left cheek was a gift from his father.

Not just him, though… someone else took a few good swings at me, too.

Flashes from the fight with his brown-eyed high school nemesis slowly returned to him, and Billy wondered if the dried blood on his knuckles was his own or Steve Harrington’s.

Overcome by a sudden wave of nausea, Billy clapped both hands over his mouth and rushed to the kitchen, staggering on his wobbly legs and bumping into walls in the semi-darkness of the unfamiliar house. He located the sink just in time to bend down and puke into it, clinging to the edge and retching repeatedly until his stomach felt hollow.

“God,” he moaned weakly, bracing his forearms against the sink to support his sagging weight. “I’m never drinking again.”

He rinsed the putrid-smelling, half-digested gin down the drain and stuck his clammy face directly under the faucet, noisily gulping down a long drink of the sweetest water he’d ever tasted. As he turned off the tap and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, Billy’s bleary eyes settled on a dinner plate drying beside the sink and another memory returned to him.
Shit… did I really break a plate over Harrington’s head? What else did I do?

His stomach felt much better after throwing up, though his head still ached and his mouth tasted sour. There was just enough moonlight shining through the kitchen window to reveal a light-switch on the wall and when Billy flicked it on, he frowned with confusion at what he saw on the other side of the room: numerous jars and Tupperware containers of food were scattered all over the floor in front of the refrigerator, along with what appeared to be metal racks from inside the fridge itself.

What the fuck…?

He cautiously stepped over the mess, nudging a jar of pickles with the toe of his boot and sending it rolling across the kitchen floor. The refrigerator was covered with the same creepy, childish drawings as the rest of the house.

I don't know who lives here, but they've got some serious issues. I'm getting the hell out of this haunted old shack as soon as I check to see if these weirdos have got any cold beer…

Billy pulled the fridge open and jumped back in shock when something enormous that was wrapped in an old quilt tumbled out onto the floor with a squishy-sounding *thud*.

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

Billy stumbled backwards, tripping on the Tupperware containers scattered all over the floor and falling against the wall opposite the fridge.

W-what the hell is that? An alien? Is it real? Is it dead?

His heart hammered in his chest as he scrambled to his feet and sprinted out the front door, slamming it behind him in case the thing in the kitchen woke up and pursued him. Desperate to get away, he fumbled frantically in his jean pockets for his car keys, cursing when he couldn’t find them.

“Motherfucker… shit, shit, shit…”

Billy dreaded having to go back into the house to search for his keys, but when he looked out at the front yard he suddenly realized that there was a significantly bigger problem.

“You’ve gotta be shitting me,” he groaned in dismay. "Where the fuck is my car?"

Billy could feel the nausea in the pit of his stomach rapidly returning as he squinted in the darkness, desperately scanning the shabby yard for his car. The humble little Toyota was still parked in front of the porch, but Billy’s blue Camaro was nowhere to be seen.

Did… did Harrington take it? Max and those other brats couldn’t even reach the pedals with their short legs, so who else could it be?

Filled with impotent rage, Billy drew his foot back to kick the back tire of the nearby Toyota. “Why couldn’t he jack *this* piece of crap, huh? I’m gonna kill him the next time I see him, if he isn’t dead already…”

Billy’s head throbbed with renewed pain as he tried to think clearly, trying not to panic. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and the eery house as possible, but he couldn’t just forget about his car and walk all the way home, especially without his step-sister.

Should I wait here on the porch, in case someone comes back? Maybe… maybe I should call home and talk to Susan, just in case Max got dropped off already…
Unsurprisingly, Billy had no desire to go back inside, given what was lying on the kitchen floor. He didn’t have much choice, though, so he took a deep breath and opened the front door again, flipping on the nearest light-switch and straining his ears for any ominous sounds.

“It’s definitely dead, whatever the hell it is, so just man up and don’t worry about it, ‘cause it’s totally dead…” Billy babbled shakily under his breath as he scanned the front room for a telephone.

*I barely even know our new number… does it end with five-two, or two-five? I could try both, I guess…*

When Billy finally found the Byers’ telephone, he slammed his fist against the wall in frustration: the phone was lying on the floor halfway down the hallway, broken and ripped violently from its moorings.

“Well, that’s just perfect…”

Billy’s heart beat faster as he impulsively poked his head around the kitchen doorway to take another peek at the terrifying thing that had fallen out of the fridge, half-hoping that it wouldn’t be there anymore.

*Maybe I was hallucinating… nope, it’s still there. Looks pretty dead, at least, whatever the fuck it is.*

He hurried back to the front porch and glanced down at his watch.

*Almost eleven o’clock… shit. Neil’s gonna murder me.*

Walking home seemed ridiculous, since Billy didn’t know the way back and it was less than fifty degrees outside; he didn’t have his jacket or even a cigarette to keep him warm. The thought of being anywhere near that thing in the house was even worse, though.

*Maybe nobody will come back to this place… maybe everyone’s dead or something.*

Shivering in his short-sleeved, half-unbuttoned shirt, Billy started off down the long, dark road, trying not to imagine the worst. His car might be totalled. Max might be lost, hurt, or dead. Steve Harrington could be gone, too… either slaughtered by that demonic-looking creature or pummeled into a brain-dead coma by Billy himself.

“Christ,” he sniffled miserably, wrapping his arms around himself to conserve warmth and trying not to break down in tears. “How’d everything get so fucked up?”

Despite the lingering aches and pains in his body, Billy walked as briskly as he could, almost jogging in his haste to leave the frightening house far behind him. He had no idea where he was going; he’d been more than a little tipsy when he first arrived at the house and all the dark, tree-lined streets in the vicinity seemed almost identical.

*If somebody happens to drive by, I’m gonna stick my thumb out for a ride… it’s better than getting lost and turning into a goddamn Popsicle like the dude at the end of The Shining.*

About fifty yards down the road, Billy’s ears pricked up at the sound of an engine purring in the distance; a pair of headlights punctuated the darkness, making him squint as they approached.

*Hang on, is that… is that my car?*

It was. Billy paused at the side of the road, using one hand to shield his eyes as the blue Camaro slowed to a halt. Relieved to see his car in one piece, he bent down to peer in the driver’s window,
but it was too dark to see anything besides his own faint reflection. A moment later, the window rolled down three inches, revealing a pair of familiar dark eyes and a pallid face covered in blotchy red bruises.

*Holy shit… it’s him.*

Steve spoke first, his soft voice barely audible over the rumbling of the engine. “Alright, listen up, asshole: I brought your stupid car back… have you calmed down yet?”

Billy nodded slowly, struggling to process the bizarre sight of Steve Harrington behind the wheel of the Camaro. His hand instinctively went to his hair, making sure it wasn’t too frizzy or flat.

“You sure?” Steve pressed, raising his eyebrow skeptically and wincing as though the tiny movement was painful. “Because I’m not unlocking the door ’til you promise you’re not gonna go psycho on me again.”

*I’m not a psycho, you smug piece of shit… I was just having a rough night, that’s all.*

Billy crossed his arms stubbornly across his chest. “Why the hell should I have to promise anything to get into my own damn car?”

“Fine! Have a nice walk,” Steve snapped, rolling the window back up and revving the engine as though preparing to drive away.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Billy called urgently, rapping his knuckles against the glass and exhaling with relief when the window opened again. “Look, I’m… I’m sorry about what happened earlier, okay?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “You can save the half-assed apologies, man… just promise me you’ll be cool.”

Aware that he wasn’t really in any position to argue or make threats, Billy gritted his teeth and swallowed his pride.

“I, uh… I promise,” he mumbled resentfully, looking down at his boots. “I’ll be cool.”

Steve briefly disappeared from view, apparently satisfied with Billy’s response because he reached over to manually unlock the passenger-side door. “Hurry up and get in, then. I don’t have all night.”

Billy hesitated, observing that Steve wasn’t making any move to unbuckle his seatbelt or open the door. “Aren’t you, uh… aren’t you gonna let me drive, at least?”

“Nope.”

*He’s got some big balls for a sheltered beta prick who just got his ass kicked a couple hours ago…*

Steve revved the engine a second time, staring directly ahead. “So, are you getting in, or would you rather walk?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m getting in,” Billy muttered under his breath as he hurried around to the passenger side. “Keep your hair on, for fuck’s sake.”

Even though being driven by someone else in his own car felt jarringly wrong, Billy had to admit that Steve looked spectacular behind the wheel of the Camaro; the cuts and bruises on the preppy boy’s face lent him an aura of combative toughness.

“And the battle’s just begun, there’s many lost but tell me who has won. The trench is dug within
It was strange, hearing ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’ playing on the radio; U2 was a far cry from Billy’s usual heavy metal and punk preferences. He reached out to change the radio station, but withdrew his hand in surprise when Steve smacked it away.

“Driver picks the music… you can listen to Ted Nugent and Mötley Crüe or whatever on your own time.”

Billy bristled indignantly and glared at Steve. “Excuse me, jerk-off, but this is my car… which you stole!”

"I didn't steal it."

"Well, then who did?"

Steve didn't answer him.

Billy noticed that his leather jacket was wadded up on the floor by his feet; he dimly recalled removing it and tossing it in the car when he had first seen Steve that night. Billy leaned forward in his seat to put it on, grateful for the familiar, reassuring warmth; the half-full pack of Marlboros he located in one of the pockets lifted his spirits even higher.

“So, where is Max, anyway?” he asked, pawing through the pockets for his lighter. “I can’t go home without her… my old man will murder me.”

“She’s fine, don’t worry,” Steve answered quietly. “Chief Hopper took all the kids back to the station with him, so she’s probably back at her house already... Hopper's not gonna want half the parents in Hawkins freaking out about where their kids are.”

Billy shook his head slowly, willing himself to keep his temper under control. “I wasted the whole night tracking her all around town for no damn reason... fucking typical.”

“What an annoying goody two-shoes… I bet he was a Boy Scout.

Billy rolled his eyes as he lit a cigarette. “God, it’s late as hell… my dad’s gonna kick my ass when I get home, even if Max is okay.”

“Am I supposed to feel bad for you, or something?” Steve muttered. “Because I don’t.”

“I said I was sorry,” Billy grumbled, lowering the window a few inches to let the smoke escape; the cold wind whipped through the ends of his hair and tickled the nape of his neck.

“That’s not a magic word that makes everything better, man… you wanna say sorry to someone, say it to Lucas Sinclair. Why the hell were you giving him such a hard time, anyway? He’s half your size.” Steve frowned with disapproval, staring straight ahead as he drove down the dark streets of Hawkins. “Is it ‘cause you don’t like him having a crush on Max? Is it… is it because he’s black?”

“No,” Billy denied hastily, tensing at the suggestion and wondering if he’d ever be able to work up the nerve to talk about what had happened with his father and ex-boyfriend back in California.

Shit, now he probably thinks I’m some kind of racist, on top of everything else… goddamn it.

“I've got no problem with his color,” Billy insisted defensively, flicking some ash out the window.
“That little shit rammed his knee into my ‘nads, though.”

“Oh, yeah?” Steve let out a short, dry chuckle. “Lucas the ball-buster, huh? Well, good for him… I’m sorry I missed it.”

“Shut up,” Billy grumbled, glaring out the window. “It hurt like hell.”

“Well, forgive me for not giving a crap about your poor little nutsack…” Steve took one of his hands off the steering wheel long enough to point at his own bruised face. “This happens to hurt like hell, too, but you don’t see me bitching about it.”

Billy was surprised by how guilty he felt. He took another drag on his cigarette and cleared his throat, speaking quietly. “Are, uh… are you okay, man?”

“Am I what?” Steve reached out to turn down the volume on the radio. In the darkness of the car, the bruises and dried blood on his face appeared almost black.

“That looks pretty gnarly… I didn’t, like, break your nose or anything, did I?”

“What would you do if you had?” Steve snapped testily. “Fix it by saying you’re sorry again?”

At least I’m making an effort, smartass… give me some goddamn credit.

Billy stared down at his lap, fiddling absentmindedly with his lighter. When he couldn’t think of anything to say, he held out his slightly squashed pack of Marlboros. “Want one?”

Steve opened his mouth as though he was about to make another peevish retort, then closed it and nodded, accepting the unlit cigarette Billy passed him without a word of thanks. When their fingers brushed together, both boys flinched as though they’d been shocked by static electricity.

What the hell was that?

Trying to ignore the growing tension filling the car, Billy reached over and flicked his Zippo lighter on for Steve, holding it steady and watching the way his bruised cheeks hollowed as he drew the flame into the tip of his cigarette. There was something unexpectedly erotic about it, and Billy bit his lip at the thought of Steve sucking on something considerably thicker than a Marlboro.

Fuck… please don’t get a boner.

Billy knew he needed to talk about something, anything, to get his mind out of the gutter. “So, uh… where are we going, anyway?”

“Back to where I parked my car,” Steve responded, rolling his window down and blowing a long plume of smoke out into the cold night air.

“Why the hell did you park so far away from the house?”

“It’s a long story.”

“You’re telling me you actually walked from wherever the hell it is we’re going to that haunted house back there?”

“No, first we walked to the junkyard, and then we walked to the lab—”

“Junkyard? Lab? You lost me, Harrington… I think you’d better start at the beginning.”
Steve shook his head. “No way.”

“C’mon, dude,” Billy urged. “At the very least, you’ve gotta tell me about that nasty thing in the fridge.”

“What?” Steve looked over at him sharply, his voice rising slightly in both pitch and volume. “Y-you actually opened the fridge? Why the hell would you do that?”

“Does it matter? Maybe I was thirsty and I wanted to see if there was any beer.”

“Y’know, I found an empty gin bottle in here earlier... are you sure you don’t have a drinking problem, man?”

“Are you sure you don’t have a death wish?” Billy snapped impatiently. “At the moment, my only problem is that you won’t tell me what the fuck was in that refrigerator.”

Steve tensed visibly under Billy’s incensed stare. “Uh… d-don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it? Are you shitting me? I’m gonna have nightmares about it for the rest of my lousy life, probably. Where the hell did it come from? Did a UFO crash in the woods around here or something?”

“It’s, uh… it’s a long story…”

Billy sighed with exasperation. “Everything’s a ‘long story’ with you.”

“And besides,” Steve added hastily, “I’m really not an expert or anything like that... I’m almost as much in the dark as you are. A-anyway, all you need to know is that they’re really dangerous and if you ever see one of them you should—”

“They?” Billy interjected, appalled by the thought of the whole town overrun with aliens the size of German shepherds. “Them? You’re seriously telling me there are more?”

Steve tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “Look, man, you’ve gotta keep it to yourself, okay? ‘Cause it’s, like... top-secret government stuff and I could get in trouble just for talking about it.”

Billy stared at Steve, furrowing his brow skeptically. “Government stuff? Bullshit…”

“It’s not bullshit,” Steve insisted. “If you don’t believe me, go check out the ’U.S. Department of Energy' signs on the fences surrounding the lab.”

_What the fuck is up with this town?_

"Hawkins is one creepy-ass place, huh? It’s like a combination of ‘E.T.’ and ‘Alien’ around here.”

“Well, more like ‘Alien’ because these things we’re dealing with definitely aren’t cute,” Steve pointed out. "They don’t bring flowers back to life and eat Reese’s Pieces... they kill people.”

Billy shuddered, remembering the rows of tiny sharp teeth he had glimpsed when the creature’s “mouth” flopped open.

“Anyway, they’ve been taken care of for now,” Steve concluded with unconvincing optimism. “Hope they’ll never come back.”

“Yeah, but how—”
“I’ve told you way too much already, so can you please just drop it? Or... I dunno, change the subject, at least.”

“Fine.” Billy turned around to look in the backseat of his car. “That crazy baseball bat... is it yours?”

“Uh... well, that’s also a long st—”

“I swear to god, Harrington, if you say something’s a long story one more time I’ll fucking lose it.” Billy puffed irritably on his cigarette. “Just tell me this: did you use that bat to kill the alien in the fridge?”

“So much for changing the subject... I told Dustin we should just bury it,” Steve muttered, shaking his head regretfully. “Jesus, I don’t know why I always listen to those crazy kids, it's completely nuts...”

“Hey!” Billy reached over with his free hand to snap his fingers in Steve’s face. “Answer me, man.”

“Look, I don’t blame you for having a billion questions, but I’m seriously not in the mood to answer ‘em right now, okay? You should never have gone to that house tonight.”

“You think I wanted to go there?” Billy scoffed, rushing to his own defense. “With all those creepy drawings everywhere, syringes lying around and freaky dead shit in the fridge? Hell, no! It was all Max’s fault... I was getting ready to go to that party, like a normal person, but she snuck out the fuckin’ window— probably with that little Romeo-wannabe— and my old man made me go out searching for her. Oh, and another thing—”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Oh, great, so there’s another thing...”

“Why weren’t you at the party? Were you just gonna blow me off?”

Steve frowned. “Who gives a shit about a stupid party? Just give it a rest, already... I’m dead tired and I’ve got a killer headache.”

An uncomfortable silence lingered between them for a few moments, during which the only sound in the car was a commercial for Red Lobster. Steve didn’t voice any objections when Billy leaned forward to switch the radio to a different station.

“Do you really want to hurt me? Do you really want to make me cry?”

“Ugh,” Billy grumbled, hastily twisting the knob again and trying his luck with an AM station he’d recently discovered by accident; it didn’t always get very good reception but it played some good, lesser-known rock and punk songs. Unfortunately for him, the station was currently playing ‘Beat My Guest’ by Adam and the Ants.

“Use a truncheon or a cricket bat, beat me, beat me... a good beating’s really where it's at, beat me, beat me—”

“Unbelievable...” Billy switched off the radio and slumped down in his seat, annoyed and self-conscious. When he glanced over at Steve, he was surprised and relieved to see the corner of his pretty, bruised lips twitching up into a grudging smile.

Jesus, he’s got such a nice mouth.

“Well, we’re here,” Steve announced quietly as he drove the car down a narrow road on the edge of the woods. “There’s my car.”
Billy could see the familiar dark-red BMW further ahead, brightly lit by the Camaro’s headlights and strewn with a few leaves, like it had been sitting under the trees for a long time. He still didn’t understand why the car had been parked so far away, and decided that he would ask Steve about it again sometime, along with the dozens of other questions still burning in the back of his mind.

Steve parked the car but left the engine idling and the headlights on so they wouldn’t be plunged into complete darkness; there were no streetlights nearby, and the trees blocked most of the moonlight. Billy stepped out first, shivering a little in the chilly night air despite his leather jacket.

*Shit, Indiana is cold…*

Steve retrieved his spiky baseball bat from the backseat before climbing out of the car, gesturing at the driver’s seat he’d just vacated.

“Here you go, man… it’s all yours.” He rested the bat on his shoulder like he was Mickey Mantle. “You, uh… are you sure you’re good to drive?”

“Sure,” Billy replied with a shrug. “I feel fine, all things considered… just really damn tired. Why?”

Steve hesitated, looking uncomfortable; his jeans and Nikes were filthy, as though he’d been gardening. “Well, I don’t know how long the booze and that stuff in your neck takes to wear off, and I don’t wanna open tomorrow’s paper and read about you passing out behind the wheel and wrapping this stupid car around a tree, okay?”

Billy was too elated by the thought of Steve being concerned about his welfare to mind very much that he had called his beloved Camaro ‘stupid’ twice in one evening. “You worried about me or something, Harrington?”

“No,” Steve scoffed, taking his bat down from his shoulder and giving it an impressive twirl. “Not even a little. Look, just forget I ever said anything… go ahead and die, for all I care. I seriously wouldn’t give a shit.”

“That’s the spirit,” Billy chuckled as he strolled around to the driver’s side of his car. “You gonna skip tomorrow? It’s been a long fuckin’ night.”

“I dunno, probably.” Steve yawned as though on cue, his warm breath forming a faint white cloud in the air. “I want to sleep for a hundred years. Why, are you?”

Billy crossed his arms and leaned against the car door. “Nah, my old man never lets me stay home unless I’m puking my guts out or my temperature’s a hundred and five or something… got my first day of work tomorrow, too. I’ll miss kicking your ass in gym, though, if you don’t show up.”

“Screw you.” Steve scowled and flipped him the bird. “You’re gonna have to start kicking someone else around for a change, ‘cause I’m done with that shit, okay? Completely *done*.”

*God, he’s gorgeous when he’s mad.*

Billy wished he could somehow snap a photograph with his mind so he would never forget the sight of Steve Harrington in that moment: illuminated by the bright, golden beams of the Camaro’s headlights and gripping a nail-studded baseball bat in one hand while using the other to stick his middle finger defiantly in the air.

*A pampered, preppy boy like him has no business looking so badass.*

“Aw, you mean we’re not gonna be best friends now?” Billy deliberately kept his voice playfully
sarcastic. “Not even after we’ve had this nice, long chat?”

“No!” Steve refused to look at him as he fumbled with the lock on his car. “Why the hell would I want to be friends with someone who beat me up and threatened a bunch of little kids?”

“I said I was sorry, for fuck’s sake,” Billy grumbled, hating how petulant he sounded.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure,” Steve muttered, glancing at his wristwatch and cursing under his breath when he dropped his keys in the leaves. “Jeez, it’s late… my parents are gonna flip when I get home.”

When he finally got his car door to open, Steve frowned and reached inside to retrieve something from the passenger seat. Billy watched, puzzled, as he emerged holding what appeared to be a bouquet of slightly wilted red roses. Steve stared down at them with a strange expression on his face.

“Were those for that chick who came to see you in gym?” Billy guessed aloud. “So, Tommy was right about her hooking up with that Jonathan dude, huh?”

“None of your business,” Steve retorted quietly without looking up from the flowers. He seemed to be almost lost in thought, as though he was pondering what to do with them.

“Hey, I get it, dude.” Billy couldn’t help smirking a little, glad that Steve’s romantic gestures toward the Wheeler girl had apparently failed. “Rejection sucks, but like I said the other day, there are plenty of bitches in the s—”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence because Steve suddenly threw the bouquet at him with all his might. Billy was too surprised to duck in time; it hit him right in the face with a fragrant explosion of red petals before plopping down onto the dry leaves at his feet.

“Jesus Christ, do you ever shut up?” Steve shouted angrily. “Do me a favor and never talk to me again, alright?”

Without another word, he slid into in his BMW, slammed the door and gunned the ignition.

“Not a chance, pretty boy,” Billy murmured to himself as he watched the car speed away and disappear around a bend in the leaf-strewn road. “Not a fucking chance.”

…………………………..

When he returned home, Billy didn’t mind that the front door was locked and the porch light was switched off; it was a good indicator that everybody had already gone to bed. For once, he was actually glad that nobody in his family really cared about him or what he was doing; he certainly didn’t feel like getting yelled at by his father on top of everything else that had happened that night.

After using the bathroom and brushing his teeth, Billy went to his room and changed into some sweatpants and a thermal shirt. He was completely exhausted, but there was one more thing he felt that he needed to do before turning in for the night. There was a large, heavy cardboard box that he had shoved in his closet the day he had moved in, just a week earlier; Billy knelt in front of it and pawed through the contents until he found what he was looking for: his skateboard.

Long time, no see, old buddy.

He spent the next few minutes sitting cross-legged on the floor with the skateboard on his lap, idly flicking the wheels and watching them spin. His mind was filled with bittersweet memories of the carefree adolescence he’d spent skating all over Los Angeles in the late seventies and early eighties.
Those were the days… I still had a mom and a sister and everything was pretty much perfect.

The skateboard he was currently holding wasn’t the first one he’d ever owned but it was by far the best; lightweight yet extremely durable, it had survived countless ollies, kickflips, and frontside airs. His parents gave it to him on his fourteenth birthday, and he could still remember how excited he had been to show it off to all his friends.

Feels like a million years ago… I was a completely different person.

Billy decided against waiting until the next morning to give the skateboard to Max. He knew that if he presented it to his step-sister in person, she might be too proud to accept it, and then Billy's temper would inevitably flare up and make things worse.

“You’ll be better off with her,” he murmured down at the skateboard, feeling foolish for addressing an inanimate object as though it could hear him. “She won’t leave you boxed up in the closet… she’ll take you out for a spin every day, just like I used to.”

It’s just a dumb piece of wood… why the hell am I getting so sentimental?

Sighing with resignation, Billy tucked the old skateboard under his arm and walked quietly to his step-sister’s bedroom, where he propped it next to the door and turned away quickly before he could change his mind.

“Now we’re square,” he said under his breath as he made his way back through the dark, silent house.

……………………

Billy tossed and turned for over an hour before finally settling into a feverish, nightmare-filled slumber. Most of his dreams were just vivid re-enactments of his lowest moments from that night, like when his father called him a faggot and punched him while Susan watched, but there were less familiar dreams, too. At one point, Billy was transported to a dark junkyard blanketed in fog where he had to battle a snarling, very-much-alive version of the dead creature he’d found in the fridge. Even Max and Lucas were in the nightmare, screaming from within a dilapidated bus as another one of the monsters tried to break inside. Billy didn’t know why, but the thought of Max dying filled him with ice-cold dread.

It'll be all my fault... all my fault... just like Emily, all over again.

He squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself to wake up so it would all disappear, but when he opened his eyes again he was back in the Byers’ house, lying flat on the hardwood floor.

Well, this feels familiar... wait a minute...

Billy realized that he was looking up at… himself. It was creepy and bizarre, seeing the burning rage in his own blue, bloodshot eyes and watching his own fist coming down at him, over and over and over until all his pain faded away and everything suddenly went dark.

After what felt like hours of absolute nothingness, Billy awoke in the backseat of a rumbling car, wedged between a curly-haired kid and another boy he vaguely recognized from earlier that night. The kid on his left had a large can of gasoline on his lap, and the kid on his right was holding something ice-cold against Billy’s aching forehead.

What the… is this my car?
“Hey, buddy…” The curly-haired kid shushed him soothingly. “It’s okay, you put up a good fight. He kicked your ass, but you really put up a fight. You’re okay.”

What’s he talking about? Who kicked my ass? And why does that kid have a gas can?

Another boyish voice spoke from the front passenger seat. “Okay, you’re gonna keep straight for half a mile, then make a left on Mount Sinai.”

Who’s that… Lucas Sinclair? Yeah, it is… wait, if I’m way back here, who the fuck is driving the car?

His heart clenched when he realized it was Max, and he was immediately fearful for his life; she was only thirteen years old and Billy had no idea how her feet were even reaching the gas and brake pedals.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god…” He babbled hysterically, distantly wondering why he didn’t sound anything like himself. Opening his mouth to protest was making the cut on the corner of his lip sting, but he was too panicked to care. “Whoa, whoa, whoa! What’s going on? Slow down, stop the car!”

Why… why the hell do I sound like Harrington?

“Everybody shut up, I’m trying to focus!” Max snapped, tightly gripping the steering wheel. Moments later, she took a sharp left and cut across the corner of someone’s lawn, screaming shrilly as she mowed down a mailbox.

The thought of dying in a car crash was dragging terrifying memories back from the walled-off part of Billy’s mind that he usually kept locked away; he pictured his mother’s old station wagon and wondered if she and his sister had screamed in their final moments, or if it was all over before they could make a sound.

Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop…

Billy pinched his eyes closed again and when he reopened them, he was standing with the four kids in some kind of dark tunnel, gripping Steve’s nail-studded baseball bat. There were strange little flecks floating in the air, almost like snowflakes or bits of feathers. He wasn’t sure why, but he was wearing dishwashing gloves and goggles, and there was a red bandana tied around the lower half of his face; he felt like a six-year-old playing dress-up.

Where the hell am I? Are we under Hawkins?

Billy looked up sharply when he heard ominous, animalistic snarls echoing from further down the tunnel and turned to run for his life, shouting at the kids to hurry up. With strength he didn’t know he had, Billy gave each frightened kid a boost, helping them escape the tunnel but then panicking when he realized the growls were growing louder and he wouldn’t be able to save everyone. He stood his ground, increasingly certain that he was about to die, especially when he glanced down at the weapon clutched in his hands and realized with dismay that the bat had somehow turned into a bouquet of red roses.

God, I’m gonna die down here, aren’t I? I can hear them getting closer… this is it…

Just as the swarm of terrifying monsters rounded the corner and caught up to him, Billy jolted awake with a sharp gasp. His heart was hammering in his chest and even though it was a chilly night, his back was covered with sweat and locks of hair were plastered to his forehead. It took a few moments to realize he wasn’t in the slimy tunnels anymore; he’d returned to the relative safety of his bedroom,
where nobody could hurt him.

*Well, almost nobody.*

“Fuck,” he sighed as he sank back against his pillow, relieved that it had all just been a bad dream.

*It wasn’t, though... a lot of that shit really happened.*

He couldn’t understand why he had actually *become* Steve during some parts of his dreams. It had all felt so incredibly real: Billy could still smell him— that tantalizing, mysterious scent he couldn’t identify— and he could still feel the tempting warmth of Steve’s narrow body pinned helplessly beneath his own. He could still feel the thin skin of his own knuckles splitting open as they were brought down relentlessly on that perfect face. Billy stared up at the shadows on his ceiling, wondering if the pretty, enigmatic boy he had beaten into comatose oblivion was having trouble sleeping, too.

*I’ll never be the guy of his dreams, but I might be the guy of his nightmares.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Recommended listening: The Effigies- Haunted Town
Monday, November 5th, 1984

After the long, life-threatening night he’d had, Steve almost wept with relief when he finally pulled into his familiar driveway and let himself into his vast, silent house. He locked the front door behind him and trudged up to his bedroom, careful not to make any noise that might wake his slumbering parents.

Steve was exhausted. He felt like he’d been running on auto-pilot for the past thirty-odd hours, completing every task and reacting to each new peril almost robotically as he did what needed to be done, whether it was checking cellars for aliens, keeping said aliens away from the kids under his care, or battling Billy Hargrove. Now that he was in the safe seclusion of his own house and there were no demodogs or high school bullies to fight and no kids to protect, Steve could finally just let himself… shut down. Keeping a brave face on for so long was exhausting, and it felt wonderfully liberating to finally take off his hero’s mask.

He had never wanted to take a shower so badly in his life. His clothes and Nikes were covered in dirt and metallic-smelling slime from the underground tunnels; he tugged everything off, leaving it in a messy trail across his bedroom floor. Naked and utterly depleted, he slumped down in the bathtub, hugging his knees against his chest and shivering despite the hot water spraying down on him.

Steve delayed going to bed as long as he could, dreading all the nightmares awaiting him, but by one o’clock in the morning he couldn’t keep his eyes open a moment longer and finally slid under the blankets for some desperately needed sleep.

He was right about the nightmares— they hadn’t been so awful since the previous autumn when he had first seen the monster. This time, there were new creatures and characters, like in the sequel to a horror film; instead of a lone, towering demogorgon at the Byers’ house, dozens of demodogs chased Steve through the junkyard and dark subterranean tunnels. He heard the shrill screams of eighth graders instead of the panicked shouts of Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers.

Most of his nightmares just replayed the most terrifying parts of the past day, but there were a few strange moments that didn’t make any sense at all. At one point, Steve found himself in a small room he’d never seen before, facing a bland-looking man with a mustache. He felt a shooting pain in his shoulders as the unfamiliar man shoved him back violently against some kind of wall or bookcase.

Where am I? Who the hell is he and what's his problem?

The mysterious, angry man called him a faggot and punched him in the face. Steve couldn’t do anything to fight back; he squeezed his eyes closed and felt hot tears trickling down his cheeks. When he opened his eyes again, he was in a different house that he actually recognized; pinned on his back like a butterfly to the Byers’ hard floor and looking up helplessly at Billy Hargrove. He felt pathetic and knew there was nothing he or anyone else could do to stop the countless blows raining down on his aching face.

Make it stop… it hurts so much, please make it stop…

The pain didn’t stop, it multiplied; in addition to the throbbing ache where he was punched in the
face, there was a sharp pain on the side of his neck, like someone had stabbed him with a pin. He was still lying on the same floor, but instead of Billy glaring down at him with fury in his blue eyes, it was Max. She was yelling “Say it! Say it!” at him, but his head felt like it was packed full of mud and he had no idea what she wanted him to say.

“Say you understand! Say it!”

Steve obeyed, hearing the words leave his mouth in a slurred voice that might not have been his own. He said "I understand" even though he didn’t really understand anything. Everything faded to black for an indeterminable length of time, and the next thing he saw was the interior of Billy's Camaro, where he was sandwiched between Mike Wheeler and Dustin Henderson in the backseat. The pain on his face had returned in full force, and he relived the sickening terror of realizing that a tiny thirteen-year-old was driving the car.

*I didn’t survive an alien attack only to end up getting killed in a car wreck…*

He pinched his eyes closed again, trying to make it all go away. His mouth felt dry… impossibly dry. There was suddenly a refrigerator in front of him, bobbing up and down in the blackness, so he instinctively reached out to open it. A dead demodog wrapped in a quilt fell onto his feet, and he sprinted out of the house in fear, cursing the day he’d been forced to move to this little town of horrors.

*I’ve lived here all my life, though… none of this makes any sense.*

Moments later, Steve found himself down in the dark tunnels beneath Hawkins, trying to get all the kids get out in time before the throng of demodogs reached them. His panic felt just as real as it had several hours earlier, when he realized there was no time to get Dustin out; there wasn't enough time to do anything but make a final stand and pray for a quick death. This time, though, he looked down at the bat clenched in his trembling fists and realized that it had somehow turned into a bouquet of red roses.

*I'm gonna die down here!*

He lost track of the rest of his nightmares. Demogorgons, demodogs, speeding cars, and screaming kids all blurred together in a dark, confusing tangle. He couldn't be sure if eight hours had passed, or only eight minutes.

*Knock, knock, knock…*

The sound puzzled him, and it took a few moments to reach out and latch onto consciousness. The welcome relief of awaking from a nightmare washed over him when he felt his familiar, thick blanket and soft sheets that smelled like laundry detergent.

“Steve? Are you still asleep in there, bud?”

*Who’s that? Dad?*

“Yeah?” Steve called drowsily, still half asleep.

“Did you forget to set your alarm? It’s almost nine o’clock!”

*Oh, crap… what's Dad doing home?*

Steve reluctantly opened his eyes, squinting in the bright sunlight shining from between his bedroom curtains; the small movement made the bruises on his face ache.
The doorknob turned with a quiet click as Mr. Harrington began to push open the door.

“Don’t come in!” Steve yelled without thinking.

“Oh, okay.” His father pulled the door closed again with an understanding chuckle. “I needed plenty of privacy for that kind of thing when I was your age, too…”

Realizing what his father was implying, Steve felt a hot blush creeping across his sore face. “N-no, Dad, I’m not… I’m not doing that, I just don’t feel good today.”

“Uh-oh,” Mr. Harrington said sympathetically from behind the door; his voice sounded oddly nasal, like he had a stuffy nose. “I’m under the weather, myself, so your mother told me to take the day off… are you gonna stay home from school?”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want to, uh… infect anybody else, in case I’m contagious.” Steve wasn’t really sure why he was lying; there was no way he was going to be able to conceal his damaged face from his parents until it healed.

“Well, we can be invalids together. You want some hot tea, son? I was just about to go down and fire up another kettle.”

“Uh… yeah, sure.”

Steve sighed with relief when he heard the faint sound of his father’s footsteps fading down the carpeted hallway. He sat up slowly and yawned, wincing at the sharp pain when the skin on his face stretched.

“Ow, Jesus… this sucks.”

He had managed to avoid looking at his reflection in the mirror the previous night, but he couldn’t delay the inevitable any longer. After using the bathroom, he washed his hands and splashed water on his face, wincing again and forcing himself to look up at the mirror above the sink.

“God,” he groaned in dismay, assessing the damage.

Surprisingly, his face wasn’t quite as much of a gory mess as it had been when Jonathan beat him up the previous year, but it was still pretty bad. Overnight, greyish-purple bruises had bloomed around his eyes and jawline, and the bloody cuts on his lip and eyebrow had formed black scabs. A spot on his stomach ached, and he lifted the hem of his t-shirt; there was a large, ugly bruise near his navel where the toe of Billy Hargrove’s boot met the soft flesh of Steve’s belly. He prodded it cautiously and groaned again.

Yep, that’s gonna hurt like hell for a couple days… but at least he didn’t break any ribs.

It was all over. The monsters were gone, chased back to wherever it was they had come from (hell itself, perhaps) by Chief Hopper and the mysterious little girl named after a number. Steve thought it was a miracle that the demodogs hadn’t run through town and killed everyone; most of the residents of Hawkins, including his own parents, were still blissfully clueless about the terrifying threats from the nearby lab.

Just because the town had been spared from a massacre didn’t mean there weren’t any casualties. Hopper had briefly mentioned that, in addition to almost all the lab employees, the creatures had killed Bob Newby, the cheerful Radio Shack employee who was dating Jonathan Byer’s mom. Steve shuddered when he thought of poor Bob getting slashed open while he and the kids were standing right outside the lab, waiting impatiently for the security gate to open.
Thank God it didn’t open sooner, or the kids might’ve gone running in there and ended up getting eaten like Bob…

Even though it was tempting to lock his door and stay in bed all day, Steve knew he couldn’t avoid the inevitable; his parents would have to see their son’s battered face sooner or later. Steve was too tired, sore, and lazy to put on actual clothes, so he just trudged down the hall in his pajamas, praying that his father wouldn’t overreact.

As he went downstairs, he heard the shrill whistle of the kettle and the cheerful clinking of mugs being set on the tile countertop. Steve poked his head around the kitchen doorway and saw his father standing by the stove with his back to him.

God, why’d he have to stay home today? He’d better not have a cow when he sees…

Steve slunk quietly to the kitchen table with his head down, dreading the moment his father turned around.

“What kind do you want, trooper?” Mr. Harrington asked as he opened a cupboard to rummage amongst the dozen-plus boxes and tins of tea. “We’ve got Constant Comment, Earl Grey, chamomile, good ol’ black tea and… let’s see, this is something called Lemon Ginger. Want to try that?”

“Sure, Dad,” Steve mumbled unenthusiastically, slouching down in his chair. “I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

Who gives a crap about tea?

He tensed when his father walked over to the table and set down two steaming mugs of hot water, each with a tea bag floating in it.

“I think we’re out of honey, but there’s sugar if you want some, bud. ”

Steve’s father sat down across from him with a sigh and took off his glasses to polish them with the hem of his striped Ralph Lauren pajama shirt. Everyone said Mark Harrington looked like a taller, older version of his son: even at forty-one, his dark brown hair was still thick, though it had lost some of its lustrous sheen and was greying at the temples. Unlike his son, however, he didn’t have moles dotted across his skin and his eyes were hazel; Steve had inherited his moles and dark brown eyes from his mother.

When Mr. Harrington put his glasses back on, he looked across the table at his son and squinted with concern. “Hang on a minute, what in the world—”

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Steve said hastily, plastering on what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “Seriously, I’m fine.”

“What happened?” The creases on Mr. Harrington’s forehead deepened when he frowned. “Did you get in another fight?”

He promptly stood up from the table and went to the freezer, pulling out a bag of frozen corn and wrapping it in a dishtowel.

“Dad, I really don’t need you to fuss over me, I’m—”

“Shh, don’t be a dummy.” Mr. Harrington pressed the cold bundle firmly against his son’s face. “Hold this— it’ll help with the swelling. When did it happen?”
“Last night.”

“What, have you taken anything for the pain yet?”

“No,” Steve admitted, obediently holding the bag of frozen corn against his face.

“Well, hang on a minute and I’ll go see what we have.”

“I’m okay, Dad, you don’t have to…” He trailed off, realizing his protests were futile as his father walked purposefully out of the kitchen.

*At least he’s too distracted to get mad that I lied about being contagious…*

Steve was used to his parents coddling him; he was an only child and he knew how guilty they felt for working all the time. When he had come home after his first serious fight the previous fall, his mother and father were both so busy working that the bruises on Steve’s face went unnoticed for almost two days; they had fretted and fussed over him like he was a toddler with a head injury, and Steve had to convince them that he didn’t need to be taken to the hospital.

*I’m not a little kid anymore, and I’m not made of glass.*

He took a long, soothing whiff of his lemon ginger tea; it smelled nice, but it was still too hot to drink, so Steve just sat there at the table with the cold corn pressed against his aching face, listening to the clock on the kitchen wall.

*Tick… tick… tick…*

His father, Mark Harrington, almost never took sick days from work, even though he was the boss of his own real estate company; he could, presumably, take as many days off as he chose, but he’d been a workaholic for as long as Steve could remember. Twelve years earlier, in the early seventies, Mr. Harrington had decided to pursue his life-long dream of becoming a pastor. He hired some additional staff to pick up the slack at the real estate office while he returned to school to earn the seminary degree that would qualify him to be a Presbyterian minister. In 1978, he used a large chunk of the family’s savings to buy a handsome red-brick building on the edge of Loch Nora, and he had spent every Sunday preaching from the pulpit of Hawkins Presbyterian Church ever since.

Now that he was eighteen, Steve didn’t really mind that his father had such a demanding schedule, but it had been difficult for him when he was younger; he couldn’t understand why his already-busy father would voluntarily take on another job, especially when the family’s lucrative real estate business (combined with Mrs. Harrington’s generous salary as an obstetrician) paid the bills more than adequately. Between his mother’s long hours at the hospital and the two jobs that kept his father constantly away from home, Steve had a very lonely childhood; he had every toy, game, cassette tape, and trendy article of clothing he could possibly want, but none of those things mattered when he came home after school to an empty house. There was a time in junior high when he often went to Tommy’s house instead, to play foosball and read comic books, but then Carol had come along and all Tommy wanted to do was canoodle with his girlfriend and talk trash about everybody at school.

*Screw that asshole.*

When his father began working at the church, Steve started looking forward to Sundays because that was often the only day he got to see both of his parents. There were occasionally obstetric emergencies that prevented his mother from going to church, though; Lillian Harrington would apologize to her son and remind him that babies didn’t take Sundays off.

On Steve’s thirteenth birthday, his parents had given him an acoustic guitar along with an
instructional videotape. By the following year, the Harringtons were urging their son to participate in the newly-formed Hawkins Presbyterian Praise Band. Steve reluctantly agreed, which delighted his proud parents, and his mother even began bribing him with a crisp five-dollar bill for every Sunday that Steve played guitar at church; in recent years, he had grown confident enough to add singing to his repertoire. The extra pocket money (increased to ten dollars when Steve turned sixteen) was an excellent perk, considering all he had to do was spend two measly hours playing corny church songs each week. There were a few kids at Hawkins Presbyterian who also knew Steve from school, but nobody really teased him about his participation in the band; he figured it was because he was an alpha, but secretly hoped that it might also be because he was actually pretty good at singing and playing the guitar, even if the music was hardly what any of his peers would call “cool.”

I skipped church yesterday, though… I was too busy laying a trail of monster bait with Dustin.

Steve’s thoughts were interrupted when his father reappeared suddenly in the kitchen and set three pill bottles down on the table with a noisy clatter.

“I wasn’t sure what would be best,” Mr. Harrington explained apologetically as he went to the sink to fill a glass with water. “There’s ibuprofen, aspirin, and acetaminophen… I can’t remember the difference. They all say they’re for pain.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I wish your mother was home— she knows all about these things.” Mark Harrington handed his son the glass of water and sat back down at the table. “So, you didn’t answer me before… what happened? Was it another fight?”

“What do you mean, another one? You make it sound like I get in fights all the time,” Steve objected sullenly, recalling the previous November’s altercation with Jonathan. “I haven’t gotten in a fight in, like, a whole year.”

Mr. Harrington shook his head and rolled his eyes. “A whole year, huh? Very impressive. Was it the Byers boy again?”

“No,” Steve denied tersely.

“It wasn’t your old pal, Tommy, was it? You two used to be thick as thieves, back in the day…”

“No, Dad,” Steve said irritably as he shook two pills from the Tylenol bottle. “It wasn’t him. Why does it matter, anyway? What’s done is done, and it’s really no big deal.”

Mr. Harrington paused thoughtfully and took a sip of hot tea; the steam briefly fogged up his eyeglasses. “It was the Hargrove boy.”

Steve almost choked on the mouthful of water he’d just swallowed to wash down his pills. “W-what?”

Didn’t see that coming…

“So it was him, huh? I met Neil Hargrove last weekend, and he mentioned he had a son who just started at Hawkins High… he’s around your age, right?”

Steve nodded slowly, fiddling awkwardly with his water glass; his entire body tensed at the mention of his rival.

How does he know his dad? Did they run into each other at the damn post office or something?
“What’s the kid’s name, again? I forgot.”

Steve wasn’t sure why the simple name suddenly seemed so difficult to say aloud. “It’s, uh… it’s Billy.”

“Ah, yes. Billy and… Martine or Marlene or something. Step-siblings, I gathered.”

Steve was confused and frustrated by all the questions. “Gathered where, Dad? What are you talking about?”

“At their new home, of course. You remember that little house way over on Old Cherry Road? Mrs. Gordon rented that place for years, and she was a reliable tenant, but she moved to Florida at the end of summer… don’t ask me why, but she had the fireplace painted green at some point. Anyway, the Hargroves moved in last week, and I brought over some paperwork that still needed to be signed.”

*Oh, God… that means my dad is their landlord now.*

Even though Mark Harrington was the realty company president, he liked to handle local house purchases and rentals himself whenever possible, because they provided a perfect opportunity to both welcome the new residents to the neighborhood and invite them to attend services at Hawkins Presbyterian.

“They seem like really nice people,” Steve’s father added. “I got to chat with Neil and Susan a little. Brought them a box of doughnuts from our favorite bakery.”

Steve remained silent, still trying to make sense of everything. His dad had explained how he knew that “the Hargrove boy” existed, but not how it had only taken him three tries to guess that Billy was the one who beat up his son.

“I was a little worried, you know, when I heard Neil Hargrove had a boy your age. As you know, I went to a pretty big high school in Indianapolis, so I wasn’t the only alpha in my grade, and fights were sometimes unavoidable…”

*Is he saying what I think he’s saying?*

Mr. Harrington paused to pull a handkerchief from his pocket, blowing his nose with a loud honk. “Anyway, your mother and I hoped that raising you in a small, quiet town like Hawkins would limit your exposure to other alphas and keep you out of trouble, but… well, I suppose it was unrealistic for us to expect nothing would ever change around here.”

*Oh, God.*

“He’s like me,” Steve said softly, almost to himself. It made a lot of sense, but he felt stupid for not figuring it out sooner. “He’s an alpha.”

Mark Harrington looked at his son with concern in his kind eyes. “You knew, right?”

“I was pretty sure, yeah,” Steve fibbed, biting his lip and looking down at the table. “I mean, I saw the way all the other guys flocked around him right off the bat. Tommy and all the other pathetic beta ass-kissers.”

“Language, Steven.” His father’s voice was stern, but the corner of his mouth curved up into an understanding smile. “You wish those beta kids were still flocking around you and kissing your butt, is that it?”
“No!” Steve protested quickly, shaking his head in frustration. “I just… so is that why Billy tried to kill me? ‘Cause we’re both alphas?”

“It’s in your nature to compete for dominance, especially at this young age. It won’t be so bad when you’re old, like me.”

Steve was confused. “But I’m not competing, he is!”

Mr. Harrington pulled out his handkerchief again, just in time to sneeze into it. “Usually the fighting happens when there are omega girls in the picture… but I thought there weren’t any omegas at your school.”

“Not as far as I know. And if there were, he’d be welcome to ‘em.” Steve scowled, thinking of all the beta girls at Hawkins High who giggled and batted their eyelashes whenever Billy was nearby. His breakup with Nancy was so recent that he had zero interest in pursuing anyone new.

"Alphas fight over beta gals, too, though," Mark Harrington added as though he had read his son’s mind. "Your mother mentioned that you and Nancy Wheeler were going separate ways... was she what you and the new guy were fighting about?"

"No." The thought of the Billy Hargrove pursuing Nancy was almost comical, yet Steve wouldn't really put anything past his volatile adversary.

“Well, if the Hargrove boy is being violent and won’t quit giving you a hard time, I could have a word with the principal—”

“No,” Steve said hastily. “No, that’s okay… I think he, uh, got it out of his system already. He said it wouldn’t happen again.”

_He was probably lying, but I’d die of embarrassment if Dad called the school because I can’t stop getting my ass kicked._

Mr. Harrington looked surprised. “Wait... he apologized?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. That’s pretty unusual.”

Steve shrugged and took a long sip of tea. “Well, he’s a pretty unusual guy.”

_That’s putting it mildly._

“Alpha rivals never apologize, in my experience. Especially the ones who fight their way to the top. Don’t tell your mother, but I once clocked a guy so hard, his parents got scared and had him transferred to a different school.”

“Really?” Steve found it difficult to imagine a time when his friendly, church-minded father had gone around punching other alpha boys.

“Yeah.” Mr. Harrington chuckled sheepishly. “If I knew where that guy lived now, I’d send him a letter of apology and maybe a gift certificate to a nice steakhouse. Just thinking about it makes me ashamed. When I was seventeen, though, I didn’t know any better and I thought I was right to clobber him.”

"Why’d you beat him up, Dad?"
"Oh, it's hard to remember after so many years..." Steve's father waved his hand dismissively, his gold wedding band glinting in the sunlight from the kitchen window. "Something stupid, I bet. Anyway, I hope you can see why your mother and I decided to raise you in a quiet place like Hawkins. We just wanted to avoid all that hormonal nonsense."

But then Billy Hargrove came to town...

“I invited the Hargroves to church, of course, but I think they might be Catholic. Neil is, at any rate… I’m not sure about his wife. His son is probably Catholic, too, but if he ever happens to stop by the church, maybe I can have a word with him."

“No, Dad,” Steve groaned in dismay, tossing the bag of corn on the table and slumping down in his chair. “Please don’t do that.”

The thought of his father offering Billy an alpha-male pep talk at church was beyond embarrassing.

“Why not? Part of my job is being a peacemaker in our community and shepherding wayward souls to Christ’s love.”

Wayward soul, my ass...

“Well, good luck with that,” Steve muttered, standing up from the kitchen table and carrying his half-full mug to the sink. “Thanks for the tea and Tylenol.”

“Sure thing, son. And if the Hargrove boy gives you any more trouble, don’t just bottle it in, okay? Promise you’ll talk to me about it.”

“Ohkay,” Steve lied on his way out of the kitchen. “I’m gonna go finish my homework.”

He trudged back upstairs, dreading all the studying and schoolwork that awaited him. Most of his teachers had grueling end-of-semester exams and projects scheduled for mid-December; the only class he was completely certain he wouldn’t flunk was gym. Steve had never been a good student.

He had joked to Nancy the previous day that, despite being a shitty boyfriend, he was a pretty good babysitter, but he knew that wasn’t true, either. In hindsight, it was nothing but dumb luck that had kept those kids safe. Steve hadn’t saved Max, Dustin, and Lucas from the demodogs in the junkyard; if some powerful, unknown force hadn’t summoned the monsters away, they definitely would’ve boarded the bus and killed everyone, including Steve. To his shame, he wasn’t even able to protect the kids from a mere human adversary. Max hadn’t needed any help from a babysitter to take care of her unhinged step-brother; all she needed was a loaded syringe and Steve’s nail-studded baseball bat.

A thirteen-year-old girl took him down when I couldn’t…. God, how lame.

With the demodogs vanquished, Steve only had one foe remaining in Hawkins: Billy Hargrove. He reminded himself that there shouldn’t be anything frightening about a seventeen-year-old Californian boy with a chip on his shoulder and unresolved anger management issues. Billy was an alpha with enviable muscles and hard fists, but he didn’t have rows of needle-sharp teeth, long claws, or cheetah-like speed. At the end of the day, Billy was only human.

I don’t buy that bullshit apologetic act of his for a second… he was only playing nice and sharing his cigarettes with me last night ’cause he wanted his car back.

Steve might be a lackluster student, an irresponsible babysitter, and a less-than-perfect boyfriend, but he was no coward.
There’s no way I’m gonna be afraid about going back to school just because some cocky, hyper-aggressive shitbird thinks he rules the roost. I don’t care what my dad says about peacemaking and Jesus; if that so-called “wayward soul” won’t leave me the hell alone, I’ll shepherd his stupid, smug face right into a brick wall.

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Nick Drake- Day is Done
“It’s been seventeen years of hell and I just can’t take it anymore
It’s been seventeen years of hell and no one’s really cared for me before
All my friends they said I’d fail or I’d end up on the run
It’s been seventeen years of hell and now I wanna have some fun.”
— ‘17 Years of Hell’ by The Partisans (1982)

Tuesday, November 6th, 1984

“C’mon, lazybones, it’s time to go!” Billy clapped his hands impatiently as he bustled into the kitchen carrying his bookbag. “It’s already seven-forty, so we’ve gotta hit the road.”

Max Mayfield was sitting at the table, reading the funnies. She sighed as she folded the newspaper and finished what was left of her glass of orange juice.

The previous day she had left for school early, sneaking out of the house while Billy was still in his room getting dressed and perfecting his hair. After school, he had cornered his stubborn step-sister outside the front doors of Hawkins Middle School and demanded that she come home with him, but she refused. Billy didn’t actually want to drive her to and from school, of course, but he dreaded what his father might do if he found out his son was shirking his duties. In the end, Billy had threatened to pick her up and carry her if she didn’t walk to the Camaro herself, and she grudgingly relented.

“You’d better not give me a bunch of snotty attitude like you did yesterday,” Billy warned as he locked the door behind them. “Trust me, I’d absolutely love to not have to shuttle you around anymore, but you know my dad. He’s never gonna get off my case for ’letting’ you sneak out the window on Sunday.”

“Whatever,” Max muttered, trudging down the steps behind her step-brother.

It was chilly and wet outside, like it had rained overnight, and they both had to be careful not to slip on the narrow steps that led down to the driveway. Billy was wearing two long-sleeved shirts under his leather jacket, and Max was wearing a thick sweater over her purple overalls.

“When it starts raining and snowing and shit, you won’t be able to skate to school, anyway,” Billy pointed out, gesturing at the old skateboard tucked under Max’s arm— the board that used to be his.

“I could take the bus,” she suggested sullenly, waiting next to the passenger-side door of the Camaro while Billy rummaged in his jacket pocket for his keys. “Plenty of kids take the bus.”

“I wish your whiny ass could take the bus, too. I sure as shit don’t do this ‘cause I enjoy the company.”

“Jerk,” Max mumbled under her breath as she sat down in the car and slammed her door.

“Excuse me?”
“Nothing.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Billy switched on the radio and tuned it to the local rock station, which was playing ‘We’re Not Gonna Take It’ by Twisted Sister. He glanced over at Max, who was staring out the window and chewing her bottom lip.

“You got something else to say, shitbird?”

“Quit calling me that,” Max muttered darkly, crossing her arms tightly across her chest. “And turn the heat up; it’s freezing in here.”

Billy reached out and twisted the heater knob until warm air blew noisily from the vents. “Any other demands, your highness? Can I get you a mug of hot chocolate or a blanket?”

Max rolled her eyes. “Very funny. Anyway, when are you gonna apologize to Lucas?”

“Christ,” Billy grumbled, recalling the way Steve had insisted that he say ‘sorry’ to the boy he had picked on. “You sound exactly like Harrington.”

“Well, you were even shittier to Steve than Lucas. Have you apologized to him yet?”

“I really don’t see how it’s any of your business,” Billy retorted. “But yeah. We, uh… talked.”

“When he went to pick you up at the Byers’ house?”

“Yeah…” Billy suddenly remembered when he had dreamed about Max driving his Camaro with Lucas Sinclair sitting in the passenger seat. “Thanks for not crashing my car during your little joyride, by the way.”

“We weren’t joyriding. We were on an important mission.”

Billy chuckled at her grave, self-important tone. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. But I can’t talk about any of it, so don’t ask. It’s done, and as you pointed out, your precious car is fine.”

It occurred to Billy that Max thought he was still in the dark about the more supernatural side of events from Sunday night. He couldn’t stand the idea of his step-sister thinking she knew all kinds of secret things that Billy didn’t, so he opted to clarify matters.

“I don’t need to ask you about shit, smarty-pants. Harrington told me everything.”

Max looked surprised. “Really? What exactly did he tell you?”

“Everything,” Billy repeated flatly. He didn’t want to delve into details and mention the dead alien he’d discovered in the Byers’ refrigerator that night; he preferred to keep that memory buried in the back of his mind with the ever-expanding pile of other things he couldn’t stand thinking about.

“Why would he tell you anything, after you almost killed him?”

Billy smirked. “Maybe he found it in his heart to forgive me.”

“We all told him he was completely nuts to go back and get you. Chief Hopper offered to drive him back to wherever he parked his BMW that night, but Steve just told us not to worry about it and took
off in your car.”

“Of course he did,” Billy said, smiling at his reflection in his rearview mirror. “That’s because I’m irresistible.”

“Yeah, right,” Max scoffed. “It’s probably ‘cause he didn’t want you to beat him up again.”

“I’m not gonna beat him up again,” Billy grumbled. “Not unless he gives me a good reason to.”

“A good reason? There was no good reason to do that on Sunday; you just did it ‘cause you felt like it!”

“Gimme a break,” Billy muttered, instinctively glancing at the telltale reddish hue of his knuckles. “He didn’t die, right?”

“He could’ve gotten, like, permanent brain damage…”

“Yeah, but he didn’t,” Billy insisted stubbornly. “He’s totally fine.”

“You’re unbelievable. Do you know how hard it was to drag an unconscious six-foot-tall boy out of a house and into a Camaro?” Max’s voice rose shrilly as she grew more indignant. “Cars like this only have two freaking doors and we had to cram him into the backseat and—”

“Alright, alright!” Billy bellowed, gripping the steering wheel tightly and shaking his head. “I get the picture, okay? I told him I was sorry, so shut up about it.”

“So, you’ll say sorry to Lucas, too?”

“Ugh, Christ. Will you get off my case if I do?”

“Yes,” Max replied succinctly, looking out the window as they approached the school parking lot.

“Fine, then. Bring that little shit over and I’ll tell him before I drive you home.”

“Don’t call him that!”

“I’ll call your scrawny, geeky boyfriend whatever I want.”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” Max hissed, her pale cheeks flushing pink. “We’re just friends!”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.” Billy pulled into a parking spot and switched off the engine; he was pleased to see the familiar dark red BMW parked nearby. “If you’re late to homeroom and the teacher bitches about it on your report card, I’ll be the one getting yelled at, so hurry up.”

Max ignored him as she shouldered her backpack and slammed the passenger door behind her with considerably more force than necessary. She shot one final glare at Billy before dropping her skateboard on the ground with a clatter and zooming off across the wet, cracked asphalt.

………………..

“What the hell happened, Harrington?” Tommy cackled gleefully when he saw Steve’s bruised face for the first time in the gym locker room.

“Don’t start,” Steve muttered, pulling off his jacket and dropping it on the skinny bench that ran down the length of the aisle. “I’m seriously not in the mood, man.”
Billy was secretly glad that he and Steve had such similar last names— their gym lockers were just as close together as their regular lockers over in the main hall— but he wished Tommy’s last name was Atkins or Zabinski instead of Hamilton, so the talkative beta would have to change his clothes a few aisles over.

**He’s always around, running his big, stupid mouth…**

Tommy looked over at Billy with small brown eyes. “You’ve kinda got a shiner, too, man… oh, crap! Did you two get in a fight this weekend? What happened? Tell me everything.”

*Nosy little beta shit.*

“There’s nothing to tell.” Billy shrugged, trying not to let his gaze linger too long as Steve pulled his shirt over his head. “Harrington and I had a little disagreement, so we hashed it out, and now everything’s fine.”

“Fine, my ass,” Steve muttered darkly. “You don’t get to decide that on your own.”

“Whoa, that looks gnarly!” Tommy reached over to poke the dark purple bruise on Steve’s stomach. “Does it hurt?”

*Get your freckled paws off him, asshole.*

“No, it feels terrific,” Steve grumbled sarcastically, swatting Tommy’s hand away and hastily tugging on his grey gym shirt to conceal the bruise.

Tommy nudged Billy and nodded in Steve’s direction. “Was that your handiwork, too, man?”

“Might’ve been,” Billy replied with a noncommittal shrug. “I was pretty wasted that night, to be honest. The details are a little hazy.”

He was surprised by the sharp pang of guilt he’d felt when he glimpsed the ugly bruise marring Steve’s otherwise perfect torso.

**Kicking a guy when he’s already on the ground is kind of a dick move, I’ve gotta admit…**

Unable to see the bruise on his stomach anymore, Tommy returned his attention to Steve’s face. “Reminds me of the time Byers beat you up last ye—”

“Shut up, Tommy,” Steve snapped as he kicked off his shoes and pulled off his jeans.

“Yeah… shut up, Tommy,” Billy muttered, completely distracted by how cute Steve’s ass looked in his snug, navy-blue briefs.

Undeterred, Tommy continued chattering, periodically grinning over at the other boys who had lockers near them; they all laughed along with his incessant jibes.

“Wonder who started it? Last time, Harrington was the one who started it.”

“Really?” Billy hated giving his underling the satisfaction, but he couldn’t help being curious about what Steve Harrington was like in the ‘old days’.

Tommy was so delighted that Billy was interested in his story that he seemed to forget his original question about who started Sunday’s scuffle. “So, even after the love of his life got dissed, Jonathan Byers was just walking away like a little pussy, right? He clearly wasn’t up for a fight. But Steve wouldn’t stop following him and shoving him. He said Jonathan was a screw-up just like his
deadbeat father, and—"

“I said shut the hell up,” Steve snapped again as he tugged on his green gym shorts, stubbornly refusing to meet Billy’s gaze.

Tommy smirked and continued. “Anyway, Jonathan still kept trying to walk away, even after getting called a screw-up and a queer…”

_Steve called him a queer, huh? Wonder if he’d ever call me that…_

“…but Mister Tough Guy here couldn’t stop yapping and riling him up, so naturally Byers blew a fuse.” Tommy tipped his head back and cackled. “Oh man, wait a sec… I just remembered how the princess was, like, _begging_ Jonathan to stop hitting Steve. That’s how bad it was: short, skinny, prematurely balding photographer _geek_ Jonathan Byers had suddenly turned into Rocky fuckin’ Balboa. Harrington got _pulverized._”

“Goddamnit, Tommy!” Steve didn’t look up at them, but his hands shook with barely-contained anger as he hurriedly finished lacing up his shoes. “How many times do I have to tell you to shut up?”

“As many times as you want,” Tommy retorted with a sneer. “Doesn’t mean I’ve gotta listen, does it? If you don’t like our conversation, you’re welcome to butt out. Nobody’ll miss you. _Anyway_, I wish you’d been there that day, Billy, ’cause you would’ve laughed your ass off. ‘King Steve’ barely got _one_ good punch in before Byers knocked him on the ground and beat him to a pulp.”

“So, what made Jonathan finally stop?” Billy asked curiously. “Did you have to drag them off each other, or…?”

“Pretty much,” Tommy boasted. “We were in an alley near the movie theater, and I managed to help our old buddy here limp away when the cops showed up.”

“I wasn’t _limping_,” Steve interjected crossly as he shoved past them. “If you’re gonna put my business out there, at least get it right.”

Billy found it difficult to imagine a mild-mannered, buttoned-up guy like Steve Harrington taunting Jonathan and getting in a fistfight in an alley.

_I wanna see more of that side of him… the reckless, shit-talking side._

“His face looks like hell, but I actually don’t think it’s quite as bad as when Jonathan whooped his ass last year,” Tommy continued, smirking as Steve left. “You must’ve gone easy on him… what’d he say to piss you off so much, anyway?”

“He lied to me,” Billy responded succinctly, bending down to lace up his high-top Converse sneakers. “And that’s all I’m gonna say on the subject, so drop it.”

Tommy frowned. “But I told you everything about—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Billy finished tying his shoes and held up his hand for silence. “Listen up, pal: just ’cause I don’t mind hearing these little stories of yours doesn’t mean you and I have some kind of quid pro quo arrangement.”

“Quid pro _what_?”

_Christ, I’m surrounded by idiots._
“Just remember this, genius: I don’t have to tell you shit about shit unless I feel like it. Got that?”

Tommy opened his mouth like he wanted to keep arguing, then closed it again and nodded meekly. The other boys didn’t look like they wanted any trouble with their unofficial leader, either; they all finished changing into their P.E. uniforms in sullen silence, occasionally exchanging uneasy glances.

That’s right, bitches: know your place.

“Alright, now let’s get outta here,” Billy instructed loudly, motioning for his posse to follow him out of the locker room. “I’m not gonna be late because of you jerk-offs. And another thing: I don’t want to see Harrington score a single point on the court today, got it? Make sure you block all his passes and shots… but don’t push him, for fuck’s sake.”

Nobody lays a finger on King Steve but me.

After the final bell of the day rang, Billy stopped by his locker to get some books, and tried not to be disappointed when he couldn’t spot Steve anywhere. Tommy, Carol, and a few other annoying beta kids asked him if he wanted to go out for burgers and fries, but Billy declined the invitation. Even if he wanted to hang out with them— which he definitely didn’t— he had to go to work. So far, he hadn’t told anyone that he had a job at the Hawkins record store; he figured everyone would eventually find out on their own.

He was pleased with his new occupation: it was simple, it paid better than minimum wage, he got to listen to music the whole time, and his boss was extremely cool. June Clearwater was a force of nature; she seemed to know everything there was to know about every type of music under the sun, from heavy metal to old delta blues. Sometimes she even let her newest employee choose which songs were played on the record store stereo; she was delighted to discover that they shared a love of gritty, anarchist punk music (“The more obscure, the better,” she often said).

It was chilly outside, and Billy blew some hot air on his palms and rubbed them together as he strolled out of the double doors towards the parking lot. He looked towards the middle school for his step-sister, but he didn’t see her. He did see Lucas Sinclair, though.

Goddamnit. Why should I say ‘sorry’? It’s not like I punched the kid or anything… Just as he decided he was going to put off his apology for another day, he spotted Steve Harrington out of the corner of his eye; the tall boy with beautiful brown hair was trudging towards his car, his breath forming little white clouds in the chilly November breeze. Billy abruptly changed his mind, deciding that he was going to apologize to Lucas, after all.

If I’ve gotta play nice and say I’m sorry and all that crap, might as well kill two birds with one stone and do it when Harrington is looking. Let him see me being a Good Person, so he’ll think I’ve mended my wicked ways or whatever.

“Yo, Sinclair!” Billy waved as he jogged over to the younger boy.

Lucas was walking alongside his bicycle, looking lost in thought, but he stopped when he saw Billy approaching. “What do you want?”

“Oh, not much. Just wanted to have a word with you. Clear the air a little.”

“Clear the air?” Lucas repeated slowly, scowling warily at Billy and crossing his arms. “You’ve gotta be kidding.”
“Nope, not kidding at all. Totally serious, man.” Billy glanced over his shoulder at Steve, who was standing by his BMW and observing them from afar. “I, uh… I’m really sorry, okay? About the shit I said on Sunday. I went a little overboard.”

“A little?” Lucas didn’t look very impressed. “That’s the understatement of the year.”

“I mean it,” Billy insisted with as much sincerity as he could muster. “I’m sorry. Seriously. No bullshit.”

Lucas narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Did Max put you up to this?”

“Nah,” Billy lied. “Just clearing the air, like I said before.”

“Clearing your conscience, you mean.”

“Sure, whatever,” Billy agreed impatiently, looking over his shoulder again to confirm that Steve hadn’t gotten in his car yet.

*Good, he’s still watching.*

“So, does this mean you’re not gonna have a problem with me hanging out with Max anymore?”

Billy turned back to Lucas, his jaw tensing at the reminder. “I, uh… no, I’m not gonna have a problem. But you kids have gotta keep it quiet, okay? Keep it subtle. You can’t, like, ride around town with her on the back of your bike.”

“Why the hell not?” Lucas’ brow furrowed with anger. “If you have an issue with your sister hanging out with a black guy, why don’t you just spit it out already?”

“Jesus,” Billy muttered uncomfortably, unable to meet Lucas’ dark eyes. “Look, I get why you’d think that, but I actually don’t give half a shit who Maxine hangs out with… my dad, on the other hand, is a bit more, uh… particular about the company his kids keep. And he’s even more uptight about Max than he is about me. Probably ‘cause she’s a girl, and she’s not really his, so he’s gotta show off for his new wife or whatever.”

Billy wasn’t interested in telling Lucas the story of his dead sister, though he suspected that it was the true reason his father was so overprotective; Neil Hargrove had already lost one daughter, and he probably saw Maxine as a chance to ‘get things right’ and leave nothing to chance, however irrational that logic was.

Lucas glared at Billy. “So, lemme get this straight: your dad is the racist, not you?”

“Yep.”

“That’s awfully convenient. You know what they say about apples not falling far from trees, right?”

*This pipsqueak is really testing my patience…*

Billy balled his hands into fists inside his jacket pockets and bit the tip of his tongue to keep himself from saying something he would regret.

Lucas shook his head. “What does your old man not liking black people have to do with you going crazy on Sunday? Something doesn’t add up, here…”

*Shit. This is nowhere near as easy as I thought it was gonna be.*
“Look, uh… back in Cali, I might’ve spent some time messing around with this… this girl, right?”
Billy felt a sharp pang of disloyalty for referring to Aaron as a girl, but he was in no mood to out
himself to an almost-stranger. “And she wasn’t white, she was… she was, uh…”

“Black?” Lucas prompted impatiently.

“Right. And one day we were, uh… fooling around in my room and my dad came home early.”
Lucas’ expression changed imperceptibly. “He saw you with a black girl and hit the roof, huh?”

“That’s putting it mildly, yeah.” Billy glanced over his shoulder again, relieved that Steve was still
there, leaning against his car with his arms crossed and watching them like a hawk.

*Thank God he’s too far away to hear what we’re saying.*

“You know Max and I are just friends, right? There’s nothing else going on between us. So, I still
don’t get why you were so pissed off about—”

Billy sighed with exasperation, wishing he was somewhere else; he couldn’t seem to find the right
words. “Look— first of all, I might’ve drank too much that night. So there’s that. Second, I’m a guy
who appreciates his own free time, okay? If my old man found out Max was hanging out with a kid
like you, he’d probably make me keep a twenty-four watch on her… I waste enough of my time
on her as it is.”

When Billy glanced over his shoulder yet again, Lucas narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Why do
you keep looking at Steve Harrington?”

“Looking at who?” Billy’s head snapped forward; he could feel his cheeks getting warm. “I’m not
looking at anyone.”

*Shit. Gotta be more subtle.*

Lucas kept staring across the parking lot. “I think we caught his attention… he’s coming over.”

Billy spun around in time to see that Steve was, indeed, striding towards them.

“Hey, Lucas!” he called with a little wave. “Is this guy giving you a hard time? ‘Cause if he’s
bothering you…”

*King Steve to the fucking rescue, huh?*

Billy bristled indignantly at the suggestion. “I’m not bothering—”

“I didn’t ask you,” Steve interjected, looking past him at Lucas and tucking his hands in the pockets
of his forest-green down vest.

“It’s okay, Steve,” Lucas explained. “He was just… apologizing. Or trying to.”

Steve raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Oh, yeah?”

Billy instinctively reached up to fiddle with his hair and didn’t respond. Even with three feet of space
between them, Billy could catch a faint whiff of whatever amazing cologne it was that Steve always
wore.

A familiar, feminine voice spoke suddenly behind them. “What’s going on here?”
Oh, great. Now everyone's here, huh?

Billy turned around quickly to face his step-sister. “None of your business.”

Max looked from Billy to Lucas and back again. “Wait... were you actually apologizing?”

“It’s far enough, plus it’s cold as fuck out here, and the sun’ll go down before you know it. If my old man sees you skating alone in the dark, you know exactly who he’s gonna blame.”

“I could drive her home,” Steve offered quietly, his expression inscrutable behind black Ray-Ban sunglasses.

Max turned to him and brightened. “Really? Thanks!”

Well, shit. What a goddamn gentleman.

“Don’t be such a little freeloader, Max.” Billy wasn’t certain why, but he felt a little embarrassed. “I’m sure Harrington has better things to do than be your substitute chauffeur for the afternoon.”

“Not really,” Steve shrugged, looking down at his watch. “I was gonna go vote, that’s all. I could get that over with while the kids are at the arcade.”

“See, Max? You wouldn’t want to get in the way of King Steve here doing his civic duty, right?”

“Are you gonna vote?” Steve asked, taking Billy by surprise. “If you are, the polling place is in the elementary school auditorium, over on Maple Street.”

“Billy can’t vote yet,” Max piped up. “He’s still seventeen.”

“Oh, okay.”

Yup. Seventeen and sick of this shit.

Billy sighed, tired of arguing. “Fine. I don’t care anymore. If Harrington wants to give you a ride, that’s his business. But make sure you’re home before dinner— you got that? I’m not in the mood to get an earful from Neil tonight ’cause you went AWOL again.”

“Yeah, I got it, okay?” Max rolled her eyes and waved her hand dismissively at her step-brother. “Take a chill pill and go to work already.”

Obnoxious little brat.

With one last backward glance, Billy strolled away to his car, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets to search for his keys. He wasn’t sure how to feel about Steve driving his step-sister around; as much as he disliked doing it himself, it was his responsibility, not Steve’s. He sat down in his Camaro and
put on his favorite aviator sunglasses, fluffing the ends of his hair as he stared at the rearview mirror. He scowled when he glimpsed Max laughing at something Lucas or Steve had said.

*I bet she wishes Harrington was her step-brother instead of me. He’s rich enough to buy her all kinds of shit and he seems like the pushover type who’d let her get away with murder.*

“Whatever,” he muttered to himself. “Fuck it.”

To let Max, Lucas, and especially Steve know precisely how he felt, he pawed through his cluttered glove compartment until he found his old Partisans cassette and shoved it in the tape player. He fast-forwarded to ‘I Don't Give A Fuck’, cranked up the volume as high as it would go, and rolled down his window.

“No, I don’t give a fuck! No, I don’t give a fuck!”

Billy lit a cigarette, revved his engine loudly and sped out of the parking lot, leaving Max, Lucas, Steve, and everyone else far behind.

*So, he’s gonna go vote today, huh? That rich prep better not vote for Reagan… not that it really matters. That bigoted old shithhead is gonna win with or without Harrington’s help.*

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Ratatat- Seventeen Years
Let Nothing You Affright

Chapter Notes

The chapter title is an archaic way of saying 'Don't Be Afraid' or 'Fear Nothing', taken from a lesser-known verse of ‘God Rest You Merry Gentlemen’:

“Fear not then, said the angel,  
Let nothing you affright.  
This day is born a savior  
Of a pure virgin bright  
To free all those who trust in Him  
From Satan’s pow’r and might.  
Oh, tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy!  
Oh, tidings of comfort and joy!”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saturday, December 15th, 1984

Steve Harrington had been surprised when Dustin approached him in the parking lot the previous afternoon to ask for a ride to the middle school dance. Apparently, there was something wrong with Mrs. Henderson’s car and she wouldn’t be able to drive him to the Snow Ball herself. Instead of asking why he couldn’t just get a ride from one of his friends, Steve simply nodded and asked “What time should I swing by?”

“It’s not like I have anything else going on.”

On the drive to the Henderson’s house that night (officially, it was the first day of winter break), Steve hummed the song his mother had persuaded him to sing on Christmas Eve. The church service was only nine days away, but he wasn’t especially nervous; ‘I Wonder As I Wander’ was one of the shortest Christmas songs, after all, so getting the words wrong was barely a possibility, even for someone as forgetful as Steve.

“For poor, on’ry people like you and like I”… what the hell does “on’ry” mean, anyway? Ornery? Must be something people used to say in the old days.

Dustin had written down his address for him, since Steve had only been to his house on one other occasion. It was hard to believe that just a little over a month earlier, he had driven to the Henderson’s place to help Dustin ‘deal with’ the juvenile demogorgon he’d managed to lure into his backyard cellar with nothing but bravery and bologna.

Steve felt strange when he trotted up to Dustin’s front door and rang the bell, like he was picking a girl up for a date or something. Claudia Henderson, a middle-aged woman with a kind, round face, answered the door. She was wearing a colorful, Christmas-themed sweater vest and holding a Siamese kitten against her bosom.

“Come in, Steven, come in,” she urged, beckoning him inside with a broad smile. “I’m sorry, but he’s still getting ready… putting some finishing touches on his hairdo, I think. Thanks a million for doing this, hon… Dusty is so excited! And just wait ’til you see how fabulous he looks in his new
jacket; I got a terrific deal on it at Sears, and—"

“Mom!” Dustin bellowed from somewhere down the hall, his voice muffled and distant. “Can you please talk about the weather or something? You’re embarrassing me!”

“Oh, don’t mind him,” Dustin’s mother chuckled with a good-natured shake of her head. “He’s a bundle of nerves tonight… so am I, actually.”

Steve tucked his hands in his jean pockets. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, Mrs. Henderson. I’m sure he’ll have a great time at the dance.”

“Please, dear, call me Claudia… oh, I almost forgot! Have you met the newest addition to our family?” She beamed down at the kitten in her arms and held up one of its tiny paws in an imitation of a wave. “Say ‘Meowy Christmas’, Tews!”

*She sure thinks of interesting names for her cats…*

Steve smiled politely and waved back at the cat, feeling slightly foolish; he had to admit, it *was* extremely cute. He tried not to think about the gory fate that had befallen Mews, its unlucky predecessor.

He managed to keep a straight face when Dustin Henderson appeared in the living room wearing a blue plaid suit jacket, turquoise shirt, large bow tie, brown slacks, and dingy white Reeboks. The boy's riotous mop of brown curls was slicked back on the sides and teased up into a stiff mound on top of his head.

How much of the Farrah Fawcett spray did he use? I said four puffs, not forty…

“You ready, Steve?” Dustin clapped his hands together with obviously forced confidence. “I’m ready. Let’s get outta here.”

“Allright, champ… lead the way.”

“You look so handsome, Dusty!” Claudia Henderson exclaimed proudly. “Lemme put Tews down and grab the camera!”

“No, Mom,” Dustin groaned, practically dragging Steve out the door in his haste to escape his mother and her Kodak Instamatic. “Will’s brother is gonna be there taking pictures of everyone, okay? We gotta go!”

During the fifteen-minute drive to the middle school, they listened to pop music on Steve's car radio. Fortunately, he didn’t have to think of much to say because Dustin, chatty by nature, was even more talkative when he was nervous.

“Mike and Nance are getting a ride from Jonathan… I think Lucas is going with them, too,” he explained, even though Steve hadn’t asked. “And Mrs. Byers took Will… El probably isn’t going, ’cause Chief Hopper is, like, really overprotective. Mike is hoping she shows up, obviously.”

“What about Maxine?” Steve recalled that Dustin once had a poorly-concealed crush on the new girl with long, red hair. "Is she going with Lucas and the others?"

“I dunno,” Dustin shrugged indifferently. “Maybe her mom is gonna drive her. Or her scary step-brother.”

*Shit, what if he's lurking around here somewhere? Not that I'm afraid, or anything...*
“All right, buddy, here we are,” he announced quietly when they arrived at Hawkins Middle School. A large white banner that read ‘Snow Ball’ in enormous, slightly crooked blue letters was attached to the red brick wall of the gymnasium. To his relief, he hadn't noticed a blue Camaro anywhere.

“So remember, once you get in there…”

“Pretend like I don’t care,” Dustin finished with a somber nod of his head.

“There you go. You’re learning, my friend… you’re learning.”

Dustin suddenly reached up to tilt the rearview mirror down towards himself for one last, doubtful look at his bold hairstyle. The carefully-arranged corkscrew dangling over his forehead reminded Steve a little of someone else.

*Why the hell am I thinking about that asshole?*

“Hey... come on,” Steve chided, gently batting Dustin’s hand off the mirror. “You look great, okay? You look great. Now you’re gonna go in there…”

“Yeah.”

“And look like a million bucks!”

“Yeah,” Dustin agreed with forced optimism, clutching his dance ticket.

“And you’re gonna slay ‘em dead.”

“Like a lion.” Dustin grinned and made a strange, guttural purring sound with the back of his tongue.

*Oh, Lord.*

“Yeah, uh... don’t do that, okay?”

“Okay.”

Steve held out his hand. “Good luck.”

Dustin clasped his hand briefly, nodded stiffly and stepped out of the car.

Instead of driving away immediately, Steve just sat there for a few moments, smiling as Dustin strolled through the double doors and greeted Mr. Clarke, the middle-school science teacher who was on ticket-taking duty. Steve’s smile waned, though, when he noticed Nancy.

He hadn’t spoken to her much since the Sunday night over a month earlier when their paths had crossed and he told her “It’s okay,” referring to her abrupt decision to leave him for Jonathan Byers. Steve didn’t want her to feel too guilty about it. They saw each other in the hallways and cafeteria at school, of course, but Nancy was in the grade below him, so they didn’t have any classes together and it didn’t take long for them to feel like they were strangers again. A couple of weeks earlier, Steve had felt compelled to attend Barbara Holland’s funeral; he had stood awkwardly beside Jonathan and Nancy in the graveyard, wearing a black suit and holding a program with Barb’s sweet, beaming face on it.

*She had no idea what was gonna happen to her... none of us know what's gonna happen to us, in the end.*

Steve certainly never could have guessed that he’d one day find himself dropping a nervous thirteen-
year-old boy off at a middle school dance and gazing wistfully at Nancy Wheeler, who had been his girlfriend for a whole year… until she suddenly didn’t want to be his anymore.

*Snap out of it, man… it’s ancient history. If she wants Jonathan, that’s fine… he turned out to be a pretty decent guy, all things considered. At least she didn’t get snapped up by some jerk, like Hargrove."

He was too far away to be able to tell exactly what she was doing— probably pouring punch or something— but he could see that she was laughing.

*She seems happy… then again, she always seemed happy to me. I didn’t have a clue."

Steve sighed and drove away, trying to push all thoughts of his ex-girlfriend from his mind. He wasn’t in a hurry to return to his dark, empty house; his mother was working late at the hospital, as usual, and his father went to bed early most Saturday nights to be well-rested for church the next morning. Steve was feeling sorry for himself and craving something sweet, so he ended up driving towards ‘Fair Mart’— the same convenience store where Tommy had once bought him Tylenol and a cold can of Coke after his humiliating defeat at the hands of Jonathan Byers.

“Hello,” the shop manager said pleasantly when Steve stepped inside the well-heated store. ‘Last Christmas’ was playing loudly from a speaker mounted behind the front counter.

*“Last Christmas, I gave you my heart, but the very next day, you gave it away. This year, to save me from tears, I’ll give it to someone special.”"

Humming along softly to the music, Steve stood in the candy aisle and stared pensively at the vast selection before finally choosing a roll of fruit-flavored Life Savers. He plopped it down on the counter and returned the shop manager’s polite smile.

“Can I get a pack of Parliaments, too, please?”

“Sure thing.”

Steve wasn’t really a heavy smoker— Tommy, ever the bad influence, had gotten him started in tenth grade— but he bought about one pack a month so he could enjoy a cigarette or two at parties, or when he was feeling particularly stressed. The ‘cancer sticks’, as his mother termed them, were especially soothing when the weather turned grey and chilly.

He pulled out his wallet and passed a crisp five-dollar bill to the shop owner, idly glancing over his shoulder at the sound of the door opening.

“Oh, shit,” he muttered under his breath when he saw who had just walked in. “Seriously?”

It was Billy Hargrove, strolling over to the counter with his hands tucked in the pockets of his leather jacket. When his blue eyes met Steve’s, he halted in apparent surprise for a fraction of a second, but recovered his composure quickly and stepped up beside him at the counter, grinning confidently.

“Hey, Harrington. Whatcha buying?”

“None of your business,” Steve mumbled, hastily grabbing his candy and cigarettes from the counter and turning to leave.

“Don’t forget your change!” The shop owner called after him, waving three dollars in the air.

“Keep it,” Steve answered, almost bumping into a cardboard display case of Christmas knick-knacks
in his hurry to escape a confrontation.

*I’m not afraid, I’m just… avoiding conflict, that’s all.*

“Hang on a minute, dude, don’t run away yet.” Billy tugged out his wallet and nodded at the display of cigarettes behind the shop owner. “Pack of Marlboros, por favor, señor.”

Steve hesitated, lingering awkwardly in the doorway as he quickly considered his options. He knew the wisest choice would be to ignore Billy, return to his car, and drive home, but for some reason, his feet wouldn’t move.

*Can’t hurt to find out what he wants, right? He doesn’t really seem mad or anything… you can never tell with that guy, though.*

Steve had been staying out of Billy’s way pretty successfully for the past month, and when it was impossible to avoid him (like when he had to change his clothes for gym or retrieve something from his locker in the hall), he almost never responded to his jibes, which ranged from casual to cruel, depending on his mood.

When Billy had finished paying for his cigarettes, he walked over to Steve and pushed open the door. “C’mom… if I have to listen to this corny crap for one more second I’m gonna throw myself into the quarry.”

“It’s not *that* bad,” Steve objected, referring to the infectious, wildly popular Wham! Christmas song.

Billy snorted. “It’s a sappy, cheese-coated turd, but okay. Whatever you say, dude.”

Steve stood four feet away from Billy on the dirty concrete walkway outside the Fair Mart. The brick storefront was painted in stripes of beige, yellow, brown, and orange, and it was brightly lit; one of the long, humming bulbs had something wrong with it, and flickered spasmodically. Even after a year, flickering lights still gave Steve the creeps.

*The demogorgons are gone… don’t be a pussy. They’re gone.*

Shivering slightly in the wintry night air, Billy peeled the plastic off his newly-purchased pack of Marlboros and lit a cigarette; his shoulder-length, wavy locks looked blonder than usual under the harsh fluorescent light, and tiny flashes of gold glinted from the tiny ring on his left earlobe and the ever-present pendant on his chest.

“So,” he began, exhaling a long plume of smoke. “Fancy meeting you, of all people, at this fine establishment. They say great minds think alike, right?”

“Huh?”

Billy used his cigarette to point at the pack of Parliaments Steve had momentarily forgotten he was holding.

“Oh, right,” Steve chuckled wryly. “Yeah, we’ve definitely got a pair of great minds between us… trying to get lung cancer and all.”

Billy tipped his head back and laughed; his teeth were white and the half-unbuttoned blue shirt he was wearing under his leather jacket brought out the color of his eyes.

“You’re a funny guy, Harrington. Anyway, why don’t you have one? It’ll keep you warm. I can’t get over how goddamn cold it is here… how can you stand it?”
“I guess you just get used to it, like anything else.” Steve shrugged, taking Billy’s advice and opening his new pack of Parliaments. It _was_ chilly, but he was comfortable enough in his thick, dark red sweater. “This isn’t even that cold… if you think _this_ is bad, you’re gonna love February.”

“Great,” Billy muttered glumly. “Something to look forward to, huh? Maybe I’ll get lucky and die of hypothermia before then.”

_So dramatic, jeez…_

“Buttoning up your shirt once in a while might help,” Steve pointed out dryly as he lit a cigarette. “You’re not in California anymore.”

Billy glanced down at his partially-exposed chest and sighed sadly. “Know what, Harrington? For once, you’re probably right.”

To Steve’s surprise, Billy held his cigarette steady between his pursed lips and proceeded to button his shirt up, stopping just short of his throat.

“Fuck it… my tan’s long gone, anyway.” Billy took his Marlboro between his fingers again and tapped the ash off the tip. “Been here less than two months and I’m already turning into a pasty midwesterner. Might as well buy a barn coat and a wooly hat with fuckin’ ear flaps.”

Steve couldn’t help smiling at the thought, certain that Billy was good-looking enough to successfully pull off even the stodgiest barn coat (though he would never give him the satisfaction of admitting it). What Steve _wasn’t_ so certain about, though, was why he was standing outside a convenience store on a cold December night, voluntarily having a conversation with a guy who had once kicked him in the stomach and broken a plate over his head.

_We’re just out here gabbing like none of that shit happened… I must be crazy._

Steve cleared his throat. “So, uh… did you drop your sister off at the dance? Step-sister, I mean?”

“Nah… her mom drove her. I just went out for a pack of smokes.”

“Oh, okay,” Steve nodded. “I just dropped Dustin off at the dance a while ago.”

Billy’s brow crinkled and he shook his head slowly. “Why?”

Steve shrugged. “Why not? His mom’s car broke down and it’s not like it took a bunch of time out of my night or anything.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t _have_ to,” Billy reasoned. “He’s not your little brother. Why are you always so nice to those brats?”

“Well, why are you so mean to them?” Steve countered defensively. “Is it, like… _fun_, or something?”

Billy paused for a moment and gazed off into the darkness of the convenience store parking lot, exhaling smoke from his nostrils like a dragon. “It’s… no, I guess I wouldn’t call it _fun_, exactly. But I—”

“But _what_?” Steve rolled his eyes. “Haven’t you ever heard of doing something nice just for the hell of it?”

_Lord, this guy has issues…_
“Nice?” Billy repeated with a sneer. “Have I accidentally stepped onto an episode of ‘Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood’ or something? Unless Tommy’s been feeding me a load of bullshit, you weren’t the world’s nicest guy yourself until recently, and—”

“Yeah, okay,” Steve interjected again, hastily steering the conversation away from the numerous past mistakes he’d prefer to forget. “I think you get off on making people afraid of you, that’s all. Makes you feel powerful or something.”

A dark, menacing glint flickered in Billy’s eyes for just a moment, and Steve wondered if he had said too much; when Billy was in a seemingly friendly mood it was alarmingly easy to forget all about his dangerously volatile side.

“Is that your in-depth analysis, Sigmund Freud?” Billy asked in a low, cold voice as he took a step closer to Steve. “How about you, pretty boy? Are you afraid of me?”

No.

It was quiet enough that Steve could hear Christmas music playing faintly from within the store and the quiet, continuous hum of the fluorescent bulbs above them. He pinched his cigarette a little tighter between his fingers and shook his head.

“No?” Billy took another step closer and glared directly into Steve’s eyes. “Well, maybe you should be.”

Steve knew that, of course. The bruises on his face and abdomen may have gradually faded into nothingness, but he wasn’t a slate that had been wiped clean. He hadn’t forgotten about how much those knuckles and leather boots hurt. He remembered it like it had happened last week, yet... he wasn’t scared. Rather than frightening, Billy was more like a frustratingly difficult puzzle that Steve couldn’t stop trying to solve; even if it was headache-inducing and ultimately a huge waste of time, he couldn’t drag his eyes away.

He has... freakishly nice eyelashes for a guy.

After holding the tense, shared gaze for what felt like a solid minute, Billy blinked and the corner of his mouth curved up into a smirk.

“Relax, man.” He reached over to punch Steve playfully on the arm. “I’m just fucking with you.”

“Oh... right.” Steve cleared his throat as he tried to remember what he was saying before the conversation took a strange turn. “Anyway, I hope someone dances with Dustin tonight... he seemed pretty nervous. Reminded me of my first school dance.”

Feels like a hundred years ago.

Billy cocked an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah? King Steve was actually nervous?”

“Obviously, I didn’t have that stupid nickname back then,” Steve said dismissively; the thought of being dubbed ‘Keg King’ when he was a thirteen-year-old virgin with braces and a cracking voice was almost laughable. “But sure, I remember the clammy palms and pounding heart and flip-flopping stomach and all that jazz... I’m sure I put on a good show and pretended I wasn’t nervous, but of course I was.”

Steve wasn’t sure why he was telling Billy so much; the words tumbled out all on their own, honest and unrehearsed.
Billy casually propped his elbow on the flat surface of a kerosene pump. “I bet every tiny-tits preteen in town was lining up to get a chance to shimmy on the dance floor with you.”

“Hardly,” Steve chuckled modestly, shaking his head. “I danced with a few girls, of course, but I wasn’t—”

CRASH!

Both boys looked up sharply, alarmed by the deafeningly loud noise. A pick-up truck had just sped out of the Fair Mart parking lot without checking if it was safe, and a car coming down the road couldn’t swerve out of the way in time.

“Holy crap!” Steve exclaimed, squinting across the dark parking lot. “God, I hope nobody got hurt… that was nuts.”

Despite the loud crash, the damage to the cars didn’t look too catastrophic and fortunately, both drivers appeared to be unharmed. When Steve turned back to Billy, he was surprised to see that the other boy had backed himself against the wall of the store; he was wide-eyed, tense, and noticeably pale.

Whoa… what’s wrong with him?

“Hey.” Steve took a step closer, his brow crinkling with concern. “Are… are you okay, man?”

Billy didn’t respond; he seemed frozen in place— staring straight ahead without blinking— almost like he couldn’t even hear Steve. He had dropped his cigarette on the pavement next to his feet, where a wisp of smoke continued to trail up into the air from the hot, glowing tip.

“You okay?” Steve repeated, reaching over tentatively to pat Billy’s shoulder. “You, uh… you look like you saw a ghost or something.”

Who gets that freaked out over a fender-bender?

At the touch of Steve’s hand on his leather-clad shoulder, Billy suddenly snapped out of his trance and nodded quickly. “Y-yeah, I’m fine. Thanks. I, uh… I’ve gotta go.”

Steve stood there, mystified, as Billy hastily walked over to his Camaro without looking back at him. He had never seen Billy look so rattled, not even on that Sunday night the previous month when they had discussed Hawkins’ alien infestation. Steve had to shield his eyes with his hand when Billy turned on his headlights.

He’s the one who wanted to talk, and now he’s speeding away like he just robbed the place...

Billy gunned the ignition of his Camaro and backed out of his parking spot, carefully maneuvering past the two dented cars and their owners, who were still bickering about who was at fault.

I really don’t get him at all.

Steve almost wished his father had never told him Billy Hargrove was an alpha; even after a month, he still wasn’t sure what to do with the information. He couldn’t just walk up to Billy and say, “Hey, I heard you were an alpha! Well, guess what? So am I.” In his own small, petty way, Steve liked knowing something that Billy didn’t. Mainly, though, he didn’t want to give his rival any reason to become more aggressive and competitive, especially not when he seemed like he was becoming a
little more mellow.

*He’s a colossal pain in the ass, as it is… if he finds out I’m an alpha, too, he’ll probably go back to being a violent dickhead who wants to beat my face into the ground.*

Trying (unsuccessfully) to push thoughts of Billy from his mind, Steve got back in his BMW, cranked up the heater and drove home, where he watched Saturday Night Live and ate Pringles and candy for dinner, because nobody was around to tell him not to.

Several hours later, Steve was fast asleep in his comfortable bed, having his usual jumbled-up nightmares featuring demons, flickering lights, screaming kids, and a terrifyingly unhinged Billy Hargrove. That night, though, his dreams took a startlingly different turn: when he opened his eyes blearily after Billy had beat him unconscious, it wasn’t nighttime, and the backseat of the car was much roomier than he remembered.

*Wait… what? This can’t be the Camaro…*

Steve didn’t know why, but he was in a big, old station wagon, and Lucas, Dustin, and Mike were nowhere in sight. Instead of Max driving the car, there was a woman in a blue sleeveless blouse behind the wheel.

“Who are you?” Steve tried to ask, though no sound came out when he opened his mouth.

The woman with wavy, blonde hair turned around and smiled kindly, but not at Steve— he might as well have been invisible. She was smiling at the young girl sitting next to him in the backseat of the station wagon, who looked like she was about eight or nine.

*Am I supposed to know who these people are…?*

He looked out the window at his slightly hazy, indistinct surroundings— the car was driving down a wide street he didn’t recognize. Wherever they were, it wasn’t Hawkins, Indiana— there was no forest, though huge mountains loomed on the distant horizon. Hawkins didn’t have large apartment buildings or wide boulevards congested with traffic. It definitely didn’t have any palm trees, either.

*Where am I? Where are we going?*

As though she had heard him, the woman driving the car met his bewildered gaze in the rearview mirror for the briefest of moments, and Steve didn’t know why, but he felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his chest. There was something familiar about her blue eyes and dark lashes, but Steve couldn’t remember where he had seen them before.

“We’ll be home soon, Emily,” she announced cheerfully, bringing the car to a halt at a red light. “Be patient, sweetheart.”

When the light turned green, the car engine rumbled as the station wagon started moving again. Steve glanced out the window and saw a large Buick running the red light on the other side of the intersection, barreling towards them at an alarming speed.

*Too fast… way too fast. God, make it stop.*

Steve knew the other car wouldn’t be able to avoid hitting them. He heard squealing brakes and shattering glass, but when he instinctively leaned over to make some kind of desperate attempt to shield the little girl screaming beside him, she disappeared. Everything disappeared. The sudden,
real-life movement of his arms had woken him up and it took a few moments of panting and clutching his chest to fully realize that it had all just been part of his nightmare. He wasn’t sure why, but his eyes were swimming in tears.

“Get a grip, man,” he muttered to himself, sniffling a little and rubbing his nose with the back of his sleeve. “It was just a messed-up dream… nothing to be scared of.”

It had felt so incredibly real, though— Steve could still picture the way the smooth leatherette upholstery felt beneath his hands, and he could still smell the faint fragrance of old orange peels and whatever pleasant perfume the mysterious blonde woman was wearing.

Who was she? And who was that little girl?

Steve told himself that they must have been characters he had seen in a movie a long time ago and forgotten about, reasoning that the minor car collision he’d witnessed outside the Fair Mart that night must’ve brought the memories back to the surface of his subconscious. Still, he felt rattled to the core and it took a full hour of tossing and turning for him to finally fall asleep again.

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: The xx- Intro
"No, thanks. No party lights. It's Christmas Eve, gonna relax, Turn down all of my invites. Last fall I had a night to myself Same guy called; Halloween party. Waited all night for him to show. This time his car wouldn't go. Forget it, it's cold, it's getting late. Trudge on home to celebrate. In a quiet way unwind. Doing Christmas right this time."
- 'Christmas Wrapping' by The Waitresses (1981)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, December 24th, 1984

“You’re a mean one, Mr. Grinch… you really are a heel. You’re cuddly as a cactus, you’re as charming as an eel, Mr. Grinch… you’re a bad banana with a greasy black peel!”

Billy had been in his room all afternoon, engrossed in a new book, but his ears pricked up when he heard the familiar tune wafting from the front room. He could still remember how much he had loved the classic half-hour television special when he was little. The previous Christmas, he had been too depressed to stomach the idea of watching his favorite holiday movies and TV programs without his mother and sister, but on this particular evening, he found himself tossing his book aside and sliding out of bed to follow Boris Karloff’s deep voice.

“You’re a monster, Mr. Grinch… your heart’s an empty hole. Your brain is full of spiders, you have garlic in your soul, Mr. Grinch… I wouldn’t touch you with a thirty-nine-and-a-half foot pole!”

Billy snorted with laughter when he walked out of his bedroom and saw Max sitting cross-legged on the couch with an enormous tin drum of popcorn on her lap; it almost came up to her chin, and her fingertips were as orange as her hair.

“You’d better not have finished all the caramel ones,” Billy warned.

“Nope,” Max replied with her mouth full. “But the cheddar ones are almost gone.”

She's lucky she's got a good metabolism.

Billy stood next to the couch with his arms crossed, leaning against the wall and watching as the Grinch attached an antler to his unfortunate dog’s head. He was almost tempted to sit down on the couch next to his step-sister to watch the rest of the TV special. Almost.

“Man, the Grinch sure has a big ass,” he remarked.
Max grimaced but didn’t look away from the TV screen. “Only you would notice something like that.”

“How am I supposed to *not* notice? The dude walks around butt-naked.”

“Ew, he’s not naked!” Max flicked a kernel of popcorn up at him and missed. “He’s covered in green fur, and he’s got shoes that are too tight, remember?”

“Great, so he’s naked, except for his feet.” Billy rolled his eyes and gestured at the TV. “The people in town wear clothes… suits and dresses and aprons and all that shit. Why doesn’t he?”

“Why are you over-analyzing a cartoon like a weirdo?”

“Maybe that’s why he moved to a cave on a mountaintop,” Billy mused aloud, ignoring Max. “So he could be a cranky nudist and treat his dog like a slave without anyone bugging him about it.”

“Speaking of bugging people, I’m trying to watch the movie. Stop ruining everything and buzz off, already.”

Billy wasn’t in the mood for a fight, so he let her snotty comment slide and headed for the kitchen. The air felt at least ten degrees warmer in there and it smelled like cinnamon, butter, and toasted pecans. Judy Garland was crooning on the radio.

“*Have yourself a merry little Christmas, make the Yuletide gay, from now on our troubles will be miles away…*”

“Oh, hello,” Susan greeted cheerfully as she set a pie on the counter to cool and turned off the oven. She was wearing a red-and-green apron over a white sweatshirt with the sleeves rolled up, and her curled red bangs were sticking to her sweaty brow.

Billy’s mouth had already begun watering at the sight of three heavenly-smelling pies: two pecan and one pumpkin. “Whoa, is this all for us?”

“Not quite… I made an extra pecan pie to bring to the Christmas Eve service tonight.”

Susan had been attending church services most Sunday mornings since the move to Hawkins, and she often brought her daughter with her. Billy and his father, on the other hand, weren’t remotely interested in joining them; they had both lost their taste for religion after the previous year’s tragedy. Susan knew better than to start any arguments about it.

Billy hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast, and a large Tupperware container on the counter caught his eye— it was filled with neat slices of moist, dark-brown gingerbread. He hadn’t tasted freshly-baked gingerbread since his mother was alive.

“Go ahead and have some, if you’re hungry.” Susan gestured at the container and smiled. “There’s plenty.”

Billy was hungry, so he mumbled “Thanks” and sank his teeth into a large slice. He would never admit it out loud, but his step-mother was an excellent baker— the cake was generously spiced with ginger and cloves, and sweetened to perfection with molasses.

*I’ve gotta start doing some extra workouts, or all these cakes and pies are gonna make my ass bigger than a holiday ham.*

Susan took her apron off as she gazed at her impressive array of baked goods. “Hmm… I wonder if
Pastor Harrington would prefer a pumpkin pie?"

Billy heard a record scratch loudly inside his head, and he almost choked on the bite of gingerbread he’d just swallowed.

“Wait a minute,” he said slowly, wondering if he had heard correctly. “Pastor who?”

“Pastor Harrington, dear. Why?”

“Uh… no reason.”

_Holy shit… there’s no way the name could just be a coincidence in a dinky town like this, right?_

Susan hung her apron and oven mitts on a little hook by the microwave. “By the way, I think the pastor and his wife have a son who goes to the same school as you.”

Billy cleared his throat and kept his voice as casually disinterested as possible. “Oh, really?”

“Mm-hm… I haven’t spoken to him much, of course, but he seems like a very polite young man. He always remembers to say hello to Maxine.”

_Yeah, that sounds like something that goody two-shoes, wannabe babysitter would do._

“So, he actually, like, goes to the church services?”

“Not every single week, but most of the time. He’s awfully talented… he even sings and plays guitar in the praise band.”

_What the fuck? How did I not know this?_

Billy couldn’t believe they were talking about the same person.

*I’m gonna kick Tommy in the balls the next time I see him… he’s worse than useless._

“It sounds like you already know Steven Harrington… is he a friend of yours?”

“Uh…” Billy paused for a few moments, uncertain how to answer. “I guess you could say that, maybe.”

_Not friends… and not enemies, either. I don’t know what we are anymore._

“I don’t suppose you’d like to come to the church service with us tonight?” Susan asked with a hesitant smile, like she was sure he’d decline.

Billy didn’t reply immediately; he didn’t want Susan to think he sounded suspiciously eager. “Well, uh… I guess it wouldn’t kill me to swing by. What time does this thing start?”

“Seven o’clock!” Susan clasped her hands together and beamed, clearly delighted that she had convinced her wayward step-son to attend the Christmas Eve service.

Billy glanced down at his watch; it was already a quarter past five. “Do you think you could write down the address? I don’t know where the church is.”

“You’re more than welcome to hitch a ride with Maxine and me, dear, if you’re worried about getting lost.”
“Thanks, but I can drive myself.” Billy was barely listening to her anymore; his mind was already spinning with thoughts of what he would wear that night.

*Shit... is my suit clean? Does it even fit me anymore?*

On his way back to his room, Billy paused to reach over for a handful of caramel popcorn from the large tin drum Max had left sitting on the couch beside her. ‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas’ was still playing on the TV, and little Cindy-Lou Who had just caught the furry green curmudgeon trying to shove her family’s Christmas tree up the chimney.

Max shifted over a few inches on the couch and looked up at her step-brother. “You wanna watch the rest with me?”

“Nah,” he answered with his mouth full of sweet popcorn. “I’ve gotta start getting ready.”

“Ready for what, a Christmas Eve kegger?”

“Church.”

“Bullshit,” Max muttered skeptically.

“Nope.”

“Wait, you’re serious? You’re actually gonna go tonight, with my mom and me?”

Billy smirked at the way her blue eyes bulged in surprise. “You got a problem with that?”

“No, it’s just... you never go to church.” Max frowned, clearly baffled. “So why now?”

*Wouldn’t your nosy ass like to know?*

Billy reached up to fluff out the ends of his wavy hair. “What, a guy can’t celebrate the birth of Baby Jesus?”

“That’s not what I—”

“Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell you no lies,” Billy interrupted smoothly, striding across the front room and closing his bedroom door quickly before Max could demand any further explanation. He was almost as annoyed with her as he was with Tommy for not mentioning what their mutual acquaintance, Steve, did with his Sunday mornings.

*People think it’s cool to keep me in the dark, I guess... what a bunch of pricks.*

As he stood in front of his closet, scanning his garments for something that might be considered fancy enough for a church service in upper-crust Loch Nora, Billy recalled the strange night over a week earlier, when his brief conversation with Steve was cut short by a minor car crash in the parking lot. He cringed with lingering embarrassment when he remembered the petrified déjà vu that had taken over his body and frozen him in place for what felt like an eternity. Even though it wasn’t a serious car accident, witnessing the collision had resulted in a resurgence of heart-wrenching nightmares about the crash that had killed his mother and sister the previous autumn.

*God, why the hell am I being such a shell-shocked pussy? Steve probably thinks I’m a freak, now...*

Billy was so humiliated after unwillingly revealing a chink in his carefully crafted armor that he almost dreaded having to face Steve again. They hadn’t seen each other since that night, not even during the numerous shifts Billy had worked at Hawkins Vinyl & Cassette. He couldn’t stand the
thought of anyone feeling sorry for him, especially not Steve Harrington.

“Dammit,” he muttered under his breath as he scowled at his reflection in the mirror, annoyed with how flat his hair looked. He had been considering cutting it for weeks, or at least trimming off an inch or two to make it look less scruffy.

Billy locked his bedroom door and rummaged around in one of his storage crates until he found what he was looking for: his curling iron. He plugged it into the electrical outlet near his makeshift vanity and turned on the radio while he waited for it to heat up.

“Feliz Navidad, Feliz Navidad, Feliz Navidad, prospero año y felicidad…”

Despite his frustration with his hair and wardrobe situation, Billy had to smile; hearing anyone speak Spanish—even in a corny, repetitive Christmas song—always reminded him of home. Nobody seemed to speak anything but English in small-town Indiana, and there were exactly cero street vendors peddling delicious tacos and tamales.

“I wanna wish you a merry Christmas,” he sang along quietly as he dragged a comb through his wavy tangles. “I wanna wish you a merry Christmas, I wanna wish you a merry Christmas, from the bottom of my heaaaart…”

The extremely limited options in his closet made deciding what to wear pretty simple—he would attend the church service in his favorite red button-down shirt and the only suit he owned.

“But no tie… I fucking hate ties,” he muttered to himself, hovering his palm just above his curling iron to see if it was hot enough.

Billy tried not to think about what his father might do if he saw him staring at the mirror and curling his hair; the bedroom door was locked, so he felt relatively safe. The curling iron itself was a relic from the early seventies—old yet reliable. Billy had rescued it from one of the many boxes his father had filled with Donna Hargrove’s things after her unexpected end; it had been heartbreaking to watch all those boxes getting loaded up in the back of Neil’s truck, destined for second-hand charity shops.

Billy’s fingers went instinctively to the Virgin Mary medallion he always wore around his neck; just like the Conair curling iron, it had been hastily pulled from a cardboard box labeled ‘Salvation Army’. If Neil ever noticed his son wearing his wife’s old pendant, he didn’t mention it. The curling iron, though, was something Billy knew he had to keep hidden; it had been less than two months since his father had punched him and called him a faggot, and Billy had no desire to repeat the experience.

“Whatever… fuck him. I think it looks pretty damn good.”

Satisfied with the soft waves and bouncy corkscrews he’d created, Billy unplugged the curling iron, gave his coiffure a quick spritz of hairspray, and started to change his clothes. He buttoned his red shirt up almost all the way, stopping just before the topmost button and smiling when he remembered Steve’s suggestion for staying warm in frigid Hawkins.

“You’re not in California anymore.”

Billy’s black suit had been zipped up in a plastic garment bag since the last time he had worn it; he still had the shiny black dress shoes, too. He tried not to think about the only other two occasions he had worn the uncomfortable suit: the day of the funeral, and the day his father had said “I do” to Susan Mayfield.
“I must be outta my mind, to be putting on this crap and going to some boring old church,” he grumbled under his breath as he put on the suit and stiff shoes. “What the hell is wrong with me?”

Even without a tie, Billy felt silly and overdressed. He kicked off the shiny shoes and pulled on his trusty black boots instead; they were a little scuffed, but he decided they were less embarrassing than wearing glossy patent leather like he was going to prom. He made a face when the radio station began playing the saccharine synth notes of one of his least favorite holiday songs.

“Last Christmas, I gave you my heart, but the very next day, you gave it away…”

Billy groaned in disgust, but didn’t turn it off. He could almost hear Steve’s voice in the back of his mind defending the sentimental song and insisting it wasn’t that bad.

“Hey, Billy!” Max called suddenly from the other side of his bedroom door, knocking loudly.

He looked up sharply. “What do you want?”

For a moment, there was no answer, then there was a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort.

“Are… are you listening to ‘Wham!’ in there?”

“A-absolutely not.” Billy hastily switched off his boombox. “Now what the hell do you want?”

“Laaaaaaast Christmas, I gave you my heart, but the very next day, you gave it a—”

“Shut up!” Billy snapped, cursing as he tripped over a shiny dress shoe. By the time he unlocked the door and yanked it open, Max had already run off giggling to the kitchen.

Little brat… she’d better not tell any of her geeky friends about this.

…………………..

Guided by the directions Susan had written down on a slip of paper, Billy found Hawkins Presbyterian Church fairly easily, though it took a few frustrating minutes of driving around the dark, crowded parking lot for him to find a place to park his Camaro. It was a cold night, and he was reluctant to leave the comfortable warmth of his car.

Billy hadn’t been to church even once since his mother and sister’s funeral— he just couldn’t see any point. He had never been to a church that wasn’t Roman Catholic before, and he had to admit he was a little curious. The red-brick building had a tall, pointed roof topped with a white, wooden cross and looked like any other church from the outside, though it was considerably smaller than the popular Catholic church in Los Angeles that Billy had attended as a boy.

When he finally stopped inspecting his hair in the mirror and got out of his car he shivered, even though he was wearing four layers: undershirt, red button-down, suit jacket, and the same black leather jacket he’d worn to the Halloween party.

What am I doing, wandering through a frozen church parking lot? I oughtta be at home in my sweatpants, with three blankets and a book.

“Good evening, dear.” A plump, middle-aged woman greeted Billy from the front entrance, giving him a welcoming smile and pressing a program into his hand. “Please sit wherever you’d like.”

Billy thanked her politely and cleared his throat as he walked through the small foyer and pushed open the double doors that led to the sanctuary. The room was invitingly warm and tastefully decorated with real pine garlands and red tartan bows; a ten-foot-tall Douglas fir in the corner made
the entire room smell like a forest.

Wonder where Harrington’s sitting? If he’s the pastor’s boy, he’s probably up in the front… if he’s not even here I’m gonna be so pissed.

Billy scanned the sanctuary, but couldn’t see anyone he recognized in the crowd; the long, wooden pews were already crammed full of people and everyone seemed to be talking at once, greeting and hugging one another. Someone was playing ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’ on the pipe organ.

“Billy! Over here!”

He turned his head and spotted a familiar flash of bright orange hair at the end of the second-to-last pew; Max was twisted around, pointing at the empty spot beside her. Privately relieved that he didn’t have to sit next to strangers, Billy strolled over and sat down next to Max and her mother.

“So good to see you,” Susan said kindly, reaching past her daughter to pat Billy’s shoulder. “You look very handsome.”

“Thought you’d changed your mind about coming,” Max added. She was wearing a pale blue sweater with snowflakes embroidered on it.

“Nah, I just couldn’t find a parking spot,” Billy mumbled absently as he stared down at his program.

Sure enough, ‘Rev. Mark Harrington’ was printed on the lower corner, and after scanning both pages for a few moments, his attention was caught by one line in particular.

‘I Wonder As I Wander’, performed by Steven Harrington.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Billy muttered under his breath, trying to search the room for any sign of his former rival without making Max suspicious.

“Here, I snagged one for you.” She passed him a little white candle that had been stuck through a circle of white cardboard. “I dunno if you used to do this at your old church, but you’re supposed to save it for the end, when they turn the lights off. And that paper circle keeps the hot wax from burning you.”

A tall, middle-aged man in a suit stood at the front of the sanctuary and raised his hands for silence; he smiled broadly and spoke into a microphone.

“Good evening, and Merry Christmas! Welcome to Hawkins Presbyterian, brothers and sisters in Christ, saints and sinners alike! Please rise, if you’re able, and join me in celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior by lifting up our voices in joyous song. If you haven’t memorized all six verses to treasured favorites like ‘The First Noël’, never fear! There are more than enough hymnals for everyone.”

So that’s what Steve’s gonna look like in twenty years, huh?

As the organist began playing the opening notes of ‘O Holy Night’, Billy flipped open a blue, hardcover hymnal to the correct page, pretending to sing along while surreptitiously scanning the room. He wished he was taller, so he could see past the congregation to the front of the church.

“Long lay the world, in sin and error pining… ’til he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.”

After two more carols, everyone sat down and Pastor Harrington stood at the pulpit and spoke for about twenty minutes, delivering what the program simply called ‘A Special Christmas Message’.
Billy barely heard a word of what the man was saying; he was fidgety and almost giddy at the prospect of getting to hear the most intriguing boy in Hawkins singing.

*Man, I’m glad I came.*

When Mr. Harrington was finally finished with his sermon, he opened a Bible and began to read the Christmas verses.

“The [Joseph went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to the city of Bethlehem, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”

Bored and impatient, Billy twisted the rings on his fingers as he tried to see who was seated in the front pew. He didn’t have to worry about Max getting suspicious, since she was preoccupied with doodling on the back of her program.

“She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them at the inn.”

A light came on behind the pastor, illuminating the carpeted raised platform behind him. There was a small ‘stable’ constructed from wood, with two robed figures standing beneath it. There was even a huge plastic camel— not quite life-size, perhaps, but still impressively realistic-looking from a distance.

*Hang on a minute…*

Billy had to squint, since he was sitting in the back of the church, but there was something very familiar about the guy dressed up as Joseph. He double-checked his program, but it just said ‘Nativity Tableau’— there were no names given. Billy was ninety-nine percent sure it was Steve; he had barely known the boy for two months, but he’d recognize that profile anywhere, even when it was obscured by a linen hood and a ridiculous fake beard.

“I think Steve Harrington might be Joseph,” Max whispered to Billy, smothering a giggle with the back of her hand. “Check out that beard…”

“Shhh.” Susan arched a disapproving eyebrow and raised a perfectly-manicured finger to her lips.

Steve and whoever was portraying Mary didn’t have any lines to read; they just stood motionless in their Biblical costumes, gazing down at a wooden manger containing a heap of hay and what appeared to be a Cabbage Patch doll swaddled in a white dishtowel.

“Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people…”

After another minute or two, the light beaming down onto the Nativity tableau was dimmed, and the organist began playing ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing’ as Steve and the girl who played Mary exited stage left. Billy couldn’t see where they went and he glanced down at his watch, growing more impatient by the minute.

*Man, church sure takes forever…*

When everyone finished singing the last verse of the carol, Steve reappeared at the front of the sanctuary and stood behind a microphone stand. He had removed the long robes and fake beard, revealing chinos and a forest-green argyle sweater.

Billy shifted in his seat and sat up straighter, wishing for the hundredth time that he was taller, so he
could see over all the heads blocking his view.

**Finally, things are getting interesting around here.**

Steve adjusted the microphone and winced when a loud whine of feedback reverberated through the large room; he cleared his throat nervously before opening his pretty mouth to begin his song.

“**I wonder as I wander out under the sky…**”

To say that Billy was impressed would be a massive understatement. He sat still as a statue, enraptured by Steve’s note-perfect voice soaring smoothly through the silent sanctuary.

**God, he sounds like an angel…**

Steve repeated the simple, lonely-sounding verse twice, his handsome tenor amplified by the microphone but unaccompanied by any instruments.

“**For poor on’ry people like you and like I…**”

Billy was surprised and embarrassed by the tears that gathered in the corners of his eyes, and he hastily wiped them away with his sleeve, trying to banish the memory of his little sister singing Christmas songs while Donna Hargrove played the piano and hummed along in a lovely, low alto.

**It’d be nice if they could hear this, wherever they are…**

When Steve finished and returned hastily to his seat in the front row, Billy wanted to stand up and applaud, but nobody else was clapping and the organ had already started to play ‘Joy to the World’.

As everyone rose to their feet, Max leaned over and elbowed her step-brother. “He’s got a pretty great voice, doesn’t he?”

“I’ve heard worse,” Billy acknowledged, busying himself with flipping through his hymnal to find the right page. He’d rather die than admit it, but he would gladly listen to an entire album of Christmas songs if they were performed by Steve Harrington. The sudden thought of him crooning ‘Santa Baby’ in a low octave made Billy squirm uncomfortably on the hard pew.

After ‘Joy to the World’, someone dimmed the lights until it was almost completely dark in the sanctuary, except for the candles on the Advent wreath and a little electric light on the organ to help the organist see the keyboard as she began to play ‘Silent Night’. Even the lights on the Christmas tree were turned off. Pastor Harrington lit a candle and held it out so that his wife could light hers; she turned to Steve and he tipped his candle to light it, then he turned to his neighbor so that they could light their candle, and so on. When Pastor Harrington began singing ‘Silent Night’ in a deep baritone, everyone joined in, and by the time they had reached the third verse, the sanctuary was aglow with the soft light of a hundred candles.

**Turn around**, Billy urged silently from the back of the room, unconsciously raising himself onto the balls of his feet. **Look at me.**

Almost as though he had heard him, Steve **did** turn around, just for half a moment, and met Billy’s eyes. His face was exquisitely beautiful in the flickering candlelight— Billy could easily have stared at it for hours. Steve quickly turned back to face forward when his mother leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

Led by the organ and the pastor, everyone finished the song by repeating the first verse. Even Billy grudgingly sang along, though his mind was more on whether he would get a chance to talk to Steve
after the service than on the song.

“Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.”

When ‘Silent Night’ was over, the lights were turned back on and all the congregants stood up to either leave or linger, wishing each other a merry Christmas. Billy told Max and Susan that he would see them later, but instead of leaving, he wove his way through the crowd of people, searching for Steve.

Where is he? He’d better not have snuck out already—

“Billy?”

He whirled around at the sound of the deep, vaguely familiar voice.

Oh, shit.

It was Steve’s father. With his thick mane of brown hair and kind, hooded eyes, he looked remarkably like his son, though he was a few inches taller and wore glasses. The corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled and the gold band on his finger glinted when he reached out to give Billy’s shoulder a gentle pat.

“Billy Hargrove, right?”

Don’t panic. Just be cool.

Billy stood up straighter and plastered on a confident smile. “Uh… yeah, that’s right.”

“I’m Pastor Mark Harrington. I just wanted to tell you how glad I am to see you here tonight.”

“Oh,” Billy answered awkwardly, fumbling for the right words. “Yeah, this is a, um… really nice church you’ve got here, sir.”

“Your family moved here two months ago, I recall… have you settled in alright? I know how difficult all these sudden changes can be: new house, new school… new friends.”

He might have been imagining it, but Billy thought he detected a slight emphasis on the word ‘friends’.

What does he want?

Billy shrugged. “It’s been okay, I guess.”

“My son, Steven, goes to Hawkins High, too, you know.”

Billy forced himself to meet Mr. Harrington’s intelligent hazel eyes and wondered how much Steve had told him.

“Yeah, I… I know. I’ve got a couple of classes with—”

“Oh, there you are, Pastor Mark!”

The middle-aged woman who had interrupted them had a stiff perm, false eyelashes, and smelled strongly of expensive perfume.

“I wanted to tell you how beautiful that sermon was, Pastor,” she gushed, clutching her handbag
with brightly lacquered nails. “Absolutely wonderful.”

Mr. Harrington showed no trace of annoyance, smiling kindly at the woman. “Thank you, Rhonda. I sure am glad to hear that. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too, Pastor Mark!”

*I bet a thousand bucks she’s had perverted fantasies about him…*

“So, where were we?” Mr. Harrington turned back to Billy and cleared his throat. “Ah, yes… if there are going to be ongoing difficulties between you and Steven at school, I’d like to know.”

*Shit, Steve must’ve told his dad. What a little weenie.*

“He didn’t tell me,” Mr. Harrington continued, as though he had read Billy’s mind. “He didn’t have to tell me anything… I’m no spring chicken, but I’m not too old to remember what it was like with the other alpha boys at my school.”

*Holy sh*t.*

Billy glanced around to make sure there were no nosy church congregants eavesdropping. Most seemed to have left, but there were still a few dozen people milling around and chatting.

“I’m, uh, I’m sorry,” he stammered, stalling for time. “The other… the other what?”

*He’s an alpha.*

Mr. Harrington smiled and patted him on the shoulder again. “There’s no need to clam up and get embarrassed, young man… it’s all perfectly normal, what you’re going through, but violence is never the best way to communicate. The sooner you learn that, the more trouble you’ll avoid.”

Billy was barely listening to a word the older man was saying.

*Steve’s an alpha.*

“So Steve’s an alpha,” he repeated aloud, marveling at how strange the words sounded.

Mr. Harrington nodded and tilted his head slightly to one side, peering curiously at Billy through his glasses. “You really didn’t know, huh? That’s… well, it’s unusual. Normally the stink of hostility gives it away.”

*Steve doesn’t stink, he always smells really good… Christ, I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.*

“So Steven is a good boy. He grew up hearing about God’s grace and forgiveness, so I have no doubt that he’ll be willing to mend fences… if you’re willing to give it a try, as well.” Mr. Harrington fixed Billy with a stare that was somehow both gentle and scary at the same time. “You will give it a try, won’t you?”

“Y-yeah, sure I will,” Billy replied hastily. “Definitely.”

“You boys have only got to survive one more semester at that school, so try not to let those pesky hormones take over and get the best of you, okay? I know it’s easier said than done— like I said, I was a young, headstrong son-of-a-gun myself, once upon a time— but you’ve gotta just find a way to coexist, somehow.”
“Um… okay.”

“Excellent!” Mr. Harrington smiled broadly and patted Billy on the back. “Thank you for taking a
minute to humor me. I hope I’ll see you again… youngsters like you are exactly what this old church
needs. You and your family have a blessed Christmas, alright?”

“Thanks… you too, sir.”

“Say hello to Mrs. Hargrove and little Maxine for me… I think they already left, or I’d tell ’em
myself.”

“Ohkay.”

Pastor Harrington strolled off to greet a cluster of old ladies, leaving Billy standing awkwardly by
himself next to a stained glass window.

Well, that was weird…

When he heard the familiar sound of Steve’s voice, he looked across the large room and spotted him
by the Christmas tree, laughing with a small group of people Billy didn’t recognize.

He’s an alpha… it makes sense, and yet it doesn’t.

Billy felt an overwhelming need to talk to him. He wanted answers, and he didn’t want them from a
middle-aged pastor he’d just met… he wanted them from Steve.

What the hell am I supposed to say, though?

He wandered across the room and loitered awkwardly on the other side of the Christmas tree,
wondering if it would be a better idea to just call it a night and go home. Steve’s back was turned to
him— Billy could just leave, and nobody would notice or care. But then he saw a tall, college-aged
boy ruffling Steve’s glossy brown hair.

“That beard was awesome,” he teased, flashing a perfectly pearly grin. “You looked like the dude
from Toto. You’ll wear it again sometime, right?”

“Not a chance,” Steve retorted, shoving him playfully. “That thing was itchy, and it smelled weird.”

Who the fuck is that, and why does he get to touch Steve’s hair?

Whoever he was, he looked like a taller version of Matt Dillon, and he made Billy’s entire body
tense with anger when he casually wrapped one arm around Steve’s shoulders.

Stop touching him. Stop fucking touching him.

Billy was so angry that he didn’t even realize he was just standing there glaring at a complete
stranger, and he was jolted back to his senses when the boy turned his head and narrowed his eyes
suspiciously.

“Yo,” he muttered to Steve, nodding in Billy’s direction. “You know that weirdo lurking over
there?”

Steve spun around and his eyes widened. “Yeah… he, uh… he goes to my school.”

Billy approached them casually, feigning confidence and tucking his hands in his pockets. “Hey…
didn’t mean to interrupt.”
“It’s okay,” an attractive, twenty-something girl said as she leaned over to hug Steve. “We’ve gotta get going, anyway. But listen— you were fabulous tonight! You’ll be at Nana’s for Christmas dinner tomorrow, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Steve replied, returning her embrace and waving to the others as they began walking towards the front doors.

The irritatingly handsome guy lingered for a moment, glaring at Billy even as he gave Steve a parting pat on the shoulder. “Merry Christmas, man… stay safe and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, okay?”

_Fuck off already, you preppy piece of shit._

“Okay, okay… catch you later.”

Suddenly, it was just Steve and Billy standing beside the Christmas tree. Steve tucked his hands into the pockets of his chinos and looked down at the floor.

“So, uh… what’re you doing here?”

Billy fought a powerful urge to reach over and tilt up Steve’s chin. “My step-mom asked me to come tonight… I didn’t want to, obviously, but then I heard you were gonna sing, and I figured that oughtta be good for a few laughs.”

Steve tightened his lips into a straight line and didn’t reply.

_God, he's cute._

“Anyway,” Billy continued. “The joke was on me, ‘cause you actually didn’t suck.”

“Um… thanks, I guess.”

Billy cleared his throat, trying to think of something nice to say that wouldn’t sound excessively flirtatious. “It, uh… it takes some balls to get up there and sing in front of everyone.”

Steve shrugged modestly. “I’ve done it before. It wasn’t really a big deal… glad to hear it didn’t suck.”

“I’ve gotta say, Harrington, you sure are full of surprises.”

“I could probably say the same about you.”

“Nah,” Billy denied casually. “What you see is what you get. But you? Let’s see, you’re a babysitter, monster hunter, preacher’s kid, choir boy…”

He paused for a few moments until Steve reluctantly met his eyes, then leaned closer and lowered his voice to a whisper. “And on top of all that, I heard you’re an alpha.”

_Just like me… but also not like me at all. Christ, he smells good._

Steve bit his bottom lip and glanced around at the thinning crowd of people in the sanctuary. “Let’s, uh… let’s step outside for a sec, okay? Get some fresh air… it’s stuffy in here.”

_Not too afraid to be alone with me, huh, pretty boy?_

Billy followed Steve out a side door which opened onto a large walled garden with a dead lawn and some playground equipment.
Steve shoved his hands into his coat pockets and heaved a sigh that formed a little cloud in the freezing night air. “Okay, so… you know this doesn’t change anything, right?”

Billy raised his eyebrows skeptically. “It doesn’t?”

“No, it doesn’t,” Steve repeated emphatically.

Billy was cold and in the mood for a cigarette, but he had left them in his car.

“It’s kinda nice to have an explanation, though, right? We’re, like, genetically hard-wired to wanna kill each other.”

“Speak for yourself, man,” Steve muttered. “I’ve never wanted to kill you.”

“No?” Billy tilted his head and smirked. “Not even a little?”

“Keep pissing me off, and that could change.”

Billy laughed. “That’s the spirit.”

“Do you want me to wanna kill you, or something?” Steve shook his head slowly. “Why?”

‘Cause you’re so fucking cute when you’re mad.

“Jesus,” Steve sighed. “How come every time I run into you, we always end up having the weirdest conversations?”

“Because we’re weirdos, I guess,” Billy replied with a shrug. “Or one of us is, at any rate.”

“I’m not the one who randomly took off last time, mid-conversation.”

Billy scowled and wished Steve hadn’t brought it up; he was still ashamed about how he had reacted to the car collision in the parking lot a week earlier.

*Change the subject, change the subject…*

“That guy in there… the Matt Dillon wannabe by the Christmas tree…” Billy struggled to keep his voice as casually indifferent as possible. “Who is he to you, exactly?”

Steve’s forehead crinkled with confusion. “Brett? He’s just an old family friend. Used to live on my street, until his family sold their house and moved to the city.”

“So, he’s not one of your cousins, like those other people?”

Steve shook his head, still looking adorably bewildered.

*I knew it.*

“Is he an alpha, too?”

“Yeah… but who gives a shit?”

“Nobody,” Billy said hastily. “No shits given. I just didn’t like him, that’s all.”

“You don’t like anybody. And besides, you don’t even know him.”

*So? I don’t need to know him to get shitty vibes from him.*
Billy couldn’t think of a way to explain it without sounding either creepy or crazy, but Brett smelled bad— not in a normal way, like crappy cologne, stale breath, sweaty armpits, or unwashed socks. It was just… extremely unpleasant, and made Billy’s entire body cringe.

*That must be what Steve’s old man meant… ‘the stink of hostility’, he said.*

When Billy noticed tiny white specks dotting Steve’s dark hair and coat, he tilted his head back and gazed upwards.

“Whoa,” he murmured softly, admiring the beauty of the feathery flakes falling silently from the dark sky. There were millions of them, illuminated by the light from within the church that shone through the stained glass windows.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never see snow before…”

“Sure I have.” Billy tensed at the sudden memories of his little sister giggling as she made lumpy, undersized snowmen speckled with dirt and pine needles. “Just not in a really long time, that's all.”

It was painful to think about the annual winter trips his family used to take to places like Mammoth and Big Bear, back when his mother and Emily were still around.

“Steven? Are you out here, honey?”

Both boys turned around to face the tall, slender woman who had just opened the door behind them. She was wearing a long coat with impressive shoulder pads over an expensive-looking red pantsuit and glossy black pumps.

“Yeah, Mom,” Steve replied. “Is it time to go?”

“Almost… your dad is still saying goodbye to a few people.” She glanced over at Billy and smiled. “Hello, I don’t think we’ve met… are you a friend of Steve’s?”

Billy opened his mouth to respond, but Steve beat him to it.

“This is Billy Hargrove, Mom… he goes to school with me.”

Her cream-colored calfskin gloves felt smooth and cool against Billy’s large, callused fingers when she shook his hand.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Harrington,” he said courteously, inwardly marveling at how perfectly her warm brown eyes matched Steve’s.

*Looks like he inherited those terrific little beauty spots from her, too.*

“Will we be seeing more of you at church in the coming year, Billy?”

“Well…” Billy glanced sideways at Steve, who was crossing his arms and staring at the ground. “I guess I might, if this guy doesn’t mind.”

“Why on earth would he mind?” Mrs. Harrington rested her hands on her hips and regarded her son sternly. “Steven, I hope you’re not being impolite.”

“I’m not,” Steve muttered petulantly, glaring in Billy’s direction.

“Well, good.” She smiled at Billy. “You’re more than welcome here, whether you decide to come every week, or only once in a blue moon. Church starts at nine o’clock, every Sunday morning.”
“Thanks, Mrs. Harrington, I appreciate that.”

“Of course, dear. Merry Christmas.” She rubbed her gloved hands together and shivered. “Come back inside soon, boys.”

Billy watched as Mrs. Harrington walked back to the door, her pumps clicking on the concrete pathway. Seeing her motherly interactions with Steve had made him a little sad; he would never again hear his own mother cluck at him about being rude or staying outside too long in the cold.

“You’re not, uh… you’re not really gonna start coming to church every week, are you?”

Billy snorted. “Why, would that piss you off?”

Steve pursed his lips and scowled. “A little, yeah.”

“That’s a real nice Christian attitude you got there, man. What would your folks say?”

“Ugh. Whatever, I don’t care. Come if you want, or don’t.” Steve ran his fingers through his hair; the melted snowflakes had made it appear even darker. “Anyway, I’m going back inside. You should, too, if you don’t wanna freeze to death in that flimsy Terminator jacket.”

*Guess he still remembers the Halloween party…*

“You worried about me, Harrington?”

“No,” Steve snapped as he walked briskly to the door. “Just annoyed, same as I always am when you’re around.”

Billy barely managed to catch the door before it slammed in his face. Almost everyone had left, and it was quiet and peaceful inside the warm, pine-scented sanctuary. Someone had blown out all the advent candles, switched off the Christmas tree lights, and covered the organ with a huge burgundy sheet.

Billy checked his watch; it was almost nine-thirty. “Well, Harrington, it’s been a rad night, but I’ve gotta jet.”

“Bye,” Steve said dismissively, glancing around. His parents were standing on the opposite side of the room, engrossed in a conversation with an elderly couple.

*Aw, c’mon… don’t just say ‘bye’ like you don’t even give a shit.*

Billy didn’t want to leave. He wanted to walk Steve back to his Camaro and drive aimlessly around town all night, chain-smoking and listening to crappy Christmas music on the radio. He wanted to get to know him better and talk about what he planned to do with the remaining six days of 1984.

*Go on, ask him.*

Billy cleared his throat. “Are you planning on swinging by Tina’s party on New Year’s Eve?”

“I’ll be out of town,” Steve replied flatly. “We’re gonna be in Utah.”

*Damn.*

“You got Mormons in the family, or something?”

“No, it’s… well, it’s one of my mom’s favorite places to go skiing.”
Billy disguised his disappointment with a derisive smirk; his hopes of partying ’til dawn with a drunk, uninhibited Steve (and perhaps even stealing a midnight kiss) deflated like a punctured balloon.

“Should’ve known,” Billy scoffed, looking pointedly at his neatly pressed chinos, cashmere sweater, and expensive coat. “Bet you’re—”

“Didn’t you say you were leaving?” Steve interjected crossly, his voice rising enough that his father arched an eyebrow at them from across the room.

*Yeah… he’s an alpha, all right. There’s no way a beta would mouth off to me like that.*

“I’m going, I’m going.” Billy held up his hands defensively. “Relax, for once in your life. And have fun on your fancy little ski trip, okay? Try not to hit a tree and die.”

“Steven!” His mother beckoned. “Are you ready to leave, honey?”

Billy took three steps towards the door, then paused and glanced over his shoulder. *“Merry Christmas, Harrington.”*

Steve met his eyes reluctantly and sighed. “Merry Christmas, asshole.”

Billy was more amused than offended. “Yeah… see you next year.”

*I’ve got a feeling it’s gonna be a hell of a lot better than this one.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Recommended listening:** The Dickies- Silent Night (1978)
Monday, January 7th, 1985

It was the first day of second semester. Christmas was over, and the sobering evidence was everywhere: most of the houses and businesses in town had taken down all their festive decorations, and there were countless brownish-green Christmas trees left on curbs, some of them with bits of tinsel still clinging to their brittle branches.

Despite all the cold, grey dreariness around him, Steve was just as cheerfully optimistic as he usually was at the start of a new semester. He hadn’t done very well in school the previous year, though he’d managed to pass all his classes. He was determined to do better this semester: take notes for once, stop daydreaming during lectures, and study harder. He didn’t have any plans to go to college after school, but he still didn’t want to feel like a brain-dead idiot who could barely scrape together a handful of Cs.

Wonder what kind of grades that asshole gets? He's always throwing me for a loop... not that I care, or anything.

Steve still hadn’t quite recovered from the surprise and embarrassment he had felt on Christmas Eve when Billy showed up at church. He knew it was crazy, idiotic, and even a little vain to suspect that Billy’s unexpected appearance was in any way personal, but... he couldn’t come up with another reason.

He always wears that Catholic-looking necklace, but he hardly seems like the church type. Why else would he go?

Steve hadn’t seen Billy since that night in late December, though he had noticed his blue Camaro in the parking lot that morning and thought he might have glimpsed him at the end of the bustling hallway (his distinctively shaggy, dirty-blond hairstyle was easy to spot in a crowd).

When it was time for gym, Steve made sure he was one of the first to arrive in the locker room. By the time Billy strolled down the aisle, closely followed by Tommy and a few other twelfth-grade betas, Steve had just finished lacing up his sneakers.

“You avoiding us or something, early bird?” Tommy taunted as he opened his locker.

Steve ignored him, though he was less successful at averting his eyes when Billy slipped off the two jackets he was wearing— leather layered atop denim— and pulled his long-sleeved shirt over his head.

Jesus, look at those abs. Actually, no, don’t look. Just be cool and walk away.

For a school in a small town, Hawkins High had an excellent athletic program. Usually, everyone took two different sports each semester, and they were referred to as units. The first half of Steve’s first semester, up until mid-October, he took baseball. Then, of course, they had switched to a unit of basketball for the remainder of the semester. He wasn’t surprised when he was instructed to go to a different room; a class of tenth-grade girls was gathering in the gym, about to begin a new basketball unit.
The room Steve stepped into was smaller than the gym, but bigger than the adjacent weight room, and there were four large, circular mats on the waxed hardwood floor.

_Uh-oh…_

There was a long metal bench pushed against each wall, and Steve sat down at the end of one, his mind filled with all the ways a P.E. unit on wrestling could potentially go wrong. He wouldn’t really be able to draw on any of his strengths; he was quick and light on his feet, which served him well in basketball (when Billy wasn’t knocking him to the floor), but he wasn’t particularly muscular. He didn’t know the rules of wrestling, either— like most things, it was sure to be more complicated than it looked. Tommy, on the other hand, had always been a huge fan, and used to whine when Steve never wanted to watch it on TV.

_It wouldn’t have killed me to watch a few matches with him… if I had, I might not be so clueless about it. Oh, well. Maybe it won’t be so bad…_

Within a few minutes, the benches filled up with senior boys, and everyone looked up when the door opened and Billy Hargrove strolled into the room, closely followed by Tommy and a few other betas. Billy paused in front of the bench directly across the room from Steve; he only had to arch one of his perfectly-groomed eyebrows for the three boys seated there to hastily get up and find somewhere else to park their asses.

_How does he do that?_

Billy sat down on the end of the bench with a satisfied sigh and stretched out his legs, bending down to reach for the toes of his black Converse sneakers. Tommy was clearly excited and kept gesturing to the large circular mats on the floor, though Billy didn’t seem to be paying much attention. Steve found it difficult not to look at him, since they were seated across the room from each other, and he tried not to wonder if Billy had selected his seat for precisely that reason.

_God, he’s annoying… even when he's not talking._

When Billy laced his fingers together and stretched his arms high above his head, tilting his head to the side to crack his neck, Steve accidentally allowed his eyes to linger too long.

“You into wrestling, Harrington?” Billy called out to him with a maddening little half-smirk.

Steve shook his head and opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by the sudden appearance of Mr. Fergus, the enormously burly wrestling coach.

“Oh, well. Maybe it won’t be so bad…”
Across the room, Tommy raised his hand, though he didn’t bother waiting for his name to be called.
“What if we’ve already got one at home?”

Coach Fergus sighed impatiently. “Is it green?”

“No, it’s blue, and there are stripes on the—”

“Sounds lovely,” the coach interjected dryly. “Tell me… is blue our school color?”

“Uh… no, sir.”

“Then you’ll wear one of these, same as everyone else.” Mr. Fergus lightly nudged the basket with the toe of his decidedly un-stylish beige athletic shoe. “I’ll leave this in the locker room after class, and you can all choose one. There should be enough for everybody, and there are plenty of different sizes here, so make sure you find one that fits. You want it to be nice and snug, got it?”

Tommy made a face and snickered. “I bet they smell like sweaty nutsacks.”

“They smell like Tide, for Christ’s sake,” Coach Fergus snapped. “They’ve all been laundered, obviously. Anyway, you’ll each need to supply your own athletic supporter to wear under your singlet… if you don’t already have one, they’re available for purchase from the student store as well as Brady’s Sporting Goods downtown. Getting a protective cup isn’t a bad idea, either.”

Steve was dismayed by the thought of wearing a jock strap. He glanced over at Billy, who was staring back at him with a wicked glint in his eyes.

“God, why’d it have to be wrestling?” Steve wondered aloud, keeping his voice so low that only Phil could hear him. “Why couldn’t it be volleyball or something?”

“Yeah, it really blows.”

At six-foot-three, the wisecracking beta was the tallest boy at school, but he was blind as a bat without his glasses and pathetically skinny. Steve suspected that was probably why Billy hadn’t allowed him to transition into his posse—Phil was tall and loud, but not remotely threatening. Steve didn’t mind; in truth, he was grateful to have someone to sit with during P.E. and lunch during the long weeks since his girlfriend had dumped him for Jonathan and his old beta friends had gravitated towards Billy.

“Wrestling is for homos,” Phil muttered.

“I heard that, Curtis!” Coach Fergus rested his hands on his hips and glared at him. “Wrestling is for everyone, and it happens to be one of the oldest sports known to man. Every culture on earth has some kind of wrestling in their history—makes sense, if you think about it, ‘cause it’s one of the only sports that doesn’t require any equipment like balls, bats, or nets. I wouldn’t expect you dense knuckle-heads to appreciate it, but there’s beauty in that kind of simplicity.”

“Sorry I can’t appreciate the beauty in having my face stuck in another dude’s armpit.”

“Dammit, Curtis!” The coach blew his whistle and pointed to the corner of the room; his round, weathered face was flushed with anger. “Get your ass over there and give me fifty cherry-pickers and twenty push-ups, now.”

Tommy and Billy both snickered as Phil trudged over to the furthest corner of the room to begin his
punitive exercises.

“Alright, so listen up!” Coach Fergus clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention. “I’m sure you fellas are familiar with a chokehold, right? Well, forget about those. There’s no choking in wrestling! When you get your arm around your opponent’s neck, one of his arms must be up there, too.”

As the teacher held his beefy arms up to demonstrate and went on enthusiastically explaining the rules, Steve’s mind began to wander.

No need to panic… we might not even get paired together. There are only four mats. Unless the coach picks people, like, alphabetically or something, which he probably won’t...

Billy glanced over at him again and ran the tip of his tongue over his lips so slowly that Steve was almost completely certain he was doing it on purpose, to distract him. And it worked— Steve jumped in surprise when he realized the coach was calling his name a few moments later.

“Hello! Earth to Harrington! What did I just say?”

Embarrassed, Steve looked down at the floor and shrugged. “I, uh… I don’t know, sir. Sorry.”

Coach Fergus frowned sternly at Steve. “Maybe you think you already know everything there is to know about wrestling. Is that it?”

Steve bit his lip and shook his head apologetically. “No, sir.”

“Well, I do,” Tommy volunteered haughtily, sitting up straighter and sticking out his chest. “My dad was a heavyweight champ in college. He’s been showing me all the moves since I learned how to crawl.”

Steve couldn’t help rolling his eyes.

Stupid suck-up…

The coach pointed in Steve’s direction. “Well, then you can pair up with Harrington over there and teach him a thing or two.”

Damn it.

“Sure thing, Coach.” Tommy leered at Steve, rolled up one of his t-shirt sleeves and flexed, displaying a round, freckled bicep— the result of hundreds of hours spent in the basement, blasting Judas Priest while working out with his father’s rusty old weight-lifting equipment.

Oh, knock it off. You’re not impressing anybody.

“Class is already half-over, so obviously you don’t have to wear your wrestling gear today. But normally, you never want to hit the mat in anything loose-fitting. Grabbing your opponent by his clothing is a huge no-no, got that? So is clasping— that’s when the guy in top position locks his hands around his opponent’s body… that’s actually legal when you’re in a neutral position, though.”

Coach Fergus glanced around the room at his students; the only ones who didn’t look confused were Tommy, who was nodding along fervently, and Phil, who was still in the corner of the room, panting through the last of his fifty cherry-pickers. “We’ll get to all that stuff later. For now, let’s just get a feel for it and try out some basics.”

There wasn’t enough space for everyone to wrestle at once, so they took turns— while some boys paired up and grappled inexpertly on the mats, the rest watched from the benches. The coach
instructed those on the sidelines to use their free time to stretch, which they did half-heartedly while cheering for students they liked and jeering at those they didn’t.

“You’ve got this, man!”

“Watch out, he’s going for your ankle!”

“Hey, Coach! He’s not allowed to do that, is he?”

“Whoa, that was awesome!”

“Aw, c’mon! That’s cheating!”

“Quit grabbing his shirt, dummy!”

“Ooh, that’s gotta hurt…”

When it was Steve’s turn, it took less than two minutes of fumbling before he found himself face-down on the floor, wincing as Tommy pressed against his back and twisted his arm behind him.

*For a short guy, he sure weighs a ton.*

“Get the hell off me,” Steve grunted, struggling helplessly. “That… *nngh*, that really hurts.”

Tommy leaned down, close enough that Steve could almost smell his hot breath. “Had enough?”

“Yeah, yeah, you win. Now get off.”

Even with his face shoved against the vinyl wrestling mat, Steve could spot Billy out of the corner of his eye. He had easily pinned his own wriggling opponent to the floor, but he didn’t seem to be paying much attention to what he was doing; instead, he was staring across the room at Steve with a strange look in his eyes.

*What’s his problem?*

Tommy finally stood up, pumping his fists above his head in triumph and calling out to Billy. “Did you see that, man? I kicked Harrington’s ass!”

“So?” Billy shrugged carelessly on his way back to the bench to resume stretching. “You don’t exactly have to be Hulk Hogan to pull that off.”

*Asshole.*

Annoyed and exhausted, Steve rolled over onto his back and stared up at the dusty popcorn ceiling, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he tried to catch his breath. Every muscle in his body was sore, and his shoulder ached where Tommy had aggressively twisted his arm. The bright, fluorescent lights overhead were making his head hurt, so he pinched his eyes closed for a few moments. Even when the coach blew his whistle to signal that it was time to go to the lockers to change, Steve didn’t get up.

*Christ, this sucks. Why couldn’t we learn how to play racquetball or—*

“Hey. Get up, man.”

Steve’s eyes snapped open again and he felt a twinge of *déjà vu* at the sight of Billy standing over him, bending down with a hand extended. He accepted it without thinking, wincing as Billy tugged
him to his feet.

*Shit, Tommy really did a number on my shoulder…*

“Ow,” Steve muttered, pulling his hand back quickly and wiping his palm on his shorts. “And, uh… thanks, I guess.”

Billy didn’t answer; he was already striding towards the locker room.

*What, that's it? Not even a snotty put-down?*

Steve followed several feet behind, looking forward to peeling off his sweaty gym clothes and taking a quick, hot shower. He wasn’t sure why or how, but he could still feel the dry warmth of Billy’s calloused palm, almost as though it was still pressed against his own.

………………

Steve hadn’t eaten much during lunch, so by the time his final class of the day was dismissed, his stomach was growling. He managed to avoid seeing Billy Hargrove in the hallway when he stopped to stash some books in his locker, and again in the parking lot when he unlocked his BMW. His stomach continued to rumble as he drove to the center of town, and he stopped at Dirk’s Diner for a club sandwich and a ginger ale. His mood improved dramatically after eating, and when he saw the faded sign of Hawkins Vinyl & Cassette Emporium down the street, he decided to stop by. He hadn’t been there in an unusually long time— almost two months— and he wanted to say hello to June, the woman who had been running the store for as long as he could remember.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes,” she greeted with a smile when he walked in the door. “Where’ve you been, hon?”

“Hi, sorry it’s been so long.” Steve waved sheepishly as he approached the front counter. “Got anything new in stock?”

“Depends on what you’re in the mood for… a new Cocteau Twins album dropped in November. Oh, and Foreigner had a new release last month.”

“Is that the one with ‘I Want to Know What Love Is’?”

“Yep. And ‘That Was Yesterday’.”

“I kinda hate both of those songs,” Steve admitted with a chuckle.

“Alright,” June laughed. “Well, I’ve got a lot of stuff besides Foreigner… have a look around and find something you like. Let me know if you’ve got any questions, hon.”

‘Talk Talk’ (by the band of the same name, oddly enough) played loudly from the store’s stereo as Steve wandered aimlessly down the center aisle, bobbing his head to the catchy beat.

“If every sign that I see is complete, then I’m a fool in your game, and all you want to do is tell me your lies, won’t show the other side, you’re just wasting my time… all you do to me is talk talk…”

He had enjoyed browsing for music in June’s record store since he was a kid— long enough to notice how much the place had changed over the years. Back in his middle school days in the late seventies, the store had more vinyl records and eight-tracks than cassette tapes, and there were no compact discs at all. Now, there were significantly more cassettes than records, and all the eight-tracks had been replaced by a slowly-expanding section of CDs near the front of the store, where
June could watch the inventory like a hawk— they were quite pricey, after all.

Mr. Harrington had bought the family a CD player for Christmas. Steve may have secretly enjoyed examining his futuristic, rainbow-tinted reflection on the shiny mirrored discs, but he still preferred records and tapes. Vinyl records would always remind him of his childhood, and he liked cassette tapes best of all because he could listen to them in his car and on his portable Walkman. Besides, the vast majority of artists didn’t release their albums on CD; the format was still too new (and expensive) to have caught on yet, and Steve thought it might be a passing fad that would fade away like Betamax tapes and eight-tracks.

_Nothing lasts forever._

As he was browsing a large display of cassettes in the ‘New Releases’ section, Steve felt his whole body tense when he suddenly caught a whiff of an intriguingly pleasant smell. It was so familiar that he didn’t even need to turn around to know exactly who was behind him.

_There’s no escape from this guy, no matter where I go..._

“What the hell do you want?” Steve asked aloud, grabbing a random cassette tape and pretending to be busy reading the track listing printed on the back.

“Nice to see you, too.” Billy nodded at the tape in his hand. “Slip it in, huh? That’s pretty racy stuff for a preacher’s boy.”

_What?

Steve looked down at the cassette he’d grabbed and hastily put it back on the shelf; it was a Black Flag album with an illustration of a nun wrapping her arm around a hairy, naked leg. ‘Slip It In’ was, indeed, the highly suggestive album title.

_Shit.

Steve cleared his throat and reluctantly turned to face him. “Are you, like, following me around town, or something?”

“Following you?” Billy scoffed, shaking his head with a bemused smirk. “That’s one hell of an ego you’ve got there, buddy. How fascinating do you think you are?”

Steve’s jaw tensed and he felt his cheeks growing warm. “Well, then why are you—”

“Hold that thought,” Billy interrupted, walking past him purposefully.

Steve flinched when Billy’s shoulder brushed his own, and he wondered for the hundredth time where he bought the cologne, or shampoo, or whatever it was that made him smell so good. He turned around just in time to see Billy roughly grabbing a boy who looked like he might be in ninth grade; the boy flushed pink and grudgingly removed two cassette tapes from his jacket pocket.

“I catch you trying that shit again and your tiny, thieving ass is gonna get banned from the store for life, okay? Now beat it.”

_Wait, what? Why is he acting like some kind of security guard?

Billy turned back to Steve and held up the cassettes. “Metallica and Scorpions. The little punk might be a criminal in the making, but at least he’s got decent taste. Anyway, what were we talking about earlier?”
“Why did you—”

“Hey, Billy!” June called from the front of the store, drowning out Steve’s question. “You know you’re not getting paid to chit-chat, right? I’ve got a huge box of tapes here that need price labels on ’em.”

You’ve gotta be kidding me.

“Duty calls,” Billy said with a wink before trotting off to the front counter. “I wasn’t chatting, June… I was discussing Black Flag with Harrington over there. You said it was good to talk about music with the customers ’cause it gets them to buy more.”

June raised her eyebrows skeptically. “Since when does Steve Harrington like hardcore punk?”

Since when does Billy Hargrove work here?

Still standing by the display of newly-released cassette tapes, Steve watched with bewildered frustration as Billy pulled a Swiss Army knife from the pocket of his denim jacket and cut open the packing tape on the cardboard box June had just hoisted onto the counter.

“Didn’t you see me catch that little shoplifter red-handed, jefe?”

“I thought I told you not to call me that,” June reprimanded primly as she polished her eyeglasses with the hem of her lime-green blouse. “It sounds too much like heifer. Thanks for protecting the inventory, though… I knew you’d be good for business.”

Jesus… I can’t even buy music now without having to see his smug face.

Part of Steve was tempted to just walk out without buying anything, but he reminded himself that Billy did not dictate where he went or how long he stayed; he also didn’t want to disappoint June, who had always been kind to him. So, after about half an hour of quiet browsing, he selected Duran Duran’s ‘Arena’ on cassette tape and walked quickly to the front counter. Billy had apparently finished labeling the cassettes and was standing at the far end of the center aisle, restocking the shelves.

“So, you actually hired that guy, huh?” Steve asked, trying to sound like he didn’t really care.

“Yeah, way back in November,” June explained as she tucked the Duran Duran cassette and a receipt into a small paper bag. “Shoot, I keep meaning to get him a name tag or a t-shirt with the store’s logo on it, so people will actually be able to tell he works here… is he a friend of yours?”

“Why, has he been talking about me?” Steve blurted without thinking.

Crap.

June’s dark, intelligent eyes regarded him curiously from behind her glasses. “No, hon, I can’t say that he has.”

Of course he hasn’t… God, why can’t I shut up for once?

“I’ve gotta admit, though… he’s been good for business, and not just ’cause he scares the shoplifters away,” June continued as she handed Steve his change, nodding in the direction of a cluster of sophomore girls who were standing in the jazz aisle and doing a poor job of pretending they weren’t staring at Billy. “I’ve told his little fan club they’re free to gawk at my new employee all they want, just as long as they buy something.”
Steve couldn’t understand why the group of giggling girls annoyed him so much; he knew it was none of his business and that he had absolutely no reason to care. It wasn’t as though he wished the girls were staring at him instead of at Billy.

“You’d think people would have better things to do with their time than make googly-eyes at a jerk like that,” he grumbled as he pocketed his change, hating how petulant he sounded.

“Oh, I get where they’re comin’ from,” June said with a sympathetic smile. “I went through a long, lovesick phase myself, back in my misspent youth. And none of the dumb boys that caught my eye were even half as cute as Billy over there… must be something in the water in California that makes everyone look like a movie star.”

“He’s not that good-looking,” Steve lied stubbornly, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Billy was still restocking shelves on the other side of the store, safely out of earshot.

He wasn’t.

“Who’s not that good-looking?” Billy asked as he plopped the now-empty cardboard box on the countertop behind Steve.

*Shit!*

“Nobody,” he mumbled hastily, refusing to look at Billy and praying that his face wasn’t turning pink. “See you later, June.”

“Don’t be a stranger!” She waved cheerfully and pulled a copy of Rolling Stone from beneath the counter.

_Gotta get outta here, gotta get—_

“Hey, Harrington, before I let you escape…”

Steve had barely taken three steps when he heard Billy call after him. Just like on the night when they had run into each other at the convenience store, he wondered why he couldn’t just ignore the maddening boy from California.

*It’s not like he’s got anything important to say…*

Billy followed briskly and stopped in front of him, blocking his path. “I have a ten-minute break coming up in a little while… you wanna have a smoke with me?”

*What the hell?*

Steve was so tempted to say yes that it was almost difficult, in a strange way, to shake his head in polite refusal. “A-another time, maybe. I’ve got a few errands to run.”

Billy crossed his arms and he leaned casually against the wall next to the door. “Oh, yeah? Like what?”

“Well, I…” Steve had made the mistake of letting his eyes meet Billy’s, the intriguing blue depths of which never failed to make his mind go temporarily blank. “I, uh… I need to stop by Brady’s.”

The corner of Billy’s mouth curled into a knowing grin. “The athletic store? You’re gonna buy a jock strap for gym class, aren’t you?”

“Jesus, keep it down,” Steve hissed, glancing around self-consciously even though nobody was
paying attention. The girls who had been staring at Billy were too far away to overhear their
conversation, especially with ‘Save It For Later’ by English Beat blaring from the store’s speakers.

“Sooner or later, your legs give way, you hit the ground, save it for later, don’t run away and let me
down…”

“While you’re at it, will you pick one up for me, too?” Billy reached in his pocket and pulled out a
battered-looking black leather wallet. “I dunno how much that shit’ll cost… three bucks?”

Steve raised his eyebrows incredulously. “You’re seriously asking me to buy you a jock strap?”

This guy is unbelievable…

“What’s the big deal?” Billy stepped closer to Steve, holding out three slightly crumpled dollar bills.
“The store’ll be closed by the time my shift’s over.”

“Yeah, but—”

“C’mon, dude, what the hell are you so embarrassed about? We’re all gonna have to see each other
wearing the stupid things, you know.”

“Don’t remind me,” Steve grumbled, though he didn’t protest when Billy pressed the money into his
hand.

Their fingers barely touched, but it was still enough contact to make Steve jerk his hand away
hastily. He resented the way Billy seemed to effortlessly trip him up, and he was annoyed at himself
for his apparent inability to simply say ‘No’ and walk away, like a sensible, sane person would.

I’ve gotta stop being like this around him… turning red and getting jumpy all the time. No wonder it
took him forever to figure out I’m an alpha.

Steve cleared his throat and squared his shoulders, forcing himself to raise his eyes from the store’s
dingly green carpet and meet Billy’s steady gaze with more confidence than he really felt. “Look…
this is just a one-time favor. I’m not some beta with nothing better to do than be your errand-boy, got
that?”

For a moment, Billy looked like he wanted to make a sharp retort, but instead he smiled. “Yeah, I got
it, tough guy.”

It was probably just his imagination, but Steve thought he detected a trace of approval in his eyes,
and he suddenly remembered something Billy had said that fateful night at the Byers’ house, right
after being punched in the face.

“Looks like you’ve got some fire in you after all…”

“Oh, and if you get a cup, buy one for me, too,” Billy called over his shoulder as he strolled back to
the front counter. “If they sell ‘em in different sizes, I’ll need an extra-large.”

Jesus Christ, I’m gonna kill him.

“What in the world are you two talking about?” June asked from behind the magazine she was
reading. “Cups for what?”

“Oh, nothing…” When Billy glanced over and winked at the cluster of girls hiding in the jazz section,
they nearly collapsed in a fit of high-pitched giggles.
Don’t those groupies have homework to do, or something?

Steve shoved Billy’s money into his coat pocket and hurried out of the store, feeling like he must be crazy to be doing favors for a guy who had never given him anything but attitude and a black eye.

I should hate his guts. I should give him his three dollars back and tell him to buy his own stupid cup and shove it up his ass...

Instead of doing any of those things, though, Steve walked briskly down the sidewalk toward the sporting goods store, muttering under his breath. “Extra-large, huh? Talk about cocky… that smug bastard better pray he doesn’t wind up with the smallest one I can find.”

Chapter End Notes

I just watched GLOW on Netflix, can you tell? They even used 'Rock You Like A Hurricane' in a scene. I’m sure there’ll be more than a few inaccuracies re: wrestling... my research has been limited to Wikipedia and an informative little YouTube video titled “The Rules of Wrestling Explained for Beginners and Parents”. Anyway, try googling ‘1980s high school wrestling’ if you need a better idea of what Billy and Steve will be wearing. Man, this writing gig sure takes me to strange corners of the internet.
Friend or Foe

Chapter Notes

“When you’re a hip-grinding, spellbinding, clean-cut seducer
You have to be careful so people take note
I take it serious, but I still like a joke.”

- ‘Friend or Foe’ by Adam Ant (1982)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tuesday, January 8th, 1985

Billy could have simply bought his own jock strap, of course. Stopping by the sporting goods store after school on Monday wouldn’t have taken very long; he had enough time between driving Max home and starting his shift at Hawkins Vinyl & Cassette Emporium.

Where’s the fun in that, though?

When he arrived in the boys’ locker room for gym on Tuesday, Billy paused at the end of the aisle and smiled appreciatively at the sight of Steve bending down to pick up something he’d just dropped on the concrete floor.

What a great ass.

“Morning, Harrington.”

“Hey,” Steve replied, quickly standing up straight again and clutching a small paper bag in his hand that read ‘Brady’s Sporting Goods’, which he tossed at Billy without any warning. “Here.”

Billy caught the bag just before it hit him in the face and peered inside. Sure enough, it contained a brand-new jock strap and a plastic athletic cup.

“They didn’t sell anything in extra-large,” Steve added dryly. “So, if you can’t cram your humongous dong into the standard-sized stuff, there’s a receipt in the bag.”

“Alright, smartass,” Billy chuckled, surprised that Steve had remembered his dumb joke from the previous afternoon about requiring an ‘extra-large’ cup.

“Hey, guys.” Tommy had just strolled down the aisle with three other betas. When he spotted the bag from Brady’s Sporting Goods he leaned over and tried to grab it. “What’s that?”

Billy yanked it away and smacked the intrusive boy’s hand. “What the hell do you think it is, genius? Back off.”

He opened the bag and withdrew the items, wrinkling his brow as he unwrapped them. The jock strap seemed almost obscenely skimpy— nothing more than a triangle of white mesh attached to a few elastic straps— and the protective cup resembled an upside-down pear.

“This shit is far out,” he muttered, carelessly dropping the crumpled plastic wrappers on the floor.
“What’s the matter?” Tommy asked as he opened his locker. “You never had to wear a jock strap before or something?”

Billy shook his head and kicked off his boots. When he slipped out of his jeans and underwear, he shivered a little at the sensation of cool air on his half-naked body. He glanced down the aisle, but Steve was busy fiddling with the packaging on his own newly-purchased items.

Sighing with resignation, Billy tugged the jock strap up his legs and tried to straighten the elastic straps. Having his dick covered while his bare ass was exposed felt bizarre, like he was wearing a thong, but he had to admit that the skimpy undergarment was extremely comfortable. The easy-breezy feeling lasted for about two seconds, then turned into an entirely different feeling when he looked over and saw that Steve wasn’t wearing anything but gym socks and a jock strap.

*Don’t get a boner, don’t get a boner…*

Steve’s cheeks (the ones on his face) were flushed and he was hurrying to pull on his wrestling singlet, but it got twisted around his knees and he ended up wobbling awkwardly on one foot, unwittingly offering a fantastic view of his round, pale ass.

*Crap! Try thinking about golf, or something…*

It wasn’t the first time Billy had seen Steve naked, but steam-obscured glimpses stolen in the crowded gym showers couldn’t compare to seeing that perfect, mole-dotted posterior a mere four feet away, lifted and framed by white elastic straps. Feeling his dick continue to react, Billy hastily tugged down the hem of his long-sleeved thermal shirt before suddenly remembering that he had a brand-new cup. He shoved it down into the mesh pouch on his jock strap, carefully encasing his balls and partially erect cock.

*There… nothing to see here, folks.*

Further down the aisle, Phil Curtis snorted with laughter as he snapped the straps of his jock strap into place on his bony hips.

“Whoever invented these must’ve been the world’s biggest fruit,” Phil remarked to nobody in particular, looking down with disgust at his coarse pubic hair escaping the confines of the flimsy cotton triangle. “I mean, could this be any gayer?”

Annoyed, Billy picked up Phil’s singlet from the bench and smacked him in the face with it.

“Shut the hell up and put something on, dude… nobody wants to hear your bitching or see your hairy crack.”

Steve looked like he was trying not to laugh as he finished putting on his own dark-green uniform.

“Yikes, that’s tight,” he muttered to himself, tugging downwards on the legs of the snug spandex garment.

Even though the wrestling singlet was undeniably weird—it resembled high-waisted bike shorts with long straps attached—Steve looked good in it. The skin-tight fabric left nothing to the imagination, and the color brought out the chocolate brown in his dark, guarded eyes. Billy forced himself to look away when the already-crowded situation between his legs grew even more uncomfortable.

*He’s like the Ark from Indiana Jones or some shit… I’ll survive as long as I don’t look at him.*
“C’mon,” he said to Tommy, taking off down the aisle without a backward glance. “Let’s get outta here.”

As they neared the locker room exit, their attention was drawn to a group of senior boys who were clustered around a small table with a battered cardboard box on it. Billy elbowed his way past the two guys closest to him, trying to read the word that was scrawled on the side of the box in black marker.

**Headgear?**

“Sweet!” Tommy exclaimed, stretching his freckled arm into the box and withdrawing four round plastic objects connected by a tangle of white elastic straps. He tugged them apart and tossed a set to Billy. “Here you go, man.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m wearing that,” Billy scoffed as he caught it.

Tommy tried his headgear on, covering his ears with the odd plastic hubcaps and tightening the strap under his chin. “Coach said we’ve gotta wear ‘em, though.”

Billy held it up between his thumb and forefinger, appalled by how absurd it looked: two domed plastic circles the size of pork chops, connected by dingy elastic straps.

“This shit’s gonna majorly screw up my hair,” he grumbled, not realizing that Coach Fergus was walking right behind him.

“You oughtta be more worried about cauliflower ear than your hairdo, Hargrove.”

Billy wasn’t sure he had heard him correctly. “Worried about what?”

“Cauliflower ear,” the coach repeated impatiently, crossing his beefy arms across his chest. “Something you’ll get in boxing and wrestling without proper padding. Blood clots in the cartilage swell up and make permanent lumps. You want lumpy ears, kid?”

“Uh… no,” Billy mumbled, grimacing at the thought. “I don’t.”

“That’s what I thought. So wear the damn headgear.”

“Okay, sir.”

“And take off that necklace, and the silly earring,” the coach added before trotting away. “Jewelry is a big hazard when you’re on the mat.”

Billy despised being told what to do, but he had no choice. He removed the tiny hoop in his ear, pulled off his mother’s holy medallion, and quickly stashed them in his locker. When he returned to the front of the room, Coach Fergus was standing there with a clipboard.

“All right, fellas!” The coach tucked the clipboard under one arm and cupped his hands around his mouth to amplify his already-booming voice. “Come on over here and line up against this wall for the weigh-in.”

Billy frowned, suddenly noticing the large, old-fashioned mechanical beam scale in a nearby corner. “Weigh-in for what?”

“We’ve gotta get sorted based on weight,” Tommy piped up from behind him. “Every ten pounds or so, there’s a different weight class. Keeps things fair.”
“How many weight classes are there?” Billy asked casually, though his thoughts were racing a mile a minute. It hadn’t occurred to him that he might not get a chance to wrestle with Steve if they weren’t close enough in weight.

“Like, fifteen, I think. It goes from a hundred and five pounds all the way up to the massive dudes who weigh two-fifty or more.” Tommy eyed Billy’s five-foot-ten, muscular frame. “I bet you’re about a buck-eighty, dude.”

Billy shrugged and pretended he didn’t care, but he continued to worry as he lined up with all the other twelfth-grade boys against the locker room wall. He hadn’t weighed himself in months; the only scale in their new house belonged to Susan, and he didn’t like to venture into the bathroom she shared with his father.

*I probably don’t weigh much more than him, right? He’s even an inch taller than I am…* 

“It’s your turn, Harrington.”

Billy kept up his pretense, feigning boredom and scrutinizing the cuticles on his left hand as Steve stepped onto the scale and stood motionless while Coach Fergus scooted the weight indicator across the balance beam.

“One sixty-six,” he pronounced, jotting the number down on his clipboard with a little pencil that looked like a matchstick in his large fist. “Next!”

When it was Billy’s turn to step on the scale, he held his breath and stared at a clock on the wall while the coach fiddled with the weight indicator.

“One seventy-five. Next!”

*Goddamnit.*

Billy managed to keep his expression indifferent as he hopped off the scale and walked out of the locker room, but he was bitterly disappointed and itching to punch something. It made him even angrier, somehow, to realize how much he’d been looking forward to wrestling with Steve.

*Who the hell is he to make me feel like this, without even saying anything? None of this should matter to me.*

For a few emotional moments as Billy stormed, alone, to the wrestling room, he pinched his lips together and resented Steve Harrington’s very existence. While he was at it, he resented his own, too. He was so irritated that he even cursed his step-mother and every single one of the tempting pies and cookies she’d baked during the holidays.

*Screw you and your goddamn gingerbread, Susan.*

When he arrived at the door of the wrestling room, he tilted his chin up and fluffed the ends of his hair on his shoulders.

*Don’t let anyone see you being a weak piece of shit.*

He strolled confidently into the room, sat down across the room from Steve, and willed himself to resist the urge to look in his direction… but failed.

*God, he's got such nice, long legs.*
Steve was sitting in the middle of the bench, resting his elbows on his bare knees and playing idly with the elastic straps on his headgear. Even though he was wearing exactly the same thing as every other boy in the room, Billy couldn’t take his eyes off him, marveling at how absurdly sexy he looked in his skin-tight wrestling singlet and calf-length gym socks.

*Look at me, you beautiful son of a bitch.*

Steve stopped fiddling with the headgear he was holding and met Billy’s eyes from across the room. Their shared gaze only lasted a few seconds, but it felt significantly longer.

*He’s got no clue what those pretty brown eyes do to me.*

“You two havin’ a staring contest or something?”

Startled, Billy turned his head just as Tommy plopped down onto the bench beside him.

“What? No, I wasn’t… I don’t…” Flustered, Steve didn’t turn his face away in time to hide either the flush that colored his cheeks or the flicker of hurt confusion that darkened his eyes.

*I don’t know whether I wanna crush him or kiss him. Maybe both.*

**Saturday, February 9th, 1985**

Figuring it would be a lot easier for him to lose a few pounds than force Steve to eat three cheeseburgers and an entire box of Twinkies every day, Billy had doubled-down on his diet and exercise regimen. For an entire month, he drank tons of water, ate mostly vegetables and hard-boiled eggs, and jogged an extra mile after dinner each night. Instead of occasionally swiping his father’s cans of cheap beer from the fridge, he started sneaking Susan’s cans of Diet Pepsi. And every time he disrobed in the bathroom before a shower, he scrutinized his naked body in the mirror, running his hands over his increasingly well-defined abs.

*Not bad… we’re getting there.*

Overall, life was dull, and passed uneventfully. His job was simple but boring; Steve hadn’t returned to the record store since discovering that Billy worked there. At home, his father usually ignored him, aside from the occasional bland comment like “Please pass the green beans” or “You’d better be keeping those grades up”. Billy didn’t find any of his classes at school especially challenging. He was, without question, the new king of Hawkins High, but he found himself caring a lot less about that than he would have when he first arrived in town.

*Christ, high school is stupid. What’s the point of sitting at the so-called ‘popular table’ if I’m just gonna be stuck listening to a bunch of ass-kissing morons while Steve eats his lunch in a corner across the room?*

Gym continued to be Billy’s most interesting class. To his surprise, Steve was actually a decent wrestler; his long, lean frame didn’t do him any favors on the mat, but he had quick reflexes and a knack for doing the opposite of what his opponents expected. Regardless of whether he came out on
top or got flattened, though, it was always hard for Billy to watch.

_That should be me, down there on the mat with him._

He was able to take some solace, at least, in the fact that there weren’t any other alphas in their grade; the boys grappling with Steve were just harmless betas. Billy suspected that if they weren’t betas, the jealous fury he’d first felt on Christmas Eve— when that attractive, older alpha had wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulders— would bubble to the surface again. Neil had once told him that bachelor alphas could become territorial and even violent with rival alphas when there were eligible mates around.

_We might as well be brainless animals in the goddamn woods._

It would be simpler, he knew, to pretend Steve didn’t exist and set his sights on someone else. Not every boy at Hawkins High was as straight as an arrow; there was a skinny blond beta in fourth-period English, for example, who stared at him like he wouldn’t necessarily say no to sucking Billy’s dick under the bleachers some dark night.

_It’s been a long, long time since anyone serviced me, but… nah. Not interested._

Billy knew exactly who he wanted, and it definitely wasn’t the unremarkable boy from his English class.

……………………

Despite Susan’s frequent invitations, Billy hadn’t gone to Hawkins Presbyterian Church since Christmas Eve. He’d never admit it to his step-mother, but on each Sunday morning that had passed he’d spent anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes considering it. He liked the idea of seeing Steve outside of school, of course, but he was self-conscious about not having the right clothes. He still had the old, slightly outgrown suit that was tainted by association with both a wedding and a funeral, but that was all he had that might be considered suitable for attending a church service in the upper-crust neighborhood of Loch Nora. He didn’t mind turning heads because he looked dynamite, but he didn’t want anyone to stare at him because they thought he was low-class or poor.

So, he decided to take some of his record store wages and go shopping. He was nearly eighteen and it was ridiculous, he reasoned, that over half of the clothes he owned were made of either denim or leather.

_I’ve been meaning to update my wardrobe for a long time, now. It’s got absolutely nothing to do with him._

At Sears, he bought some slim-cut black slacks, two button-down shirts, a thick grey sweater, new socks, and some black oxford shoes that looked much more grown-up than the old patent-leather ones he’d worn to the funeral. He hated to pass so much of his hard-earned money across the counter and into the saleswoman’s hand, but knew it was necessary.

_Maybe I’ll ask June if she can give me more hours at the record shop… I’ve gotta save as much dough as possible if I’m gonna move out of Neil’s house after graduation._

When he returned home after his shopping trip, he tossed all the bags on his bed and went to the kitchen to hunt for something to fill his growling stomach. He’d only had a glass of skim milk for breakfast, and it was past lunchtime. He stood in front of the fridge, glumly assessing his limited options and heroically ignoring the aluminum container of Sarah Lee pound cake on the top shelf.
What’s worse, plain yogurt or cottage cheese? Celery or carrot sticks? Man, fuck my life…

He assured himself that he would’ve done it, anyway— that he’d been meaning to sharpen his already-enviable physique, and that all this dieting and exercise had nothing to do with getting a chance to wrestle with a certain dreamy-eyed boy in his gym class.

Nothing whatsoever.

He joylessly raised a carrot stick to his mouth, trying unsuccessfully to banish the thoughts of sweet, tempting things like pound cake and Steve Harrington from his ravenous mind.

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Adam Ant- Friend or Foe
"God came into the world to save sinners, not good people, and your unworthiness is your greatest claim for His redemption."
- Hannah Whitall Smith, 'The God of All Comfort'

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Sunday, February 10th, 1985**

Steve Harrington was bored. It was eight-forty in the morning and he was in the warm sanctuary of Hawkins Presbyterian Church, absentmindedly picking out a random tune on his Fender Stratocaster electric guitar. He paused to smother a yawn with the back of his hand, regretting how late he had stayed up the previous night.

The short warm-up rehearsals before the church service weren’t really necessary, in his opinion, unless the band leader had new selections for them to play. On this particular Sunday, there was nothing difficult about any of the songs printed on the bulletin. ‘Seek Ye First’, ‘Open Our Eyes’, ‘Great is the Lord’— Steve could almost play them with his eyes closed.

Usually, he and the other praise band members would be finishing up with their warm-up by a quarter to nine, just before people started arriving and filling up the sanctuary. This morning was different, though, because the music director hadn’t shown up yet.

“Wonder where he could be?” Steve’s father fretted, glancing down at his gold Rolex as he paced anxiously from his pulpit to the first row of pews. “It’s not like him to be late.”

It was true: Julian Bunderson, the church’s recently-hired music director, was a stickler for punctuality and would scold any band or choir members who were late to rehearsals. Steve thought he seemed like a nice guy, overall, and he had a strangely endearing Minnesotan accent.

“It’s okay, Dad,” Steve said reassuringly. “He probably just slept through his alarm clock or got a flat tire or something.”

“Well, we can’t start without him,” his father muttered, striding purposefully down the carpeted center aisle. “I’ll run to my study for a minute and give him a call.”

Steve went back to strumming his guitar, half-listening to a dull conversation the drummer and bassist were having about some movie called ‘Heaven Help Us’. His mother wasn’t sitting in the sanctuary that Sunday; she was needed at the hospital. Earlier that morning, before rushing off to Hawkins General, she had kissed her son's cheek and pressed a crisp twenty-dollar bill into his palm.

*One of these days I’m gonna have to grow the hell up and get a real job…*

Steve appreciated everything his parents did for him, of course— he wasn’t so proud that he was going to start refusing the pocket money they gave him or hand back the keys to his BMW— but he sometimes wondered if he would ever be able to stand on his own two feet. When he graduated from
high school in June, what would he do? He hadn’t bothered applying to any colleges, and his former romantic notions of playing happily-ever-after with Nancy Wheeler were ancient history. Since the only solid ‘plan’ he had for his future was sliding effortlessly into an undeserved position in his father’s real estate office, Steve was afraid that he might end up living off his parents’ talents and hard work for the rest of his life.

What the hell are my talents? I totally stink at school. I managed to survive a couple of crazy alien attacks, but even if that wasn’t just dumb luck— which it absolutely was— it’s not something I could turn into a career. I’m halfway decent at playing basketball and guitar, I guess, but not good enough to make any money. For Christ’s sake, I’m not even good at stupid keg stands anymore, since that asshole—

Steve’s self-pitying thoughts were interrupted when the large double doors creaked open and slammed shut, echoing through the mostly-quiet sanctuary. He glanced up from his guitar and felt his eyes widen with shock when he saw Billy Hargrove strolling into the church like he owned the place.

Oh, crap… what’s he doing here?

Steve hastily pulled his Fender over his head and rested it on his guitar stand, stepping carefully over the numerous black cords snaking across the burgundy carpet.

The last thing I need is to trip and fall flat on my face in front of him.

Steve hurried down the center aisle, keeping his posture erect and trying his best to look aloof. He couldn’t have made direct eye contact even if he wanted to, because Billy’s eyes were hidden behind a pair of aviator sunglasses.

“Hey,” Steve said quietly, slowing to a halt and leaving five feet of space between himself and the other boy. “Didn’t expect to see you here again.”

“No?” Billy held a church bulletin in one hand and reached up with the other to pull off his sunglasses. “Well, I hope you like surprises, Harrington, ’cause here I am.”

He was wearing an outfit Steve didn’t recognize: black shoes, black pants, and a grey fisherman cable-knit sweater that brought out the stormy hue of his eyes. He looked like he might have lost a little weight, too; though he was still broad-shouldered and brawny, especially in the thick, oversized wool sweater, his jawline looked sharp enough to cut glass.

Jesus, what’s wrong with me? Who cares if he bought new clothes or lost a couple pounds? Quit staring before he notices.

“Yeah, uh…” Steve dragged his attention away from those hypnotic eyes and looked at the carpet instead. Even from five feet away, he could smell Billy’s freshly-applied cologne and… something else. He took a quick step backwards and tried to remember what he had started to say. “Why’s that? Why are you here, I mean?”

Billy tilted his head to the side and regarded Steve quizzically. “Is that supposed to be a trick question, or something? Why does anyone come to church?”

Steve cleared his throat and crossed his arms, annoyed by the deflection. “So, you’re here because you wanna sing hymns and pray, is that what you’re telling me?”

Billy shrugged. “Sure, why not? Sounds like a rad way to spend the morning.”
“Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit… this is exactly like Christmas Eve.”

“Oh, look…” Steve glanced over his shoulder to make sure nobody was listening. “Can you please do me a favor and cut the crap?”

“You first, Harrington. If you don’t want me at your precious church, just say so.”

“No, that’s not what I…”

Steve trailed off and pinched his lips tightly together, feeling like he’d been outsmarted, yet again. A small part of him wanted to punch the placid, unruffled look off Billy’s maddeningly flawless face. There was no way Steve could say what was really on his mind: that he suspected Billy had come to church for the sole purpose of teasing and antagonizing him. He knew that Billy would simply deny it and accuse him of thinking too highly of himself.

_He wouldn’t be wrong, either… I’m probably just flattering myself. Maybe his parents are forcing him to come here, or bribing him to take an interest, the same way my folks do._

“I don’t care if you stay,” Steve began hesitantly, choosing his words carefully so Billy wouldn’t be able to twist their meaning. “I just—”

“Good morning, boys!”

They both turned around in time to see Susan Hargrove and her thirteen-year-old daughter walking through the door.

“Oh… hi, Mrs. Hargrove,” Steve greeted politely. “How’s it going, Max?”

“Fine,” the little redheaded girl replied, returning his friendly smile with one of her own. Her blue eyes flicked from him to her step-brother, regarding them curiously. “Are you being nice, Billy?”

“What are you talking about? I’m _always_ nice,” he snapped with a haughty tilt of his chin.

Steve and Max rolled their eyes in unison.

“Whew, it sure feels nice in here after being out in the cold.” Susan rubbed her pale, freckled hands together and looked around the sanctuary. “Where shall we sit, Maxine? Should we see if there’s any room towards the front?”

Max didn’t have a chance to answer because the double doors opened again and Pastor Harrington walked back into the sanctuary, frowning with concern.

“What’s up, Dad?” Steve was almost grateful for the interruption; he liked Susan and Maxine, but he was running out of polite small talk, and conversations with Billy were always awkward and tense.

“There was a message on the answering machine in my study,” his father explained quickly. “Apparently, Julian fell down the stairs this morning… he’s at Hawkins General with a sprained wrist. Or maybe it’s broken, I’m not sure.”

“Oh, shit,” Steve said, momentarily forgetting where he was.

“Watch your language, son.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

His father sighed heavily and checked his watch for what seemed like the hundredth time. “I’ve gotta
get up there and start the service in about ten minutes. Julian will certainly be included in our prayers today… I suppose we’ll have to soldier on without him.”

“Without anyone playing the piano?” Steve shook his head slowly. “How’s that gonna work?”

Mr. Harrington shrugged and glanced up at the lofty ceiling. “God always works something out.”

_Sometimes, maybe, but I don’t know about always… He didn't work anything out for Barb, or Bob Newby._

“Hey, I know who could do it,” Max spoke up suddenly.

“Who could do what?” Steve asked, puzzled; he had almost forgotten that she was still standing there.

“Shut up,” Billy growled through clenched teeth, glaring at Max like she had said something offensive.

“What’re you guys talking about?” Steve was feeling dumber by the second.

Susan smiled brightly and reached over to pat her glowering step-son on the shoulder. “Billy used to play the piano all the time… he was quite good, actually.”

“What’s right?” Steve’s father raised his eyebrows skeptically at Billy. “Can you read music?”

Billy shrugged. “Yeah.”

_What?

Steve snorted, refusing to believe it. “You can’t, like, sight-read music, though… right?”

Billy gave him one of his obnoxiously cocky little smirks. “It’s not that hard, amigo… if you wanna learn, I could teach you.”

_What??

Steve hated it when Billy was right, but it was true: he had never learned to sight-read music. Most of his fellow amateurs in the praise band couldn’t, either; like Steve, they got by pretty well just by memorizing the tunes and reading simple chord progressions: G7, C, A minor, F, etcetera. It had never occurred to him that Billy might be some kind of virtuoso.

_He can’t possibly be serious…

His father tapped his watch and glanced fretfully around the room. “Well, there isn’t much time to practice. The songs we do here are hardly Tchaikovsky, but…”

Billy hooked his sunglasses over the collar of his sweater and fluffed out the ends of his hair. “I haven’t played much lately, but I’ll give it a shot, since it’s an emergency or whatever.”

_Holy shit… he’s really not kidding around.

“Well, praise God!” Steve’s father exclaimed, grinning broadly. “C’mon up here, buddy. I’ll introduce you to the band.”

Steve tried not to seem sulky as he followed his father and Billy up the aisle. He stubbornly refused to look up from his guitar as Billy maneuvered past him to sit down behind the large Yamaha electric
keyboard.

“So, uh… this is all the stuff for today?” Billy’s eyes flicked back and forth as he flipped through the pages of music planned for that morning. “Doesn’t look too tricky. Most of it’s in four-four… oh, this ‘Great Is the Lord’ thing is in six-eight. Shouldn’t be a problem.”

*What a damn show-off…*

“Let’s give it a whirl,” one of the singers in the band suggested, looking at the gradually-filling sanctuary. “The congregation won’t mind listening to us warm up for a few minutes.”

“No, we don’t mind at all!” Mrs. Kent, an elderly lady who always sat in the front pew, smiled encouragingly. “I’m sure we’ll love it.”

Billy sat up straighter on the cushioned stool, lowered his fingers onto the black and white plastic keys and began to play.

*Holy shit.*

Steve was so startled that he dropped his guitar pick on the floor and missed his entrance. He bent down to retrieve it, flinching when Billy briefly twisted his head around to meet his gaze, even while playing the opening bars of the song.

*Gonna play without looking at the keys, huh? Cocky asshole…*

Steve swallowed his dumbstruck astonishment and managed to start singing and strumming along just as Billy finished the intro. He sang softly at first, unsure why his cheeks felt so warm; it wasn’t the first time Billy had heard his voice, after all. It wasn’t like Steve was singing on his own this time, either— there were two young women in the band, a soprano and an alto, and the bassist had a decent voice, too. But even with all the other people singing and playing together, Steve felt overwhelmingly self-conscious, almost as though he and Billy were performing a duet.

*This is too weird… feels like I’m back in the upside-down again… how’d we go from getting into fistfights to playing ‘Great is the Lord’ together?*

As soon as the song was over, Steve’s father hurried towards Billy with his arms stretched wider than the statue of Jesus in Rio de Janeiro.

“That was incredible,” he exclaimed, bending down to hug his eleventh-hour substitute pianist. “Bravo! We are so blessed to have you among us, young man.”

Watching his own dad embrace Billy Hargrove, of all people, was one of the strangest things Steve had ever witnessed— and he had seen inter-dimensional monsters and slimy subterranean tunnels.

“It’s… it’s really not a big deal, sir,” Billy mumbled, awkwardly patting the back of Pastor Harrington’s blue suit jacket.

The other band members, as well as old Mrs. Kent from the front pew, heaped so much praise on Billy that he actually started to look uncomfortable; his cheeks were slightly pink and he kept touching his hair and fiddling with the rings on his fingers.

“Oh, okay… we’ve gotta get started soon, right?” Billy picked up his church bulletin and skimmed though it, his brow furrowing a little beneath his signature jaunty curl. “What about this part after the sermon, where it just says ‘Offering & Music’? Does the band do that, too?”
“No, that’s when Julian—the music director, you know—usually just plays whatever he likes on the Steinway,” Steve’s father explained. “A nice hymn, or something classical… last week, he played a Bach prelude.”

Billy nodded. “Cool… I know something that might work.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything classical, of course,” the pastor added, checking his watch yet again and speaking hurriedly. “Even pop music can work well, sometimes… the week before last, Julian played a moving rendition of ‘You Light Up My Life’, and everyone loved it.”

“I doubt he’s much of a Debby Boone fan, Dad,” Steve muttered, glancing over at Billy and noticing the way his lips—disarmingly perfect and shapely—curled up into a smile.

There’s no way a guy should have lips like that… God, I really can’t stand him.

The first half of the church service went smoothly; Billy played each song with an effortless, unflustered confidence that simultaneously amazed and annoyed Steve. After five songs, the praise band dispersed and sat down with the rest of the congregation. There was some praying and a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, then Steve’s father stood at the pulpit and delivered a twenty-minute sermon, after which he looked over at Billy and nodded, signaling that it was finally time for the offering. Steve sat up a little straighter on the pew and watched curiously as an empty-handed Billy approached the glossy black grand piano.

He doesn’t even have any sheet music with him… does he have something memorized?

Billy sat down at the Steinway, cracked his knuckles, and after only a few moments’ hesitation, began to play. The song sounded maddeningly familiar, but Steve couldn’t quite place it, and for one impossibly long minute it made him intensely bothered.

Christ almighty, what is it?

When Billy finally reached the chorus, though, Steve’s eyes widened and he felt stupid for not recognizing it sooner.

Oh, I know what this is!

It was ‘Save a Prayer’, his favorite Duran Duran song. He hadn’t been able to place it right away because Billy had slowed down the tempo so much, and it sounded completely different when played on an acoustic piano, without any drums, bass guitar, or that quivering synthesizer riff. Steve twisted around on the hard pew to glance at the congregation behind him; he doubted that anybody in the audience, besides a few of the younger members, had any idea what Billy was playing.

Bold choice for a church service… good thing Dad doesn’t know the lyrics.

Billy picked up the tempo and played more forcefully towards the end, moving his head in time with the emphasized chords and furrowing his brow in concentration as his hands flew rapidly across the keys.

Steve was surprised that Billy knew the Duran Duran song; he assumed his blond rival only listened to angry, gritty music like heavy metal and punk. Steve almost wished he could sing along, but that was obviously impossible—he was in church, so he had to settle for singing along in his head.

“And you wanted to dance so I asked you to dance, but fear is in your soul… Don’t say a prayer for
At the very end of the service, the band gathered behind their microphones again for two final songs, and then it was over. Pastor Harrington thanked everyone for coming and announced that there was coffee and a large box of doughnuts in the parlor, the same way he did every Sunday. All the congregants stood up and started talking and milling around, smiling and saying hello to their friends. Within a few moments, some people had even come forward to the praise band's corner of the sanctuary, wanting to shake Billy’s hand and congratulate him on a job well done. Steve stood off to the side, watching the amusing spectacle unfold as he unplugged his guitar from the amplifier and zipped it inside its case.

Billy, looking like he wanted to sprint out of the room as fast as his legs would carry him, had no choice but to stand there awkwardly while elderly and middle-aged churchgoers swarmed around him.

“Gee, that was really something,” an ancient man named Gerald said cheerfully, taking one of his wrinkled hands off his walker long enough to squeeze Billy’s shoulder. “Are you our new piano-player, young man?”

“No,” Billy mumbled sullenly. “This was just a one-time thing.”

Another curious, elderly church member wanted to know how old he was. “Oh, only seventeen? Goodness me, you look older than that.”

Rhonda, a rather flirtatious divorcée who wore too much makeup and perfume, gave Billy a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “You were absolutely fantastic, sweetie! Now, tell me: do you prefer being called ‘Billy’ or ‘William’?”

Steve snorted as he shouldered the strap of his guitar case and started to walk towards the exit.

“Hey, Harrington! Wait up!”

What now?

Steve paused halfway down the center aisle and looked over his shoulder at Billy, who had apparently just walked away from the crowd of admirers without even bothering to excuse himself.

“Got yourself a little fan club, William?”

Billy scowled. “Shut up.”

“Oh, and you’ve got some, uh…” Steve pointed to his own cheek. “Lipstick.”

“Great,” Billy muttered, scrubbing his cheek with the sleeve of his sweater. “How come chicks think it’s okay to smear their stupid makeup all over people? It’s gross.”

_I bet he knows a thing or two about girls leaving lipstick on him..._

Steve tried not to smile at the way one of Billy’s cheeks was now significantly more pink than the other. “You can stop rubbing now, it’s gone. Anyway, how did you know that song?”

“What, the one I did on the Steinway? That’s one hell of a nice piano, by the way— you can tell your old man I said so.”
He's wrong if he thinks I'm gonna let him change the subject...

“How’d you know ‘Save a Prayer’, though?”

“Everybody on this planet knows that song,” Billy scoffed.

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you were the Duran Duran type.”

Billy chuckled dryly. “Okay, so what ‘type’ do you think I am, exactly?”

_The pain-in-the-ass type._

“I, uh…” Sensing that he had wandered into potentially dangerous territory yet again, Steve was too flustered to remember the name of even one heavy metal band. “Death… Panther?”

Billy snorted. “Death Panther?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Well, you’re right, Harrington… I’m _not_ the Duran Duran type. But I work in a record store, remember? I’ve heard that song playing on the stereo about five thousand times.”

Steve was growing increasingly annoyed and confused, as he usually did when talking to Billy. He didn’t understand how simply hearing a song repeatedly could result in him knowing how to play it so well with zero advance notice, unless Billy was some kind of prodigy. The thought of him being a musical genius on top of everything else irritated Steve, so his mind homed in on the only other alternative: that Billy secretly enjoyed ‘Save A Prayer’ and had spent hours, at some point, perfecting it.

_He acts like such a macho, tough-guy alpha, but I bet it’s just for show. I don’t give a shit what he says; everyone’s the Duran Duran type._

“That song’s been one of my favorites since it came out, back when I was in tenth grade,” Steve said casually, thinking about how satisfying it would be if he could somehow prompt Billy to admit that he actually enjoyed a pop song. “I, um… I still really like it.”

Billy’s mouth curved into his signature infuriating half-smirk. “You really like it, huh?”

Steve nodded reluctantly and shifted the nylon strap of his guitar case, which was digging uncomfortably into his shoulder. He wondered how Billy always managed to make even the most innocuous topics sound vaguely dirty.

“I thought it was pretty damn lame, at first.” Billy stared directly into his eyes, smiling enigmatically. “But I’ve gotta admit, it’s kinda growing on me.”

_Wait, are we still talking about a song?_

“Hey, Billy!”

They both looked up and saw Max Mayfield standing near the door with her mother.

“We’re going to grab some lunch at that buffet on Main Street… you wanna meet us there?”

“You’d be welcome to join us if you’d like, Steven,” Mrs. Hargrove added with a bright smile.

“Christ,” Billy muttered under his breath, looking slightly embarrassed. “They dragged me to that
dump last weekend and the food was total garbage.”

Steve smiled politely at Mrs. Hargrove and shook his head. “No thanks, ma'am. Another time, maybe.”

Even if the food at that buffet didn’t suck, going out to eat with the three of them would be seriously awkward.

“Good call, Harrington,” Billy said in a low voice as he turned towards the exit. “See you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Steve repeated without thinking.

“At school,” Billy elaborated slowly, like he was speaking to an old person with dementia. “That boring place we have to go from Monday to Friday, remember?”

Shit, why am I such a spaz today?

“Right, right,” Steve said hastily, feeling like a complete moron. “See you tomorrow, then.”

As though he wasn’t already bothered enough, Steve went through the rest of his day with the chorus of ‘Save A Prayer’ stuck in his head on an endless loop. It may have been one of his favorite tunes before, but now he wouldn’t be able to hear it without thinking of Billy Hargrove’s cocky, know-it-all smirk and the way those thick fingers of his knew exactly which keys to press.

God, out of all the bazillions of people in the world you could’ve sent to Hawkins, why’d it have to be him?

Chapter End Notes

-Recommended listening: 'Churches' by New Musik (1981)

-There’s a video of a handsome pianist named Karim Kamar covering ‘Save a Prayer’ on YouTube, if you’re interested in finding out what Billy’s impromptu solo might have sounded like.
“Push it to the limit,
Walk the razor’s edge
But don’t look down, just keep your head
Or you’ll be finished.”
— ‘Push It To The Limit’ by Paul Engemann (1983)

Monday, February 11th, 1985

“You want me to what, Hargrove?”

“Weigh me again, sir.” Billy kept his voice down, trying not to draw too much attention to the conversation he had just initiated with Coach Fergus in the gym locker room.

The burly P.E. instructor scratched his bulbous nose and groaned wearily, like he’d just been asked to do something extremely taxing. “Why, though?”

Refusing to back down, Billy tilted his chin up confidently to meet the enormous gym coach’s humorless blue eyes. “Well, I know I’ve dropped a few pounds since January, and out of respect for the rules, I—”

“Respect for the rules, huh?” Coach Fergus snorted. “That’s a good one. In my long years of experience, boys like you don’t have a single iota of respect for rules or anything else… and when it comes to wrestling, they try their damnedest to move up a weight class, not down.”

“Yeah, but—”

“What’s your angle, kid?”

“There’s no angle, sir,” Billy assured him, trying his best to look like he wouldn’t really care if his request was denied.

Quit calling me a kid and just weigh me, you bull-headed old fart.

Billy was starting to worry that all of his crunches, after-dinner jogs, and depressing meals of salad and skim milk might have been for nothing. If the coach was too lazy to re-weigh him, Billy wasn’t completely sure he’d be able to resist the urge to yank the ever-present clipboard from his hairy paws and smack him across the face with it.

Then I’d get expelled, and my dad would murder me, and I’d never get to see Steve’s pretty ass again… goddamn it, I should’ve known this stupid idea wouldn’t—

“Fine, fine…” Coach Fergus grumbled, gesturing irritably at the scale in the corner of the locker room. “Hurry up and hop on; I haven’t got all day.”

Yes!
Billy held his breath and said a silent, hasty prayer while the coach moved the weight indicators along the thin metal balance beam.

*Please, please, please…*

“Well, what do you know,” Mr. Fergus muttered gruffly, squinting at the tiny numbers. “One sixty-eight and a half.”

Billy kept his expression indifferent, but in his mind he was whooping and doing cartwheels.

The coach looked down at his clipboard, found Billy’s name and erased the old, slightly higher number.

“Can’t say I’ve got any clue why you wanted me to do this, Hargrove. It’s not like this is a varsity team or anything, but I suppose I can’t complain about a student wanting to stick to the rules, now can I?”

“I suppose not, sir… thank you.”

Billy turned around quickly to walk away, unable to suppress his triumphant grin a moment longer.

“Not so fast, kid!”

*Ugh, what now?*

“Yeah?”

“You need to take that—” Coach Fergus paused, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. “What the heck are you so happy about?”

“Nothing,” Billy lied innocently.

*Quit busting my balls, already.*

Mr. Fergus pointed at Billy’s chest. “Take that necklace off, and don’t make me remind you again, or I’m confiscating it for the rest of the semester.”

Billy had been in such a hurry to sprint to gym and change into his wrestling singlet before Steve, Tommy, and everyone else arrived that he’d completely forgotten about his mother’s little holy pendant.

“Sorry, sir,” he mumbled as he pulled the delicate chain over his head, careful not to get it tangled in his shaggy curls. “I’ll go stash it in my locker.”

The coach grunted in response and left abruptly, marching down one of the aisles to bellow at some boy who was wearing a jock strap on his head and making all the other boys around him hoot with laughter.

“What on God’s green earth do you think you’re doing, Perkins? You think that’s funny? Hurry up and get dressed, and if I ever catch you horsing around like that again, you can laugh all the way to detention!”

………………

Billy had changed into his uniform and gotten weighed so quickly that he was the first student to arrive in the weight room. Whistling softly to himself, he sat down to do some bench presses while
he waited for everyone else to get there.

*I got what I wanted, so now I can get back to serious lifting without having to worry about bulking up too much. If I go over one-seventy, the coach doesn’t need to know.*

“Hey, man,” a voice spoke suddenly from the doorway. “What’s up?”

Billy had been lying flat on the padded bench, focusing on a brown water stain on the ceiling as he raised and lowered the heavy barbell. He rested it on the safety rack and sat up just enough to see who had greeted him.

*Oh. It’s just Tommy.*

“You’re early today,” the freckled beta remarked, strolling over to stand beside him. “Need me to spot you, bud?”

“Nah, I’m good.” Billy picked up the barbell and went back to lifting. “And don’t call me ‘bud’.”

Never one to take a hint, Tommy selected two fifteen-pound dumbbells from the large rack, plopped down onto a neighboring bench and began blathering about some wrestling match he had watched on TV over the weekend. Billy ignored him and continued his workout, grunting and counting under his breath as he carefully hoisted the barbell above his chest.

*Betas are so fucking lame. Where’s Steve?*

Billy couldn’t be too annoyed, though. His mission to get down into the 160 weight bracket had succeeded, and he was still coasting on the high from the previous day’s multiple victories. First, he had managed to impress Steve just by playing the piano. The dorky praise songs were relatively simple, but he had taken a gamble during the offering with his rendition of ‘Save A Prayer’, for which he had no music and relied entirely on memory and improvisation. To his relief, he had gotten through the entire morning without making any noticeable mistakes.

The second victory had come a few minutes later, in the church parking lot. Billy was unlocking his Camaro when Steve’s father, of all people, had come jogging out to stop him before he left. Pastor Harrington congratulated him again on a job well done, then offered Billy an astounding **forty dollars** for each Sunday he agreed to fill in as a substitute pianist until the music director’s wrist healed. It was almost too good to be true.

*It’s weird, but my luck has been way better in Hawkins than it ever was in L.A.*

“So, what do you think, man?”

“Huh?” Billy had been so deep in thought that, for the last minute or two, he’d completely tuned out Tommy’s ceaseless prattle. He set the barbell down on the rack with a loud clatter and sat up on the bench, flexing his arms and savoring the pleasant burn in his biceps. “What do I think about what?”

Tommy tsked impatiently. “About what I should get Carol on Thursday… I was thinking sexy lingerie, but the last time I tried that, she got pissed ‘cause I bought the wrong size.”

*Jesus Christ, this dumbass can’t be serious…*

“What the hell are you yapping about?” Billy stood up from the bench and stretched his arms over his head. “Is Thursday your bitch’s birthday, or something?”

“You don’t have to call her that,” Tommy muttered, pouting at the floor. “It’s gonna be Valentine’s
Day, remember? You know how chicks like to make a huge deal about that kind of shit.”

Billy had completely forgotten about Valentine’s Day; it wasn’t exactly a holiday in which he could freely participate.

*Even if I actually had someone, there’s no way I could take a dude out for a romantic dinner at whatever hog trough passes for a nice restaurant in Hawkins. Everyone would stare and make us feel like circus freaks, or lepers.*

The unexpected reminder of his single, outlier status soured Billy's mood and made him scowl. “Buy her whatever the fuck you want, Romeo. I really couldn’t care less.”

“Well, sorry,” Tommy grumbled, standing up and abandoning his dumbbells on the floor for somebody else to pick up. “Maybe I’ll play it safe and get one of those heart-shaped boxes of chocolate…”

They both looked up when they heard the wrestling coach clapping his hands in the adjoining room.

“Allright, guys!” Coach Fergus called, his booming voice clearly audible even from the next room. “I want everyone in here for a quick roll call, then we’re gonna get started! All you boys hanging around in the weight room, come on out!”

Billy sat down on his usual bench in the room designated for wrestling and glanced around; it only took a second or two for him to spot Steve, who looked just as sexy as he always did in his green wrestling singlet.

*God, I can’t wait to get my hands on him…*

Billy tried not to get his hopes up— there were several boys in the 160-pound weight class, so there was no guarantee he’d get to wrestle with the lanky, brown-eyed beauty that morning.

*Don’t sweat it… if we don’t get paired up today, there’s always tomorrow. No rush.*

Sure enough, he had to spend the first ten minutes grappling with a boy named Terry. Even though Billy was usually extremely competitive, he didn’t put up much of a fight with this particular opponent— losing was preferable to placing his hands anywhere near Terry’s smelly armpits or his greasy chest and back, which were covered with pink and white pimples that looked alarmingly like they might burst if touched.

Next, the coach paired him with Phil Curtis, who was so skinny that he was in the 160-pound weight class despite being over six feet tall. Billy won each round easily, though the coach yelled at him at one point for lifting Phil like a rolled-up rug and throwing him down on the mat.

“What are you tryin’ to do, Hargrove, break his back? You think you’re one of those hot-shot pros on the tube? Quit being such a damn show-off! That’s your second caution this morning— if I have to give you another, you’ll be benched for the rest of the week.”

*Oh, shove it. I was just having some fun.*

Billy had never liked wrestling. He couldn’t stand all the nit-picky rules that stood in the way of what ought to be, in his mind, a straightforward ass-kicking. As soon as the coach showed them a maneuver, it seemed like he almost always followed the demonstration with a stern warning that the move was against the rules. Billy understood why biting, scratching, junk-grabbing, and hair-pulling were strictly off-limits, but he could fill an entire composition book with all the other maneuvers he had to remember not to do: chokeholds were forbidden, as were armlocks, leglocks, wristlocks, rear
chinlocks, full nelsons, and the impressive-sounding scissored armbar.

_Christ, I hate wrestling._

There were hundreds of rules and Billy was not— despite the fibs he told Coach Fergus— someone who was good at following rules or obeying authority figures.

After he easily pinned Phil for the third and final time, Billy glanced over at the corner, where Steve had managed to successfully pin his own opponent. Their eyes met from across the room, but Steve looked away quickly as he stood up from the mat, rolling his shoulders and tilting his head to the side to stretch his neck.

_So sexy…_

The coach checked his watch and blew his whistle, indicating that everyone on the mats should stop what they were doing and rise to their feet.

“Alright! That could’ve been worse, all things considered. Perkins, you can head over to the weight room. Thompson, you’re benched— don’t argue with me, you know exactly what you did. Whipple, Crenshaw, you’re up. Get over there onto the fourth mat. Hargrove, Harrington, you’re on the first mat. Get into position and let’s see what you can do!”

Steve, still red-cheeked and panting from his previous round of grappling, stood frozen in place and gaped incredulously at the coach. His thick, straight hair stuck up chaotically around the elastic straps of his headgear and clung to the back of his sweaty neck. Even from across the room, Billy could see the perplexed crinkles on his forehead beneath the damp points of his hair.

“Harrington!” Coach Fergus barked. “Shake a leg, slowpoke, we don’t have all day!”

The coach’s booming voice seemed to jolt Steve back to the present moment, and he walked warily towards Billy, reaching down to tug awkwardly at the legs of the singlet that had ridden up and bunched around his pale, hairy thighs.

As he watched Steve’s reluctant approach, Billy made the mistake of thinking about what those long legs might feel like if they were wrapped around his body. Almost immediately, his dick began to stiffen with anticipation.

_No, no, no… this can’t happen right now._

Hoping that his cheeks weren’t turning a shade of pink that might be attributed to anything other than fitness-related exertion, Billy plastered on his signature careless smirk and tried to look casual. It wasn’t easy, but he managed to redirect his thoughts from Steve’s pretty legs and round little rump to an unfortunate incident a few years earlier, in California, when he had accidentally walked in on his grandfather sitting on the toilet. It worked like a charm; the situation in his jock strap calmed down within seconds.

_See? I’ve got it all under control. No problem._

“Why are we getting paired up?” Steve still looked adorably bewildered. “I, uh… I thought you were in the one-seventy group.”

Billy shrugged. “I lost a chunk of weight when I was really sick a while back… must’ve caught that nasty flu that was going around.”

“The flu?” Steve repeated skeptically. “I don’t remember hearing about any nasty flu that was going
around.”

“Yeah,” Billy lied smoothly. “I spent a few days puking my guts out and not eating anything. You’re lucky you didn’t catch it.”

“A weekend of being sick isn’t enough to lose that much—”

“You’re not calling me a liar, are you, Harrington?”

Even when he thinks I’m full of shit, he’s still the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.

Frowning, Steve seemed like he wanted to question Billy further, but the coach bustled over with his clipboard.

“Shut your traps and listen up, gentlemen! Now, I’ve noticed a lot of you having trouble taking the initiative in the beginning. Especially you, Harrington... you can’t just waste time and let the clock run down circling your opponent for five hundred years; you’ve gotta learn how to penetrate his defenses!”

Penetrate his defenses, huh?

Steve stared down at the floor, nudging a frayed spot on the vinyl wrestling mat with the toe of his Nike sneaker. A few moments later, he had no choice but to meet Billy’s eyes when they were instructed to face off on the mat.

Here we go...

Wrestling matches usually began the same way, with the pair of opponents reaching out to try to grab each other, often by the shoulder or by placing a palm firmly on the back of the other wrestler’s neck. The boys circled each other on the mat, tense and unblinking, occasionally batting each other’s hands away.

Billy had almost forgot that there was anyone else in the room when he heard the coach’s reproachful voice again.

“What did I say about those defenses, fellas?”

Yeah, yeah... penetrate ‘em. Sounds like fun.

Billy’s left hand shot forward, passing between Steve’s arms and gripping the back of his neck. This was the first time they’d been in such close proximity since their fight at the Byers’ house, and he was determined to make the most of it. He was keenly aware that putting on a good show for Coach Fergus would increase their chances of getting paired together more frequently in the future.

Don’t fuck this up...

While Steve tried to pry the hand off the back of his neck, Billy suddenly dropped to one knee, wrapped his arms around Steve’s thighs and tackled him to the floor.

“Excellent, Hargrove!” Coach Fergus exclaimed. “See if you can pin him while he’s down!”

Despite landing squarely on his butt, Steve wasn’t giving up without a fight— gritting his teeth, he planted his palms on the mat and refused to let his shoulder blades get pressed down. Billy hovered above him, delighted by the sight of a breathless, sweaty Steve lying beneath him. He was really starting to enjoy himself.
I changed my mind—wrestling is awesome.

He could tell what Steve was trying to do next, and didn’t even bother stopping him. Losing his positional advantage was well worth getting to experience the sublime feeling of Steve’s strong, slender legs wrapped tightly around his waist. He could feel the muscles in Steve’s thighs tensing as he used them to try to rock him onto his side and escape. Predictably, Billy’s dick started to thicken again.

If it wasn't for this cup, Steve would find out exactly how I feel about him.

He could’ve put a swift end to the round right then and there, just by putting all his weight on Steve and forcing his shoulders onto the mat… but Billy wanted to savor it for as long as possible.

“Are you falling asleep, Hargrove?” Mr. Fergus demanded, interrupting his tiny moment of tortured bliss. “Looks like you’re not even trying!”

I don’t wanna try, though… I mean, why would I?

Steve’s face was so close to his own that Billy could almost see himself reflected in his dark eyes. He could smell him with every breath, and he wished they could stay tangled together on the mat forever, preferably without someone shouting down at them.

“Someone show me some hustle, already!”

With a loud grunt of exertion, Steve managed to roll out from under Billy and scamper back to his feet.

“An escape!” The coach clapped his hands approvingly, watching them closely. “Atta boy, Harrington. We’re back to neutral position, now.”

A few moments later, Billy won the first round simply by pushing Steve backwards, inch by inch, until his Nikes slipped off the edge of the mat and he lost his balance. Billy shoved him onto his side, made sure his own feet were still touching the mat, and looked up at the coach.


Billy couldn’t help smirking.

There’s no way in hell the guys who invented this so-called ‘sport’ were straight.

Steve sighed with resignation and dropped down to his hands and knees.

“Christ, this sucks,” he muttered under his breath, keeping his soft tenor quiet enough to escape the coach’s notice. “Never thought I’d miss basketball so much.”

“It could be worse, dude.” Billy knelt on the mat behind him, arranging his legs carefully like Coach Fergus had demonstrated (there were plenty of detailed rules about that, too). “If we were in ancient Greece, we’d be doing this butt-naked.”

Steve inhaled sharply, made an odd choking sound and started coughing.

God, it’s so easy to screw with him…

The coach, who had walked over to criticize the pair of boys grappling on a neighboring mat, turned on his heel to look at Steve.
“What’s the matter, kid? You coming down with a cold, or something?”

“No, sir,” Steve managed to say, clearing his throat and turning red. “I’m fine.”

“Just glad we’re not in ancient Greece, huh?” Billy whispered as he leaned forward to place his hand on Steve’s left elbow.

“Will you shut up for once?” Steve hissed, squirming slightly at his touch.

It was a perfectly standard starting position that Billy had been in hundreds of times over the past few weeks, but when it was Steve’s elbow he was grasping and Steve’s spandex-clad ass he was crouching behind… well, that changed everything.

*Keep it together, man... keep it together.*

Billy’s confidence in his own self-control was faltering a little bit more with each passing second. He breathed through his mouth so he wouldn’t be able to smell that intriguing aroma as much, and he tried to focus his attention on Steve’s wrestling headgear, which was too ugly and ridiculous for even Billy’s lust-filled mind to sexualize.

*Take a deep breath, keep looking at that stupid thing on his head, and think about golf...*

Just as Billy was privately congratulating himself for staying cool, Steve turned his head and glanced over his shoulder at him with those big, brown eyes.

Oh, shit.

“Quit glaring at each other and get started, fellas,” the coach commanded impatiently, tapping his watch. “Second round lasts two minutes. Go!”

Billy’s protective cup and tight singlet were the only things keeping his erection contained. Not even thoughts of golf or his grandfather taking a dump could save him from his current uncomfortable predicament. It was extremely difficult to pay attention to proper wrestling maneuvers when he was practically mounting the boy of his dreams; his reactions were slower, and before he realized what had happened, Steve shimmied out of his grasp and scored another two points for escaping.

“What the hell was that, Hargrove?” Coach Fergus exclaimed, smacking his forehead dramatically with his palm. “Get your head out of the clouds and focus!”

Billy clenched his thighs together and gritted his teeth, trying unsuccessfully to block out both the coach’s unhelpful shouts and the dirty thoughts fogging up his mind. It was hard to concentrate, and Steve took advantage of his distraction, darting behind Billy and reaching around him with both arms.

Almost like he’s giving me a hug.

It wasn’t a hug, though. Steve had learned a few tricks in the past few weeks, and one of the moves he’d mastered was the half-nelson. Quick as lightning, he grabbed Billy’s left wrist, then laced his right arm under Billy’s right armpit and up to grip the back of his neck. Billy was so stunned by how good it felt to have Steve’s warm palm on his neck and his slim body pressed against his back that he barely minded the fact that he couldn’t move either of his arms and his chin was currently digging into his own chest.

*Worth it... so worth it.*
Despite the clunky headgear covering his ears, he could hear Steve’s panted breaths and the soft grunt of exertion when he put all his weight into dragging Billy down backwards onto the mat.

Annoying hard-on crisis aside, I think I’m actually starting to like wrestling.

Billy ended up losing his seven-minute wrestling match with Steve, but he wasn’t upset about it, even though Tommy teased him about it afterwards (“How’d that happen, man? You could snap him like a twig if you wanted!”). He knew it was the only way he’d ever find himself lying on his back with Steve straddling him, staring down at him with a proud look of triumph on his sweaty face.

“Well played, amigo,” Billy had said breathlessly, trying to ignore the foreign, hard bump of Steve’s plastic athletic cup pressing suggestively against his stomach. “You got me.”

A tiny bead of perspiration had dripped off Steve’s forehead and landed on Billy’s cheek, right next to his lips. Without breaking eye contact, Billy boldly licked off the salty drop with the tip of his tongue; it would be a long time before he forgot the resulting look of scandalized confusion in Steve’s eyes.

He tastes good, he smells good… Christ, how does he do it? He’s sweating but he doesn’t stink.

“Not too shabby,” Coach Fergus remarked as Steve scrambled hastily to his feet. “I’ll definitely be pairing you two up again tomorrow.”

Hell, yeah!

Billy stood up and stretched, still trying to ignore the discomfort in his groin. “I went easy on you today, Harrington, but you might not be so lucky next time.”

‘Cause next time I’m gonna be smart and jerk off before P.E., so I don’t have to deal with an endless torture-boner.

“Terrific,” Steve muttered as he walked towards the weight room.

After class, when everyone had trooped off to get changed, Billy spotted Steve talking to Coach Fergus. He desperately needed to take care of the unresolved problem in his jock strap, but he couldn’t resist the temptation to sneak over and eavesdrop, so he ambled over and pretended he was extremely interested in the dingy, dog-eared chart of rules taped to the wall a few feet behind the spot where Steve was standing.

“But Coach, remember that guy who got switched to fifth period gym when he joined the marching band, and—”

“Have you joined the marching band, Harrington?”

“No, but—”

“We can’t just shuffle you kids around for no good reason,” Coach Fergus interjected impatiently. “Do you have a good reason to switch to another period?”

Steve looked down at his sneakers and sighed. “Well… not really, no.”

“That’s what I thought.” When Coach Fergus finally noticed Billy standing nearby, he narrowed his
eyes sternly. “You need help with something, Hargrove?”

Steve whirled around, flushing pink when he saw who had been listening.

“Who, me? No, I don’t need anything,” Billy answered innocently, nodding at the sheet of paper printed with rules about locker room decorum. “Just reading this fascinating—”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Now quit badgering me and go get changed, both of you.” The coach rolled his eyes as he marched away, grumbling under his breath about how his retirement couldn’t come soon enough.

There was no point in pretending he hadn’t been listening, so Billy looked directly at Steve and gave him a knowing smirk.

“Well, well, well,” he tsked, shaking his head with exaggerated disappointment. “I gotta say, that’s a pussy move, Harrington… even for you.”

“Shut up.”

“Are you really that desperate to avoid me?”

“No.” Steve glared at him and crossed his arms defensively. “I’m not desperate about anything, asshole, and it’s got absolutely nothing to do with you.”

Billy had to admit, he’d be angry if Steve’s attempts to get transferred to a different gym period had actually been successful, but since the coach had brushed him off there wasn’t really anything to get upset about. If anything, Billy was proud that after just a single seven-minute wrestling match, Steve was evidently so hot and bothered that he was all but begging the coach to transfer him to a different class.

*Maybe I’m finally getting under his skin…*

“If it’s got nothing to do with me, why the hell are you trying to switch periods?”

“None of your business, that’s why.”

“Gimme one good reason. Just one, I dare you.” Billy took a step closer, willing Steve to meet his eyes. “You gonna join the band and play the fucking clarinet so you won’t have to get your ass kicked in gym, pretty boy?”

“First of all, the only ass I noticed getting kicked today was yours.” Steve glanced around furtively, confirming that all the boys changing were too far away to overhear. “Second of all, why do you keep calling me that?”

Billy’s eyes widened with feigned innocence. “Calling you what?”

“It’s not funny, and it’s not even true. So just quit it.”

*Not true? Gimme a break… it’s true and everyone with a pair of functional eyeballs knows it.*

“I don’t have time for this crap,” Steve muttered, taking a few steps backwards. “I’ve gotta get changed.”

Billy tilted his head and licked his lips as he watched him storm away. “I’ll quit saying it as soon as you quit being so goddamn pretty.”
He said the words under his breath, but they must have been louder than he thought, because Steve halted in his tracks and turned to scowl at Billy.

_Oops._

“Quit being so what?” Steve demanded testily, perching his hands on his hips.

“Shitty,” Billy lied automatically, so distracted by the increasingly uncomfortable situation in his jock strap that he couldn’t think clearly. “Quit being so goddamn shitty.”

_God, I want him. I wanna drag him to the bathroom with me and rip that dorky uniform off and—_

“Oh, okay,” Steve said with a haughty tilt of his chin. “So I’m a shitty boy now, is that it?”

Billy tried to match his proud, pissed-off stare with one of his own, but keeping a straight face was impossible when Steve was standing there with his hands on his hips, attempting to look like an imposing alpha despite his absurd wrestling singlet and the dozens of noisy, half-naked boys goofing off in the locker room behind him.

“Nah,” he admitted after an awkwardly long pause, glancing down at the concrete floor before meeting those beautiful eyes again. “You’re a whole lot of things, Harrington, but shitty ain’t on the list.”

Steve seemed surprised that Billy had backed down so quickly. He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again, perhaps realizing that they were just right back where they had started—arguing about whether Steve was pretty and whether Billy had a right to say so. His bothered scowl returned, with his bottom lip sticking out just enough to make Billy want to lean forward and bite it.

_Uh-oh… this is bad._

As much as Billy loved all their circuitous bickering and lingering eye contact, he was in imminent danger of—to borrow Steve Harrington’s memorable verbiage—creaming his singlet.

“Gotta go,” he blurted, turning abruptly to head in the opposite direction. “Smell ya later.”

_Just walk to the bathroom like a normal person… a totally normal person who doesn’t have a dick that’s about to explode._

“Running away, huh? Now who’s a pussy?” Steve called after him. “Hey, where are you going?”

“To the crapper,” Billy replied without looking back. “Nature calls!”

Given its mysterious puddles, flickering fluorescent lights, and the ever-present fragrance of mildew and urinal cakes, the boy’s bathroom was hardly an ideal location for jerking off, but Billy had pushed himself to the limit and had no other options. He shut himself in the relative privacy of an orange bathroom stall and gazed up at the dusty pipes high above his head as he impatiently tugged the straps of his wrestling uniform off his shoulders and rolled the tight garment all the way down to his knees. Grateful that all the other boys were busy changing in the locker room, Billy shifted his jock strap over and groaned with relief when his aching cock sprang free from its cramped, sweaty prison.

“Thank fuck,” he sighed, finally allowing all the forbidden, sensual thoughts to come crashing through the flimsy barriers he’d erected in his mind.
Thoughts of Steve down on all fours, glancing over his shoulder at Billy with those big, brown, please-be-gentle eyes.

Thoughts of Steve grunting as he forced Billy down on the mat and straddled him.

Thoughts of Steve panting as a triumphant smile lit up his flawless face.

Thoughts of Steve getting flustered and turning a delicate shade of pink when Billy called him pretty.

“So, so pretty…” Billy whispered aloud, biting his lip and swallowing a moan when he felt an orgasm on the horizon. “Prettiest boy I ever saw…”

_He said it wasn’t true, and that just makes me wanna keep telling him every day. How could he not know? There’s no way in hell he doesn’t… oh god, I’m getting close… there’s no way he doesn’t know how good he looks._

It only took a few more quick tugs to finish— he aimed for the toilet bowl and got most of the sticky, white mess inside. Feeling a thousand times more relaxed, Billy carefully tucked his satisfied dick back into his jock strap, pulled his spandex singlet back up, and whistled ‘Save A Prayer’ as he strolled out of the stall and washed his hands at the sink.

_I gotta think of something else to play next Sunday… something that’ll really knock that pretty boy’s socks off. He hasn’t seen anything yet._

Chapter End Notes

Drop me a line, if you feel so inclined. No pressure. I just like hearing from you guys.

:)
Happy Valentine's Day, Dummy

Chapter Notes

"While physics and mathematics may tell us how the universe began, they are not much use in predicting human behavior because there are far too many equations to solve. I'm no better than anyone else at understanding what makes people tick."
- Stephen Hawking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thursday, February 14th, 1985

The nightmares didn’t come as often, but they still came. All night long and well into the early hours of the morning, Steve dreamed about aliens that crashed down from ceilings, clawed at the windows, and snatched girls from his own backyard. Some of the creatures were like tall men, skinny and solitary; others were more like dogs and traveled in snarling packs. Either way, they all made his blood run cold when they opened their flower-like faces to reveal rows of sharp teeth.

When his alarm clock went off at six-thirty and his eyes flicked open, Steve was relieved to discover that it was just a bad dream and he was safe at home in his cozy, comfortable bed. But there was also an anxious, forbidding certainty tugging at the frayed edges of his subconscious; somehow, he knew that he’d forgotten something important, like a big test, his mother’s birthday, or some kind of deadline.

What is it? What’s different about today?

He stared up blankly at the ceiling as his clock radio beeped, thinking for a few moments before finally remembering: it was Valentine’s Day.

“Oh… of course it is,” he grumbled sleepily, reaching out to smack the ‘Snooze’ button.

The lovers’ holiday didn’t apply to him this year, of course. There was no girl— no Laurie, Amy, Becky, or Nancy— who would get upset and run sniffing to the bathroom because he’d forgotten all about buying flowers and making dinner reservations. For the first time in years, he was single and had absolutely nothing to feel guilty about.

Can’t be a shitty boyfriend if I’m nobody’s boyfriend.

“Guess I’m off the hook,” Steve mumbled to himself as he burrowed deeper beneath the warm blankets and closed his eyes.

Just five more minutes.

…………………….

Five more minutes turned into fifteen, then twenty-five, and he ended up rushing to school much later than usual. After finally finding a decent parking spot, he jogged across the wet, cracked asphalt, carefully avoiding puddles and dark patches of ice. Steve had been so preoccupied with getting to first period on time that he managed to completely forget about Valentine’s Day again— until he stepped inside the main hall of Hawkins High.
It was just as crowded and noisy as it usually was ten minutes before classes began, but the air was especially thick with hormonal excitement and scented with generously-applied cologne, perfume, and hairspray.

*Jesus, it stinks like a stupid school dance in here.*

Determined to ignore the teenage hubbub around him, Steve continued down the hallway, which one of the student committees had decorated with red crêpe paper and heart-shaped doilies.

When he reached his locker and began twisting the combination knob, he noticed Nancy and Jonathan further down the hall, standing close together. Nancy must have liked whatever Jonathan said, because she tipped her head back and laughed, then gave him a hug; she didn’t even have to stand on her toes to loop her arms around her new boyfriend’s neck.

Steve would like to be able to say that he couldn’t remember what he had done on Valentine’s Day the previous year, when he and Nancy were still an item, but that would be a lie. He wasn’t quite so indifferent and detached that he’d completely forgotten about her delighted gasp when she unwrapped a bottle of Miss Dior perfume (ordered from one of his mother’s fancy catalogs). He’d presented her with a bouquet of red roses, too— blissfully unaware, of course, that a mere eight months later he’d be buying her an almost-identical bouquet which would end up getting flung at Billy Hargrove’s smug face.

*Why am I thinking about that asshole all of a sudden?*

“**Awww, look at poor wittle Stevie,**” a feminine, mocking voice called out from behind him. “**Thinkin’ about your long-lost love?**”

Startled, Steve turned around to face Carol and Tommy, who were both sticking their bottom lips out in matching expressions of fake pity.

*Oh, great.*

Carol glared down the hall at Nancy, who was too busy hugging Jonathan to notice anything happening elsewhere.

“It’s okay, Stevie, you can go ahead and cry over Little Miss Perfect,” Carol sneered as she adjusted the fuzzy pink earmuffs she was wearing. “I’ve got some Kleenex if you need it.”

*Just ignore her and maybe she’ll actually shut up, for once in her stupid life.*

He couldn’t stand being called Stevie, but he knew that telling her to stop would only encourage her (not unlike another relentless bully and the nickname ‘pretty boy’).

“You can deny it all you want, but we totally saw you making gooey eyes at Fancy-Nancy, didn’t we, Tommy?”

“I wasn’t making gooey eyes at anyone, for Christ’s sake,” Steve muttered peevishly, stuffing books in his backpack faster so he could escape.

Tommy smirked. “You want some advice, Harrington?”

“No.”

Tommy ignored him and reached over to give his shoulder a not-so-friendly punch. “If you’d quit moping over the princess and get back in the game, you could have someone brand-new bouncing
on your balls in no time.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Gee, how romantic.”

“Who’s bouncing on Harrington’s balls?”

*Oh, crap, where’d he come from?*

Billy Hargrove had suddenly emerged from the crowded hallway; he carelessly brushed past Carol and Tommy to get to his locker.

“Nobody!” Steve clarified hastily, wincing when he dropped his five-pound history textbook on his toe.

“What’s up, bud?” Tommy greeted cheerfully, wrapping an arm around Carol’s shoulder. “We were just trying to give Stevie-Boy here some pointers on love, but he’s being a stubborn little bitch about it, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Billy repeated blandly as he turned the combination knob and opened his locker with a loud *ka-chunk*. “And what’d I say about calling me ‘bud’?”

“Oh, right… sorry, Billy.”

*Pathetic beta brown-noser.*

Carol tilted her head and snapped her gum, smiling coquettishly at Billy despite the boyfriend currently glued to her side.

“What about you, California King? You got a special someone you’re taking out tonight?”

Billy arched one of his annoyingly perfect eyebrows and gave Carol an enigmatic smile. “Maybe.”

*Really?*

Steve had gotten what he needed from his locker and was about to walk away, leaving the trio of obnoxious bullies far behind, but he paused mid-step, succumbing to his nagging curiosity.

*He’s seriously taking someone out tonight? Not that I give a shit, but… who?*

Carol seemed to be having exactly the same thought.

“Ooh, is that so?” she giggled, nudging her boyfriend. “Who’s the lucky girl?”

“Yeah, man, give us the scoop!” Tommy chimed in with a lecherous grin. “Who’s the mystery hottie? Does she go to school with us, or—?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Billy replied in a bored voice as he crammed another notebook into his bag. “And don’t you two have a class you gotta get to, or something?”

The smirk on Tommy’s freckled face faded into a disappointed scowl.

“C’mon, baby, let’s get outta here,” he said to Carol, squeezing her shoulder and steering her away.

*Good riddance,* Steve thought as he finished closing his backpack— or tried to, anyway, since the zipper was stuck.
“There’s no shame in not having anyone on V-Day, pal.” Billy slammed his locker shut and leaned against it, watching Steve struggle with the jammed zipper. “This stupid holiday is really just a marketing ploy, y’know? Anyone who sells chocolate, panties, or flowers or owns a halfway-decent restaurant is raking in piles of cash this time of year.”

“Uh-huh,” Steve agreed absently without looking up from his defective zipper.

“The way I see it, you dodged a bullet,” Billy continued. “I mean, just look at this creepy bullshit.”

He gestured at a large, colorful picture of a flying cupid taped on a nearby wall. “A fat, naked baby shoots you in the chest with a goddamn arrow, and then you just fall in love with some bitch, whether you like it or not? Gag me with a spoon.”

_Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask…_

Steve couldn’t keep the words from tumbling out. “But didn’t you say you were, uh, taking someone out tonight?”

Billy looked at him for a moment longer than necessary, just enough to make Steve’s cheeks start to feel warm.

“I didn’t exactly say that,” he finally admitted. “I’m working tonight, so… nah.”

“Oh.”

Steve was alarmed by the tiny flicker of relief he felt— it was small, but definitely there.

_What the hell is wrong with me?_

“Working at the, uh, the record store,” he stammered awkwardly, even though he already knew where the other alpha was employed. “Right?”

“We’re havin’ a big sale right now— fifteen percent off damn near everything.” Billy smiled wryly. “Not that a rich guy like you ever breaks a sweat about how much shit costs… still, you oughtta stop by sometime and check it out.”

A girl Steve recognized from Spanish class walked by and smiled bashfully at him— or was she looking at Billy? Steve wasn’t sure, and he didn’t really care. He had to admit that he was surprised Billy didn’t have someone hanging on his arm, given the huge amount of attention he received. Everywhere Billy went, it seemed, girls would stare, blush, and smile, yet Steve couldn’t recall seeing him with anyone in months.

_In this town, if he wanted. Literally anyone. I bet even the captain of the cheerleading squad would dump her boyfriend in a heartbeat to screw around with Billy._

Steve might not be the most popular guy in school anymore, but that didn’t mean he was a stranger to the eyelash-fluttering gaze of the opposite sex. On any given day, he noticed a few girls looking at him in class or in the cafeteria.

_Just ’cause I got knocked down a peg doesn’t make me chopped liver. I’ve still got what it takes— I just don’t wanna be bothered with any drama when things go south._

It occurred to him that Billy might not be interested in the naïve, giggling girls that their small high school had to offer; Steve had noticed the way even adult women— some old enough to be his mother— often stared at him, smiling shyly like they were back in grade school. The thought of Billy
having a secret rendezvous with a lonely housewife he’d met at the record store or church was simultaneously amusing and gross.

Anything’s possible, though, especially with a wack-job like him.

The bell rang, indicating that they had just five minutes to get to first period; the herd of students in the hall was already beginning to thin.

“Better get going,” Steve mumbled, abruptly taking off down the hallway towards his Spanish class. He silently commanded himself to resist the impulse to glance over his shoulder at Billy… and then did it, anyway.

Goddamnit!

“See you in gym,” he called after Steve with a casual wave, still leaning against the lockers like he didn’t have a care in the world. “Hope you’re ready to get flattened like a pretty pancake.”

Steve swallowed. He may have forgotten about Valentine’s Day, but there was no way wrestling could slip his mind— not with Billy Hargrove in the mix. Grappling with bony Phil, pimpley Terry, and all those other boys was bad enough, but now that Mr. California Keg King himself had somehow been reassigned to the same weight class as Steve, wrestling was… different, to say the least. He never knew what to expect: would Billy twist him into knots like a soft pretzel and sit on him, or would he act strangely distracted and let him win the match? Would he behave (relatively) normally, or would he do things that made Steve’s head spin?

Like when I pinned him the other day and accidentally got a little sweat on him… that crazy asshole actually licked it off, like a dog! Unbelievable.

The day had only just begun, but Steve already couldn’t wait for it to be over. In addition to being sleep-deprived, he was irritated by all the red and pink heart-shaped decorations that seemed to follow him everywhere, even as he trudged upstairs to his second-floor Spanish classroom.

I hate wrestling, I hate Billy Hargrove, and I definitely hate Valentine’s Day.

A few hours later as he headed towards the locker rooms for third-period P.E., Steve overheard two boys whining about their math homework, and his stomach flip-flopped— he had completely forgotten about his Algebra II assignment.

“Crap,” he muttered to himself, cursing his terrible memory and trying not to panic. “It’s seriously due today? Crap, crap, crap…”

He didn’t have math class until fifth period, but even if he understood the material— which he definitely did not— there wouldn’t be enough time to complete forty complicated algebra problems. His best bet, he decided, would be to do as much as he possibly could in the few hours remaining before he was expected to hand in the assignment. Feeling foolish and desperate, he sandwiched a few sheets of notebook paper and a pencil inside his math textbook and hastily stashed it under a bench in the weight room with the intention of getting started on it after his wrestling match.

God, I’m screwed.

Mercifully, the coach didn’t pair him with Billy Hargrove that morning. Steve wasn’t sure why, but wrestling with the other boys in class didn’t make him feel quite as… unsettled. None of them made whispered comments about the ancient Greeks wrestling in the buff, and they certainly didn’t call
him ‘pretty boy’.

Or do that… that THING he does with his tongue. Christ, he’s weird.

……………….

After he’d gotten his two seven-minute wrestling matches over with, Steve tossed his headgear in the box Coach Fergus had placed in the corner for that purpose. He ran his fingers through his thick, sweaty hair, hoping it didn’t look too ridiculous as he walked briskly to the weight room.

Instead of stretching and lifting weights with the other boys like he was supposed to, Steve retrieved his math textbook from its hiding place and sat cross-legged in a corner behind a rack of barbells, hunched over the book and staring glumly at his sheet of notebook paper, on which he’d only managed to write his name, the date, and the assignment. On the first two lines he copied the quadratic formula, so he wouldn’t have to keep flipping back to that page in his textbook.

“Christ, this blows,” he grumbled under his breath as he struggled through the first question. “Who the hell needs to know this complicated garbage? It’s not like most of us are gonna get jobs building rockets for NASA or anything…”

Steve had always despised math— he hated anything that made him feel stupid, especially something that seemed to have been invented for the sole purpose of torturing students like himself. He could see the point of learning practical concepts like arithmetic and fractions, of course; his mother had taught him how to calculate a twenty-percent tip by the time he was ten years old (“Just scoot the dot over to the left and double it, honey… always tip at least twenty percent, unless the service is absolutely dreadful”). But when would he ever need to know the quadratic formula, or how to plot ellipses on a graph?

I’ve just gotta get through the next four months without flunking, and then I’ll never have to do pointless shit like this ever again.

He spent the next several minutes trying to figure out the first problem, growing increasingly frustrated when each answer he produced seemed more wrong than the last.

“Can’t even get past the first question without screwing up,” he fretted, scrubbing angrily at the page with his eraser for the fifth time and wiping away the pinkish-grey flecks of spent rubber.

Steve tried not to picture the humiliating ‘F’ that would inevitably be written in red pen on the top of the paper when the teacher handed it back to him the following week. Mrs. Phelps would probably add a little frowny-face, too, for good measure.

Shit…

He considered turning it in the next day, recalling that his math teacher had a policy of deducting ten percent for each day an assignment was handed in after its due date. He would have to turn it in tomorrow, though, because after that was President’s Day weekend and they had Monday off. Steve might be terrible at math, but he knew enough to calculate a forty-percent deduction; even if he answered every question perfectly, which was not going to happen, he would only get sixty percent — an abysmal D-minus, which wasn’t much better than an F.

“Hey, Harrington,” a familiar voice spoke from above. “Whatcha doing down there in the corner?”

“Math homework,” Steve muttered without looking up. “I gotta concentrate, and I can’t—”

He bit his lip, stopping himself before finishing his sentence, which he realized Billy would probably
misinterpret just to make Steve squirm and turn red.

*I can’t concentrate when you’re around, okay? So buzz off, for once.*

Instead of leaving, though, Billy crouched down beside him and tilted his head as he tried to read what was written on the paper.

“What’s that, algebra two?”

Steve nodded in response, still refusing to look up.

“Dude… you forgot the negative sign,” Billy chuckled, reaching out to tap the sheet of notebook paper where Steve had copied the quadratic formula.

“What?”

“That \( b \) is supposed to be negative, genius.”

“Oh… thanks,” Steve said tersely, scooting a few inches away to keep his arm from brushing against Billy’s as he wrote a little dash in front of the \( b \).

*Great, I can’t even copy down a lousy formula right.*

He tried not to notice how nice Billy smelled, or how enormous his muscular thighs looked when he was squatting in that tight, green wrestling singlet.

“When do you have math?”

Steve sighed heavily. “Uh… fifth period.”

“And you’ve got, lemme see…” Billy moved closer and snatched the paper away. “*Zero* problems solved so far? Out of forty?”

*Oh, shut up.*

Steve yanked the sheet of paper back and scowled. “Don’t you have, like, iron to be pumping, or something?”

Billy glanced disdainfully over his shoulder at all the boys who were talking and guffawing as they messed around in the weight room.

“Nope.” He rolled his left shoulder in its socket and winced slightly. “One of those knuckleheads wrenched my arm the wrong way, so I’m taking it easy for today… I owe him an ass-kicking, that’s for sure.”

“You could still do leg presses or something,” Steve pointed out dryly.

*Not that they aren’t already buff enough… goddamn meathead.*

Billy smirked. “Trying to get rid of me, Harrington? Even after I helped you?”

“I don’t need your help,” Steve snapped, tightly gripping his pencil and finally looking up at him, though he immediately wished he hadn’t.

Billy’s shaggy, brownish-blond hair was a little untidy from wrestling and wearing the headgear, but that maddeningly curly lock was still perfectly intact, dangling down over his eyebrow like a
cavatappi noodle.

“Don’t need any help, huh?” Billy nodded pointedly at the nearly-blank sheet of paper. “You sure about that, Einstein?”

Furious and frustrated, Steve was struggling to think of a clever retort when the bell rang, signaling that the students had fifteen minutes to shower and change back into their regular clothes.

“Shit, I didn’t get anything done!”

Steve checked his wrist, so panicked that he forgot he wasn’t even wearing his watch. He clambered to his feet, stubbornly ignoring the helping hand Billy had extended; a miserable pool of dread filled his stomach.

“C’mon, Billy!” Tommy called from the doorway of the weight room. “We gotta get changed.”

“Don’t wait up for me, man… I’ll catch up.” Billy returned his attention to Steve. “Christ, he’s annoying. How’d you ever put up with that clingy beta prick?”

“I dunno,” Steve muttered distractedly, cursing when his pencil fell out of his textbook. “If you hate him that much, just tell him to get bent and hang out with someone else.”

“Someone else, huh? Who, exactly, should I be hanging out with?”

Crap.

“Uh… I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

Averting his eyes, Steve darted out of the weight room, power-walking to put as much distance between himself and Billy as humanly possible.

…………………….

After showering and changing back into his long-sleeved polo shirt and corduroys, Steve departed for fourth period, praying that—by some miracle—they might be watching a documentary in English Lit so he could try getting some of his math assignment finished.

*It’s hopeless… even if I had a whole hour to myself, I still wouldn’t know how to do that crap.*

It was crowded in the stairwell, and someone bumped against him so roughly that he almost fell down. Steve knew it was Billy before he even spotted him; he’d recognize that strangely intoxicating smell anywhere.

“Hey, Harrington— you’ve got fifth-period math, right?”

“What?” Steve narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Yeah… why?”

“No reason. Anyway, lemme borrow this for a minute.” Without any further explanation, Billy grabbed the math textbook Steve had been carrying and took off in the opposite direction, down the packed stairwell.

“H-hey!” Steve spluttered angrily, nearly losing his balance on the step as he whirled around in confusion, scanning the crowd of students for Billy’s unmistakable hairdo.

“Hey!” he shouted again. “Get back here, shithead, I need that!”
Billy paused at the bottom of the stairs and turned to look up at Steve, holding the textbook in the air and winking before rounding a corner and fading from view.

Steve didn’t know what was going on, or what he should do. For what felt like a long time, he stood there, motionless, in the middle of the staircase as kids rushed past him like salmon swimming around a boulder in a stream. He was a little concerned that his textbook was going to end up in a trash can with its covers ripped off, but what was he supposed to do about it? Chasing after Billy wasn’t really an option—he’d gotten a considerable head-start and Steve didn’t even know what class he had next.

*God, he pisses me off. What the hell is his problem?*

As it turned out, Steve wouldn’t have been able to chisel at his assignment during fourth period, anyway—his teacher patrolled the room, watching everyone like a hawk as they took turns reading passages from ‘A Separate Peace’ aloud.

When the bell rang for lunch, Steve found Phil Curtis sitting at their usual table in the cafeteria. Phil could be annoying sometimes, but he was the only loyal beta Steve had left since the others—namely Tommy—had abandoned him for the shiny new alpha from sunny California. And, of course, his days of sitting with Nancy Wheeler were long gone.

Billy didn’t usually eat lunch in the cafeteria, but that didn’t stop Steve from glancing around periodically, hoping to spot him so he could get his textbook back. His homework was definitely a lost cause, but he still needed the book returned. The last thing he wanted was for his Algebra II teacher to phone his parents to inform them that their irresponsible son had somehow lost his textbook and that they were expected to pay for a replacement.

*They’d be so pissed at me. Hell, I’m pissed at myself. I should’ve shoved all those people out of the way and chased him down when I had the chance.*

“Who gives a shit if you didn’t do the homework?” Phil asked with his mouth full after hearing an abridged version of the story. “It’s just one measly assignment, right?”

Steve rested both elbows on the cafeteria table and shook his head regretfully, fiddling with the carton of chocolate milk on his lunch tray. “It’s not measly, it’s worth forty points. If I had my book I could’ve tried doing a few of the problems, at least… maybe. Jeez, my grade’s gonna take a nosedive.”

“Can’t take a dive if you’re already at the bottom, pal.”

“Is that supposed to cheer me up?”

“Sorry.” Phil, who had gotten Algebra II over with in first period, shrugged sympathetically. “Wish I’d known, man… you could’ve copied mine or something, but I handed it in already.”

“It’s okay,” Steve muttered, stabbing his straw into the little carton of milk and taking a sip. “Thanks, anyway.”

Phil wasn’t much better at math than Steve, but at least he didn’t completely forget about an assignment that was worth forty points.

“Oh, shit,” the skinny beta said suddenly, craning his neck to look past Steve at the cafeteria entrance. “He’s comin’ over this way.”
“Who is?”

He turned around just as Billy approached their table, tipping his head back to swig from a can of root beer.


Utterly unconcerned, Billy ignored him for the five seconds it took to drain his can of soda, which he crumpled in his fist before tossing it on the table in front of Phil with a loud clatter.

“Calm down, dude,” he said smoothly, burping as he pulled a familiar-looking textbook from his backpack and dropped it on the table, narrowly missing Phil’s lunch tray. “There’s your precious book, safe and sound.”

He’d better not expect me to say ‘thank you’ or anything…

But Billy didn’t ask for thanks, or say anything else— he just shoved his hands in his pockets and walked away. Almost all the girls (and some of the boys) he strutted past swiveled their heads to watch him leave the cafeteria, like flowers following the sun’s course across the sky.

“You didn’t tell me he jacked your book,” Phil said, gesturing at the algebra textbook in the middle of the table.

“Yep.”

Steve eyed the book with mild suspicion, like it might be wired with explosives. On the outside, it didn’t look any different— it still had the simple paper-bag cover with his name and ‘Algebra 2’ written on it in blue marker— but he hadn’t checked inside yet.

“Maybe he drew a bunch of dicks in it, or something,” Steve mused.

“Oh, yeah.” Phil nodded with the sage wisdom of one who knew a thing or two about getting bullied. “This guy in middle school did that in my history book once— added huge cocks and mustaches and stuff to the pictures of Ben Franklin and whoever. As long as Billy didn’t use a pen, you can just erase ‘em before the teacher sees.”

Steve picked up the heavy book and sniffed it warily.

You never know…

“Did he fart in it?” Phil asked, tilting his head curiously as he took another bite of his sandwich.

“I don’t think so,” Steve admitted with relief when he couldn’t detect anything but the usual old-book smell.

Billy didn’t seem like the type to fart on things, the way some bullies might, but then again… what type was he?

The type who likes to drive me absolutely nuts.

Steve flipped the book open to the first page and paused when he saw a few sheets of paper tucked inside the front cover. The first one had his name, the assignment, and the quadratic formula written on the top in his own familiar scrawl, but the rest was in a slightly neater hand that he didn’t recognize.

Phil leaned over to get a better look. “Whoa, is that what I think it is?”
Steve barely heard him. He flipped though the pages, feeling the furrows on his forehead deepen as his confusion multiplied. Each sheet of lined notebook paper was crammed with numbers, front and back: forty math problems in total, all seemingly complete.

*He showed the work, too... what the hell is going on?*

“Holy cow!” Phil exclaimed, reaching over to inspect the papers more closely. “I thought you said he hates your guts.”

Steve could only nod slowly.

“But didn’t Billy sock you a few months ago?”

Steve nodded again, hardly registering a word Phil was saying.

*What. The. Hell.*

“So, like, why would he do your—”

“I dunno, man!” Steve snapped impatiently, sick of being pestered. “I’ve got no freaking clue, okay? I never, ever, at any moment of any day, know why that crazy asshole does anything. Got it?”

“Okay, okay, jeez,” Phil muttered defensively, passing the pages back. “Take a chill pill, man... no need to wig out.”

As Steve went back to staring at the completed math assignment, Phil crammed the rest of his bologna sandwich into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully for a moment before his eyes bulged and he started patting the table like he’d suddenly had an epiphany.

“Hey, wha’ fish all bokush?”

“What?” Steve had no idea what he was saying, and the sight of mushy bread and cold cuts in Phil’s open mouth was revolting. “Finish your food, first, will you? Jeez, that’s nasty.”

*Why do I even let this caveman sit with me? I mean, he’s way better than Tommy, but that’s not saying much.*

Phil swallowed obediently, and Steve could practically see the lump traveling down his long, skinny neck like a second Adam’s apple.

“I said,” he began again, clearing his throat, “What if it’s all bogus?”

“Bogus?” Steve repeated blankly, looking down at the papers in his hands.

“Yeah,” Phil insisted eagerly. “Like, maybe every single problem has a wrong answer and Billy’s just playing a prank on you. Maybe he’s hoping you’re dumb enough to think ‘Oh, my arch-nemesis just randomly did my homework for me for no good reason whatsoever? Neat! That sounds totally normal and not at all suspicious.’ There’s gotta be a catch, dude.”

*It does sound too good to be true...*

“I’m no expert, obviously,” Steve mused quietly, flipping through the pages and scanning the lines of algebra equations. “But it seems right, and I don’t think he’d go to that much trouble to play a prank. Not when he could’ve just tossed my book in a toilet, or something.”

*He’s not the prank-playing type. If he’s got a problem with someone, he takes the most direct*
“Assuming it’s not bogus, should I turn it in? Would you? I mean… won’t the teacher think something’s up?”

Phil flapped his hand dismissively. “Just turn it in, old Mrs. Phelps’ll never know the difference. You really think she memorizes what our handwriting looks like? Fat chance.”

Steve had to admit that Phil was probably right. Billy’s handwriting might be tidier than his own, but the teacher wouldn’t notice. It wasn’t even penmanship—just lots of numbers, root symbols, and the letters $a$, $b$, $c$, and $x$.

*I might be overthinking this…*

“Hey, I just thought of something else,” Phil said. “Maybe he’s gonna make you pay him.”

Steve frowned as he took a bite of his apple. “Seriously?”

**Pay him? For something I never asked him to do?**

“Maybe once you get the assignment back with a good grade on it, he’ll say ‘Pay up’ and make you fork over forty bucks—a dollar per question.”

“What, like exertion?” Steve mumbled through a mouthful of fruit.

Phil snorted. “It’s *extortion*, brainiac.”

“That’s what I said,” Steve lied hastily. “Anyway, how could he have copied his homework for me if he had math way back in first period?”

Phil shook his head. “No, dude, no… Billy’s got math during first period, but not Algebra Two. He takes pre-calculus with the smart kids, remember?”

This was brand-new information for Steve.

**Calculus? Holy shit.**

“So… he didn’t copy it? He just… did it? In an hour?”

“I’m tellin’ you, man, he’s gonna ask you to pay up. He’s seen your ride, he knows he can squeeze some cash outta you.”

Steve didn’t know what to think. He never knew what to think, it seemed, when Billy was in the picture. The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch, and he said goodbye to Phil and walked to his Algebra II class, feeling simultaneously anxious and relieved, like an enormous weight had been lifted from his shoulders and then immediately replaced with one that was even heavier.

[…] Fifth period math went smoothly; Steve stapled the pages together and turned in his assignment along with all the other students, then tried not to fall asleep while Mrs. Phelps droned on about radical equations and functions. Sixth period history was just as dull, and Steve sighed with relief when the dismissal bell finally rang at three-fifteen. On his way out of the classroom, a pretty girl named Michelle shyly handed Steve a heart-shaped lollipop with a little red bow tied around the stick.

“Thanks,” he told her with an attempt at a smile that was kind but not remotely flirtatious.
Don’t wanna get her hopes up, or anything.

Steve didn’t usually have much of a sweet tooth, but his mouth was dry and he hadn’t eaten much during lunch, so he tugged the silly little bow and plastic wrapper off the lollipop and popped it in his mouth. It was surprisingly good: cherry-flavored and intensely sweet.

Mmm… not bad.

The main hallway was crowded again, and there was an excitement in the air that made it feel like a Friday, even though it wasn’t.

Still one more day to survive before the weekend… Christ, this has been the longest week of my life.

Billy was already at his locker when Steve arrived, flipping through the contents of a binder.

Don’t talk to him. Just don’t say anything.

“Hey,” Steve said quietly, then bit his lip to silence himself.

Damn it!

Without turning to face him, Billy replied with nothing more than a curt nod and a grunt of acknowledgment.

Steve knew he should just gather his things and leave without saying another word, but his curiosity got the better of him.

“I heard you take calculus,” he began cautiously.

Billy slammed his locker closed and slung his backpack over one shoulder. “Pre-calc, actually. Who cares?”

So defensive, jeez…

“I figured you just copied your own homework… but Phil said you’re not even taking Algebra Two.”

“Fuck, no,” Billy scoffed, as though the suggestion offended him. “I took it back in, like, tenth grade at my old school in Cali.”

Show-off.

Steve sucked thoughtfully on his lollipop for a moment. “How’d you do it so fast, though?”

“It’s not that hard, Harrington. You just use the formula and solve for $x$. Boring as shit, but easy as pie.”

For you, maybe.

“Yeah, but…” Steve floundered for the right words. “But why?”

Billy shrugged. “Felt like it.”

“You… felt like it?” Steve repeated skeptically.

“That’s what I said, yeah.” Billy stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket, searching for
something. “It was no big deal, y’know? It’s not like I wrote a twenty-page research paper or took your SAT for you.”

It might have only been Steve’s imagination, but he thought Billy looked a little self-conscious—his cheeks were, perhaps, half a shade pinker than usual.

“Nobody does anything nice for no reason,” he declared, remembering Phil’s theories about pranks and extortion.

Billy let out a short chuckle as he withdrew a pack of Big Red from his pocket and folded a stick of gum into his mouth. “Jesus, dude… that’s a pretty fuckin’ bleak outlook for a good lil’ preacher’s boy.”

*Oh, shut up.*

“I am not a good little preacher’s boy, and it’s—”

“Will you cool your jets, already?” Billy interjected, crossing his arms across his chest. “It was just a few dumb math questions, and if you wanna know the truth, I’m starting to wish I hadn’t done ‘em at all and let you get a big, fat ‘F’ on your homework.”

“Well, maybe I wish you had, too,” Steve blurted angrily.

“Don’t worry, next time I’ll let your ungrateful ass drown.” Billy rolled his eyes. “God, you’re such an uptight brat.”

“Am not!” Steve protested sullenly, even though he knew there was probably a grain of truth in the insult—the ‘ungrateful’ part, at least. “I just…”

“He did me a solid, after all.”

“You just what?”

*Maybe he still feels shitty about punching me that one time.*

“I just, uh…” Steve reached up to run his fingers through his hair, selecting his words carefully. “I don’t wanna feel like I owe you something now.”

Billy shrugged. “So don’t.”

“What’s he staring at?

Steve kept nervously chewing on the lollipop stick; the candy was gone and the soggy paper on the tip was starting to disintegrate.

*Just thank him, already… stop being a baby and spit it out.*
“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Billy said casually, pursing his lips and blowing a little red bubble with his gum.
“Anyway, I’ve gotta jet.”

Before departing, he put on his aviator sunglasses and suddenly leaned forward, making Steve freeze in surprised panic.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” Billy murmured, pausing just long enough to fill Steve’s bewildered mind with impossible thoughts.

_W-why is this crazy bastard so close? What the hell is he…?_

Steve could see himself reflected in Billy’s dark glasses and smell the spicy cinnamon on his breath. The strangely intimate moment ended as soon as it began, though, because Billy smirked and reached up to rap his knuckles against Steve’s forehead like it was a door— one, two, three times.

“Dummy.”

Rubbing his forehead, Steve gaped indignantly as Billy turned to stroll down the crowded hall; his lollipop stick fell from his half-open mouth.

_Always strutting away after getting the last word… every goddamn time!_

“Hey!” Steve shouted after him. “You think you’re hot shit just ‘cause you take calculus? Well, you’re not! Y-you’re the biggest dummy of all, asshole!”

One of Billy’s silver rings caught the fluorescent hallway lights when he stuck his middle finger high up in the air; Steve could still see it glinting even after everything else— the tight jeans, black jacket, earring, and head of golden-brown curls— had disappeared in the throng.

…………………..

Less than five minutes later, Steve sank gratefully into his BMW and turned on the heater, rubbing his hands together while he waited for the ice-cold car interior to warm up. He switched the radio on and almost every station he tried was playing commercials.

“…so come on down to Melvold’s General Store and treat your sweetheart to a box of Russell Stover’s finest choc—”

“No…” he muttered under his breath, twisting the tuner knob.

“…take her breath away with a bouquet of one dozen beautiful long-stem roses! Available in your choice of red or pink for the incredible low price of just—”

“Nope.”

“Every kiss begins with Kay—”

“Ugh, shut up.”

“In my life there’s been heartache and pain, I don’t know if I can face it again…”

Steve’s fingers paused on the dial when the familiar tune by Foreigner filled his car— it wasn’t his favorite song, but it was definitely better than dumb commercials urging him to buy chocolate, flowers, and jewelry for his non-existent ‘sweetheart’.
“Can’t stop now, I’ve traveled too far to change this lonely life…”

The sentimental power ballad had been released just two weeks after his abrupt breakup with Nancy, so he’d always associated it more with ‘heartache and pain’ than love.

“I wanna know what love is, I want you to show me, I wanna feel what love is, I know you can show me…”

Steve couldn’t resist humming along— what harm could it do when he was all alone in the car with nobody to tease him?— but when he caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror, the tune got stuck in his throat and his dark eyes grew round with dismay.

“Oh, shit…”

His lips were red. Unnaturally red. It only took half a second of horrified confusion before he remembered the cherry lollipop he’d been sucking on after school. Under normal circumstances, he probably wouldn’t even care very much— he would’ve just shrugged it off and laughed at how goofy he looked, like a kid admiring his colorful tongue and lips in the mirror after polishing off a Popsicle— but the realization that he’d just been talking to Billy with a cherry-stained mouth made him feel hot despite the lingering chill in the car.

So that’s what he was staring at…

He let his face slowly fall forward until it bumped against the leather-covered steering wheel.

“I’m gonna take a little time, a little time to look around me, I’ve got nowhere left to hide, it looks like love has finally found me—”

Without bothering to raise his head from the steering wheel, Steve reached out and smacked the power button on the radio, unceremoniously cutting off Lou Gramm’s passionate vocals. Without music, the only sounds in the car were the purring engine, gently roaring heater, and his own weary groan.

“Valentine’s Day can bite me.”

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Neil Diamond— Cherry, Cherry
“In the midst of hate, I found there was, within me, an invincible love. 
In the midst of tears, I found there was within me, an invincible smile. 
In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm… 
In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. 
And that makes me happy, for it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against 
me, within me, there’s something stronger— something better, pushing right back.”

- ‘The Stranger’ by Albert Camus

Friday, March 8th, 1985: Part I

7:42 a.m.

Billy had genuinely enjoyed the snow during the first half of winter, when it was still something of a 
novelty; he had to admit that it was really pretty when it was fresh and covered Hawkins in a cold, 
glittering blanket of white. But then it refused to stop falling... it snowed and snowed and snowed 
some more, and the temperature rarely rose above twenty degrees. Week after week, the noisy 
snowplows shoved the snow onto the sides of the roads and parking lots in dirty, grey heaps that 
derpressed Billy and made him long for the sunny, sixty-degree winters he had taken for granted in 
Southern California.

“Fuck snow,” he muttered, shuddering in the icy air that gusted in his face when he opened the door 
of his Camaro.

He’d been an involuntary resident of Hawkins, Indiana for over four months but still wasn’t used to 
the extreme cold. He had finally succumbed to common sense and purchased a big black parka and a 
pair of matching knit gloves, resenting all the bulky, unsexy layers and missing L.A., where he never 
needed anything warmer than a sweatshirt in the winter.

He cursed again when he stepped right onto a patch of ice and almost fell over.

“Be careful,” Max called from the other side of the car as she shouldered her backpack. “You should 
get some boots like mine… they’re waterproof, y’know.”

Billy slammed his car door and gave his step-sister a withering look. He had already sprayed a few 
coats of Scotchgard onto his favorite black biker boots, but that wasn’t always enough to keep his 
socks dry when the snow was knee-deep.

“I wouldn’t be caught dead wearing those,” he informed her, wrinkling his nose disdainfully at her 
orange-and-pink rubber footwear. “Rain boots are for little kids and fishermen.”

Max rolled her eyes, then smiled at something over Billy’s shoulder.

“Hey, look who’s here.”
Billy turned to watch the familiar dark-red BMW pulling into the parking lot, gravel crunching beneath its tires. Out of nowhere, a crazy idea popped into his head.

“Hang on a sec,” he called out to Max, who was already walking across the parking lot towards Hawkins Middle School.

She stopped and turned around. “What?”

Someone had plowed the parking lot, and there was a low wall of snow near the Camaro. It looked dirty and grey near the bottom, but the top was still pristinely white. Billy quickly grabbed a large handful and began packing it between his palms with the clumsy inexpertise of someone unused to snow.

Max stepped back warily as she watched him. “You’re not gonna throw that at me, are you?”

“Yup,” Billy nodded without looking up. “And you’re gonna throw some at me, too, so hurry up.”

“What, seriously?”

*Steve wants to see me playing nice with her, right? Well, now’s his chance.*

Billy was already on his fourth snowball; he was lining them up on the hood of his Camaro. “Is it so terrible to wanna have some good, old-fashioned fun with my little sister?”

Max crossed her arms across the front of her sky-blue puffy down jacket and smirked. “I’ll do it for a bag of quarters.”

“Fine!” Billy hissed impatiently, preoccupied with the childish task he’d undertaken. “Now, get on with it, will ya?”

He could see Steve out of the corner of his eye, getting out of his BMW and yawning as he fussed with his hair.

*God, it should be illegal to be that good-looking.*

“Ow!” Max yelped a few moments later when a snowball caught the side of her head and burst, dusting her fiery orange hair with ice. “Dammit, Billy, that hurt!”

*Whoops.*

“Sorry!” Billy apologized hastily and glanced over at the other side of the parking lot— sure enough, their little impromptu snowball fight had caught Steve’s attention.

Max followed his gaze suspiciously, then smirked with sudden understanding.

“I’m raising the price of my services,” she informed him as she packed another snowball. “You get an employee discount at the record store, right?”

“Ten percent… why?” Billy asked warily, even though he suspected he already knew the answer.

“Well, a new ‘Tears For Fears’ tape just came out, and I want it.”

*Her taste in music is just as cheesy as Harrington’s.*

Billy snorted and tossed one of his snowballs high in the air, catching it easily on its way down. “Kiss my ass, you little extortionist.”
“Fine,” Max said primly as she turned to walk away. “Forget it, then.”

*Shit.*

“H-hey, hang on a sec!”

*This is so stupid.*

Billy glanced over at Steve again—he had his hand cupped around a freshly-lit cigarette, and after their eyes met for a moment from across the parking lot, he quickly averted his gaze and blew a plume of white smoke into the cold air.

*The things I do for that guy... what the hell is it about him?*

“Change your mind?” Max asked with an obnoxious little grin on her freckled face.

“Yeah, yeah,” Billy sighed as he packed some more snow between his palms. “Let’s get this over with.”

He chucked the snowball at his step-sister, aiming more carefully this time so he wouldn’t hit her in the head.

*She’d totally deserve it, though.*

“Whoo-hoo!” Max exclaimed, slightly louder than the situation warranted and giggling more than she usually would as she flung a fistful of snow back at him. “This sure is fun, Billy!”

“Okay, no need to lay it on so thick.” He ducked half a second too late and got ice all over his right shoulder; even his hair was starting to get wet. “And watch it, will ya? Pneumonia and frostbite weren’t part of the plan.”

Billy knew he must’ve taken too many not-so-surreptitious glances across the parking lot when Max smiled coyly and asked, “Was chucking one at Steve Harrington part of the plan?”

His instinct was to play dumb and pretend he hadn’t heard her. “At who?”

“You know who.”

*Crap, I knew I was being too obvious...*

“If you want.” Billy shrugged, tossing another snowball at his step-sister. “I honestly don’t give a rat’s ass.”

But he *did* give a rat’s ass, so to speak, and Max knew it. She might be a bratty pill, but she wasn’t a blind idiot who was born yesterday; she knew they were putting on some kind of performance. Billy watched with quiet amusement as she wound her arm up like a baseball pitcher and hurled an especially large snowball at Steve, twenty-five feet across the parking lot.

“Hey!” Steve exclaimed, hopping back when the snowball collided with the slush-covered asphalt in front of his shoes and sprayed his dark jeans with snow.

Billy smirked—of *course* the clumsy little twerp had missed. He grabbed one the snowballs from his private reserve on the hood of his Camaro and flung it at Steve, laughing triumphantly when it hit him squarely on the chest.

*Gotcha, pretty boy.*
“All right, that’s it!” Steve yelled, though he didn’t sound very angry. He flicked his cigarette away and stormed purposefully to a nearby embankment of snow, where he began scooping up a snowball of his own.

Billy took advantage of his temporary distraction and sent another perfectly-aimed snowball flying through the air, where it burst against the back of his navy-blue peacoat.

“Hey!” Steve shouted again, whirling around and glaring indignantly. “Who was that?”

Billy and Max pointed at each other at the same time, and Steve responded by throwing a snowball at each of them. Billy hadn’t even noticed him pack the second one.

“What the hell would you California amateurs know about snow, anyway?” Steve taunted, hurrying around his car to take cover just as Billy lobbed another snowball in his direction.

“It snows in California, genius!” Billy retorted, recalling vacations to Mammoth and Big Bear he’d taken with his family millions of years ago.

My real family... not this fake one Dad patched together.

“Yeah!” Max chimed in. “It totally snows in Cali... just, like, not in L.A.”

She pulled her arm back like she was about to launch a snowball across the parking lot at Steve, but then she giggled and threw it at Billy, instead.

“Hey!”

Billy dropped the handful of snow he’d been packing so he could brush the ice off his shoulders and fuss with the damp tips of his hair. He opened his mouth to yell at Max, but changed his mind when he remembered that Steve was watching and the only reason they were having this ridiculous snowball fight in the first place was so Billy could pretend that he was the world’s greatest big brother.

His idea seemed like it might actually be working, too— even with a parking lot and BMW between them, he could tell that Steve was rosy-cheeked and smiling cheerfully. Billy suddenly didn’t mind at all that his painstakingly arranged hairstyle was a little wet or that his fingers, even in their knit gloves, were so cold he could barely feel them.

“Hey, Max!” A voice called from behind them. “Whatcha doing?”

Billy turned around— it was Lucas Sinclair, standing a few yards away in an orange knit hat.

“Snowball fight,” Max replied, grinning mischievously. “Wanna join us?”

Lucas looked bemused, though his expression grew wary when his dark eyes drifted over to Billy.

Jesus, is he still afraid of me, or something? I’m not gonna do anything to him.

Billy wished Lucas hadn’t chosen that moment to turn up; the boy was a reminder of the not-so-cool things Billy had done and said in the past— things he wished everyone could just forget, once and for all. He cringed with shame when he thought of Steve walking into the Byers’ house that night and witnessing Billy grabbing the skinny thirteen-year-old by the jacket and snarling threats at him while little Maxine pleaded with him to stop.

I must’ve looked like such a pathetic asshole, picking on a puny geek like Sinclair.
Fortunately for everyone, the bell rang a moment later, signalling that the students of both the high school and middle school had ten minutes to get to their first classes.

“Well, this was bunches of fun, brother dearest, but we’ve gotta run.” Max winked at Billy and jogged over to Lucas, linking her arm through his. “Don’t forget about our deal, okay?”

“What deal?” Lucas asked curiously.

“I’ll tell you later.”

“No, the fuck you won’t!” Billy bellowed after them, scowling when both kids snickered and started to run towards Hawkins Middle School, still holding hands.

Annoying little brats.

He’d almost forgotten his thoughtless promise to get a copy of the ‘Tears For Fears’ album for Max and wondered, for the millionth time, what in the world was wrong with him and when, exactly, he had started turning into a person he no longer recognized. Was it when he started going to Steve’s church? Was it when he started transposing songs that Steve might like on the beat-up piano in the back of the record store?

I bet he’d go for that one song, ‘Head Over Heels’… maybe I’ll play it next Sunday.

As if practicing music with his crush specifically in mind wasn’t bad enough, Billy was still more than a little disgusted with himself for doing Steve’s math homework the previous month. Not wanting to seem like a desperate tool, he hadn’t made a single offer to help since then, and he forced himself to get a little more aggressive when they were paired together during wrestling, too. It was never easy, though, to fight his instincts.

When did my instincts change so much, anyway? I used to want to punch him in the face... now I just wanna, like, give him presents and kiss him and shit. Goddamn it.

Turning away from the retreating figures of the young lovebirds, Billy looked over at the other side of the parking lot, but Steve wasn’t standing by his car anymore. He had disappeared— presumably walking off to his first class of the day at Hawkins High—leaving nothing behind in the slushy grey snow but footprints and a soggy cigarette butt.

1:30 p.m.

The day passed uneventfully until history class, when there was a big chapter test. Billy got there a little earlier than usual and flopped down into his seat in the far corner of the room. He knew the material for the exam pretty well, but he pulled out his textbook and flipped to chapter sixteen, anyway, staring at the pages without actually focusing. He glanced up from the book when Steve strolled into the classroom; it sometimes seemed like he could sense the other alpha’s presence in a room before even seeing him. Their eyes met for a moment before Steve looked away, waving back at a friendly girl who greeted him from the front row.

“Did you study?” She asked him with a bright smile.

Ha! Five bucks says he didn’t.

“Yep,” Steve replied confidently as he hung his coat on the rack by the door. “Studied for, like, three whole hours last night.”
Guess I owe myself five bucks.

“Well, best of luck, Steve!”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, heading towards his seat. “You, too.”

This was Billy’s second-favorite class after P.E., but it wasn’t because he liked American history—the reason was sitting down right in front of him. The seats weren’t assigned alphabetically, so it was nothing but good fortune that had inspired the teacher to tell Billy to sit in the farthest corner of the classroom, directly behind Steve.

Can’t complain about the view.

As if he had somehow read Billy’s mind, Steve took a few seconds to stretch before taking his seat, and his dark green sweater rode up just enough to reveal a quick glimpse of his pale waist.

“Hey,” Billy greeted, shifting uncomfortably in his chair and trying not to think about running his hand under that soft-looking sweater. “So you actually studied, huh?”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Steve retorted with a proud tilt of his chin as he hung his backpack on the back of his chair. “Stranger things have happened.”

Billy smirked, even though Steve had already sat down and couldn’t see him. He closed his own book and tucked it into his backpack, then began hunting for a pencil; he found two, but then had a better idea.

“Hey, Harrington,” he said, reaching out to poke Steve’s shoulder. “You got a pencil I can borrow?”

“No,” Steve answered flatly without turning around.

“No?”

“You can have one of mine,” the girl sitting diagonally from Billy offered with a shy smile. “Here.”

“Oh… thanks,” he muttered, feeling somewhat foolish as he took the pencil she was holding out to him.

What am I supposed to say? ‘Actually, I already have one, I was just looking for an excuse to talk to the hot guy sitting in front of me’?

A moment later, he heard Steve groan and mumble something that sounded like “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“What’s the matter?” Pencil Girl asked with concern.

Billy couldn’t see his expression, but Steve seemed to be staring directly ahead at the chalkboard, where the teacher had written ‘Exam today—Chapter 16’.

Steve’s shoulders stiffened beneath his green sweater as he hunched over his history textbook and began frantically flipping through the pages.

“Crap,” he muttered under his breath. “This is totally… freaking… unbelievable.”

“What’s the matter?” Pencil Girl repeated. “You forget about something?”

Steve didn’t respond, so she shrugged and went back to looking at her own book. Billy sat up
straighter and tried to peer over Steve’s shoulder; as far as he could tell, Steve was attempting to
speed-read the first few pages of chapter sixteen.

“Hey, man, what’s wrong?” Billy asked, poking him a second time.

No response.

Never one to be ignored, Billy reached out to prod him again. “Hey, what’s the problem?”

“Shut up.”

“I thought you said you studied, smart guy.”

Steve twisted around in his seat and scowled at him; there was panic in his big, brown eyes. “I did! I
totally did, but… not chapter sixteen.”

Billy blinked, confused. “What the hell did you study, then?”

Steve bit his lip. “I could’ve sworn I thought he said chapter fifteen. And didn’t we do chapter
fourteen a few weeks ago?”

Billy tried not to laugh. “You’re incredible, Harrington. We skipped over chapter fifteen, remember?
Are you seriously telling me you managed to screw up again?”

“I’m seriously telling you to shut up,” Steve snapped. “And what do you mean, ‘again’?”

Billy reminded him about the math homework that had slipped his mind the previous month, on
Valentine’s Day.

“That was, like, a million years ago,” Steve muttered defensively, turning back to stare glumly at his

“Dude, there’s no time,” Billy chuckled, shaking his head incredulously. “You can’t memorize a
whole chap—”

BRRRRINNGGG!

Right on cue, the bell rang and the history teacher came bustling in, holding two stacks of paper.

“Alright, guys and gals, put away your books and pipe down.”

Mr. Gelson was a rotund old man who wore the same baggy, tan suit every day of the year. His
ponderous size combined with his advanced age made it difficult for him to walk, so he often enlisted
the help of his students.

“Who wants to help me pass these things out?” The padded chair behind the teacher’s desk groaned
as he sank down onto it. “I’ll need two volunteers: one for Scantrons and one for the tests.”

Two girls from the front row raised their hands and stepped forward.

“I don’t want to see any books out,” Mr. Gelson called sternly from the front of the classroom.
“You’d better have ‘em put away by the time these fine young ladies give you your tests… that
means you, too, Steven. Now. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Sorry,” Steve mumbled, ducking his head as he shoved his heavy textbook into his backpack and
zipped it closed.
Billy didn’t like hearing the resigned misery in Steve’s voice. He wished there was something he could do to help him, but he wasn’t sure what he could possibly hope to accomplish without getting both Steve and himself in huge trouble.

*That dumbass should’ve paid more attention… how does anyone study the wrong damn chapter, anyway?*

One girl handed Billy a blank Scantron and the other gave him a test; he thanked her without looking up and immediately began scanning the first page of the test.

The exam consisted of several stapled sheets of paper printed with fifty multiple-choice questions. They didn’t look particularly difficult; Billy had read the chapter earlier that week, then reviewed it once more while he did push-ups on his bedroom floor that morning. He already knew, from previous tests, that Mr. Gelson had a sadistic streak and liked to ask really specific questions about places, names, and dates; it wasn’t enough to have a general understanding of FDR’s New Deal — you also had to know about Senator Wagner and remember the difference between the Securities Act of 1933 and the National Labor Relations Act of 1935.

*Oh, well… at least it’s multiple choice, so even if Harrington takes a bunch of wild guesses, he’s still got a one-in-four chance of getting ’em right.*

He glanced up at Steve, who was slumped in his seat and tugging fretfully at his thick, brown hair. Billy wasn’t sure how, but he could almost feel the tension and regret radiating from the boy in front of him.

*Shit, I wish I could help him, somehow…*

Billy finished his own test within half an hour, then glanced over it again to make sure there were no mistakes. He wished he could see how many bubbles Steve had managed to pencil in on his Scantron, but he didn’t want the teacher to see him craning his neck suspiciously and accuse him of cheating.

*As if I’d peek at Harrington’s paper if I wanted to cheat… what a joke.*

Mr. Gelson had a radio on his desk which he often tuned to a classical music station on exam days. Five minutes into Ravel’s ‘Boléro’ he was slouched down in his chair with his hands folded atop his enormous, round belly; his wrinkled eyelids were closed and he was snoring softly.

Seizing his opportunity, Billy reached out to tap Steve’s shoulder.

“Psst,” he whispered, keeping an eye on the front of the classroom in case Mr. Gelson suddenly awoke. “How’re you doing, man?”

Steve twisted his head around and met Billy’s eyes; he looked depressed and irritated.

“Why do you care?”

After double-checking that the teacher was still asleep, Billy rose up in his seat enough to see Steve’s desk. Just as he suspected, there were only about five bubbles penciled in on the Scantron, and it was covered with pink flecks of eraser.

“Quit bugging me,” Steve muttered, turning back to flip through his test booklet.

Billy glanced up at the clock on the wall — there were only twenty minutes left — then looked down at all the neatly filled-in bubbles on his own Scantron. Noticing that he hadn’t written his name on it
yet, he was overcome by a crazy impulse.

_Fuck it... what am I supposed to do, just sit on my ass while he crashes and burns?_

Billy’s heart pounded a little faster as he erased two of his choices and replaced them with wrong answers; he knew the teacher would get suspicious if Steve scored one-hundred percent. He confirmed that Mr. Gelson’s eyes were still closed before leaning over his desk and stretching his arm out to snatch Steve’s Scantron off his desk.

“Yoink,” Billy whispered, smiling at the expression of confused outrage on his pretty, mole-flecked face.

“Are you crazy?” Steve hissed angrily. “What the h—”

“Here, trade ya.” Keeping a cautious eye on their sleeping teacher, Billy handed Steve his own completed Scantron. “Just write your name on it.”

Steve looked down at the paper, then back over at Billy. “W-what’s this? You can’t—”

“Quiet!” Mr. Gelson barked suddenly from the front of the room. “I shouldn’t be hearing a peep out of anyone. You’ve got, uh, let’s see… fifteen minutes to finish up, folks.”

The teacher turned down the volume on the radio and folded his hands over his belly again, though this time he didn’t close his eyes— he sat there staring out at his students, which meant that Steve couldn’t turn around in his seat to argue with Billy about their unexpected test-swap.

Relieved that he hadn’t been caught, Billy carefully erased ‘Steve Harrington’ from the Scantron and replaced it with his own name. Out of the handful of bubbles Steve had filled out on his test, only one happened to be correct.

_Lucky guess, probably. Christ, he’s hopeless._

Billy quickly erased all the wrong answers and flipped though the pages of his test booklet; since everyone had been given the same test and he had already done it once, he only needed a few minutes to go through the questions and fill in all the correct answers on the Scantron.

“All right, kids, time’s up,” Mr. Gelson announced, tapping his watch. “Heather, would you collect the tests, please? Thank you, dear.”

After Billy handed Heather his Scantron and test, he waited expectantly for Steve to twist around in his seat again to scold him for doing something so risky.

_Go ahead, pretty boy— call me a crazy asshole._

But Steve didn’t turn around; he just sat perfectly still with his arms crossed, staring straight ahead for the next few moments until the bell rang, when he grabbed his backpack and practically sprinted from the classroom.

“You’re welcome,” Billy muttered under his breath as he watched him leave.

…………………

3:05 p.m.

Billy didn’t see Steve for the rest of the school day, but when he was walking across the parking lot to his Camaro, he heard footsteps behind him and knew, somehow, that it wasn’t Maxine.
“Hey, wait a sec, man.”

Billy paused and turned around. “What’s up?”

*Not avoiding me anymore, huh?*

“Listen, um…” Steve tucked both of his hands in his coat pockets, then pulled one out again to rub the back of his neck. “I’m not saying I don’t, like, appreciate you bailing me out the way you did today in history, a-and like you did that time in math, too, but…”

Billy knew what Steve was trying to say, but it was amusing to watch him get fidgety and flustered, so he kept quiet and let him flounder for the right words.

“We can’t keep… you know.” Steve ran his fingers through his hair and cleared his throat. “We’d both get in seriously deep shit if anyone found out.”

Billy shrugged. “Suit yourself, dude. I was just trying to help.”

“Thanks, but I don’t—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Billy interrupted, recalling what Steve had said the previous month. “You don’t wanna ‘owe’ me anything, right? Well, whatever. If you flunk and end up repeating twelfth grade, don’t come crying to me about it.”

Steve bristled. “As if I’d ever come crying to you about anything.”

“I could help you study sometime, if you want.”

Billy made the offer as casually as possible, but he couldn't help licking his lips; the thought of having some private one-on-one tutoring time with the boy of his dreams almost made him salivate.

“No, no, that’s okay,” Steve said with a nervous chuckle and a few backwards steps. “I’ll just, uh, make sure I don’t study the wrong chapter next time.”

“Well, best of luck to you.”

“I’m not a complete idiot, you know.” Steve arched one of his eyebrows haughtily as he slid his Ray-Ban sunglasses up the perfectly straight angle of his nose. “I’ve managed to survive just fine without your help so far.”

“Oh, yeah?” Billy snorted. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“Shut up.”

Max appeared suddenly, all bundled up and pink-cheeked in the cold. “Are you two fighting again?”

“No,” Billy and Steve said in unison, which made her eye them both with bemused skepticism.

“I gotta go,” Steve mumbled, taking off towards his BMW on the other side of the parking lot.

“Bye!” Max called after him, waving cheerfully. “Have a good weekend!”

“Yeah, you too,” Steve replied without turning back to look at them.

Billy could feel Max’s curious blue eyes boring into the side of his head as they both climbed into the car and fastened their seatbelts.
“Quit it,” he muttered, cranking up the heater as high as it would go.

"Quit what? I didn’t say anything."

“Well, you’re saying plenty, now. And didn’t your mom ever teach you it’s rude to stare?”

Max rolled her eyes. “What’s going on between you two?”

Billy felt his lips tighten. “Nothing."

Like I’d tell a nosy little pipsqueak like you, anyway.

“Are you going to work today?”

“Mm-hm.”

“You’re not gonna forget about my tape, right?”

Billy sighed heavily. He had completely forgotten about his promise from that morning, as it happened, but he was a man of his word.

“Yeah, yeah… you’ll get your corny tape, don’t worry.”

I must've lost my mind for a second there, telling her I'd do that just for throwing a couple of lousy snowballs. Harrington probably didn't even give a shit.

..................

5:30 p.m.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise!” June, the owner of the Hawkins record store, teased when Billy slid the latest ‘Tears For Fears’ album across the front counter during his fifteen-minute break.

“It’s not for me,” he grumbled, pulling some cash from his wallet. “What do I owe you?”

With his ten-percent employee discount, the total came to $6.75. Billy considered how ridiculous it was that he was buying things for other people on this day, of all days.

It was his eighteenth birthday. Billy knew he couldn’t be too upset that nobody had mentioned it all day; he hadn’t told anyone, after all. When his father and step-mother hadn’t said anything about it at breakfast that morning, he hadn’t brought it up; he didn’t tell his step-sister or his boss, either. It felt like his own little secret that he was finally, in the eyes of the law, no longer a boy but an actual man. And real men, in his opinion, didn’t make a big deal about their own birthdays.

That stuff is strictly for chicks and little kids.

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8:15 p.m.

“I wanted to be with you alone, and talk about the weather.”

Billy whistled along to the inescapable Tears For Fears tune, which was catchier than he’d ever admit out loud and currently playing on the radio in the Fair Mart. His shift at the record store had ended at eight, and he had decided to stop by the convenience store for what he considered to be a manly birthday treat: a pack of cigarettes and some beer.
“I’m lost in admiration, could I need you this much? Oh, you’re wasting my time… you’re just, just, just wasting time.”

Billy tucked his hands into his pockets, still whistling to himself as he strolled up and down the aisles. Even though it was a Friday night, the modest store was deserted, and Billy was glad; he wasn’t in the mood to see anyone (well, seeing Steve wouldn’t be so bad, but he doubted he was that lucky). Billy couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so lonesome; it was his eighteenth birthday but he—by all accounts, the most popular guy at Hawkins High—was on his own and browsing the Fair Mart’s underwhelming selection of beer and chips, taking his sweet time because he had nowhere else to go.

God, I hate this boring little town.

It wasn’t like he didn’t have any options for socializing—Tommy had invited him to tag along with him and Carol at the movies that night, but Billy had declined, stating that he had “plans” after work. Plans or no plans, there was no universe in which Billy would have agreed to go to a late screening of ‘The Sure Thing’ as Tommy and Carol’s third wheel, even if he actually liked romantic comedies (which he definitely didn’t).

That John Cusack dude is kinda nice-looking, I guess, but he could never hold a candle to a stunner like Steve… his mouth is too small.

Pamela, the girl he’d driven home once or twice, had stopped by the record store earlier that night towards the end of his shift; she had loitered at the front counter for over ten minutes, making dumb jokes and flirting aggressively even though Billy didn’t give her a scrap of encouragement. When she asked him if he’d be interested in going to some party and he said no, Pamela declared that he was “no fun whatsoever” and stormed out in a huff with her friends in tow.

Find some other guy who cares, ’cause I sure as shit don’t.

Billy had completely abandoned the ideas he once had of taking advantage of Pamela’s interest in order to fool everyone into thinking he was a "normal" high school boy who liked girls. After all, nobody at school seemed to suspect anything was different about him, even if he was always single, and his father had hardly paid any attention to him at all since the unpleasant "faggot" incident in November. So, Billy decided there was no reason to force himself to entertain the romantic fantasies of some boring girl; if anyone wanted to wonder why he never went on dates—well, let them keep on wondering.

I wish people would just mind their goddamn business.

“Don’t take my heart, don’t break my heart,” he sang absentmindedly, feeling a little sorry for himself as he opened the door of a refrigerated display case and pulled out a six-pack of Schlitz. “Don’t, don’t…”

“Don’t throw it away,” a very familiar voice sang from behind him, concluding the chorus.

Billy didn’t even need to turn around to see who it was; he’d recognize that handsome tenor anywhere after hearing it at church so many times.

Shit! Be cool, be cool…

“Evening, Harrington,” he greeted casually, tucking his six-pack under one arm and using his free hand to fluff out the ends of his hair. “Long time, no see.”

“Yeah, it’s been, like, a whole five hours,” Steve replied dryly, brushing past Billy to open the
refrigerator. “What’re you doing here? Besides grooving to ‘Tears For Fears’, I mean.”

“I’m not grooving along to this garbage,” Billy protested, gesturing to his six-pack of Schlitz. “I’m just grabbing some brews. You?”

“Same,” Steve mumbled as he reached into the fridge for two six-packs of green Heineken bottles, stacking them precariously in one arm so he could reach for a third.

“Here, lemme help,” Billy offered, trying to take one of the six-packs from him.

_What does he need all this fancy beer for? Is he going to that dumb party Pamela was yapping about?_

Steve shook his head and pushed past him. “No, I got it… thanks, anyway.”

“Don’t be a dumbass.” Billy followed close behind him, still carrying his six-pack of Schlitz. “You’re gonna drop ‘em.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Man, you’re stubborn.”

“Am not,” Steve muttered as he reached the front counter and plopped all three six-packs next to the cash register; the glass bottles clinked noisily. “See? I didn’t drop anything.”

It was hard to get a good look without staring too much, but Billy could tell that Steve wasn’t wearing the same outfit he had worn to school that day. He still had on the heavy wool peacoat, but the green sweatshirt had been swapped for an expensive-looking black turtleneck, and instead of dark jeans he was wearing grey slacks.

_God, he's too gorgeous…_

The middle-aged man sitting behind the counter chuckled and gestured at Steve's eighteen bottles of Heineken. “Sure you’ve got enough beer, son?”

“Yeah, hopefully.”

“Goin’ to a fun party tonight, huh?”

Steve nodded as he handed over a crisp twenty-dollar bill, looking slightly uncomfortable, like he wished the cashier would stop asking questions.

_What’s his problem… he doesn’t want me to know about where he’s going, or something?_

As Steve stuffed his change in his pocket and carefully picked up two of his six-packs, Billy stepped up to the counter to pay for his beer and the canister of Pringles he'd just grabbed. He pointed behind the cashier and requested a pack of Marlboros.

“I’ll need to see some identification, young man.”

Billy was still using his old fake ID from California, which he handed over along with a five-dollar bill.

“Well, well!” The friendly employee exclaimed, flicking the little plastic card with one of his weathered fingers. “Many happy returns, sir. Welcome to adulthood.”
“Thanks,” Billy mumbled, hastily reaching out to take his ID back. The year might be fake, but the month and day of his birth hadn’t been changed: March 8th.

The cashier nodded over at Steve, who had one arm wrapped clumsily around two of the six-packs and was picking up the other one by its cardboard handle. “I see what all this beer is for, now… having a big ol’ birthday bash, huh?”

“Shut up, goddamnit!”

“It’s, uh… it’s not like that,” Billy muttered to the nosy convenience store clerk, fervently wishing he would mind his own business. “Can I get my smokes, now?”

Steve paused halfway to the door and glanced over his shoulder. “Wait… your birthday is today?”

Billy grabbed the large paper bag from the cashier and hurried out of the store, gritting his teeth and feeling his face grow warm.

“Hey, hang on, man,” Steve called after him, stumbling a little under the weight of his eighteen bottles of beer. “Is it seriously your birthday?”

“Maybe. So what?”

Billy walked briskly to his Camaro and dropped the brown paper bag on the passenger seat, then returned to Steve’s side and unceremoniously yanked two of the six-packs of beer from his arms.

“Oh... thanks.”

As Steve used his now-free hand to fumble in his pocket for his keys, Billy stood there silently, holding a pack of beer in the crook of each arm and watching the way their breath fogged the icy-cold air in the fluorescent glow of the convenience store lights. He was reminded of the night in December when they had stood outside the Fair Mart together, smoking and having a typically bizarre conversation.

*That's the only kind of conversation we know how to have... awkward and bizarre.*

Steve opened the trunk of his BMW and set the six-pack of beer inside, then turned around to take the other two packs from Billy.

“Thanks,” he mumbled a second time, flinching slightly when their cold fingers brushed together.

“No problem.”

Just before Steve slammed his trunk closed, Billy caught a glimpse of the nail-studded baseball bat that Max had once threatened him with— it was hard to believe it had only been a few months since that strange night at the Byers’ house.

“You keep that thing in your car, huh?”

“What thing?”

Billy pantomimed swinging a baseball bat, and Steve nodded.

“You never know,” he explained simply as he opened the door of his red BMW.
“True. Well, catch you later, Harrington.”

Billy had only taken three steps towards his car when he heard Steve call out to him.

“Hey, uh… if it’s your birthday, what’re you doing tonight?”

*Getting drunk on cheap beer in my room with the door locked… it’s gonna be rad.*

“Why?” Billy replied evasively, rubbing his freezing hands together and stuffing them in his jacket pockets.

Steve sighed impatiently and muttered something inaudible as he gazed up at the sky; there were hundreds of stars dotted around a perfectly crescent-shaped moon.

“It’s just… well, I’m on my way to a party, and I thought, uh…”

*God, he’s so cute when he can’t think of what to say.*

“Pamela told me about some party that’s going on tonight,” Billy said casually. “Is that where you’re headed with all those Heinies?”

Steve looked confused and shook his head. “No, um… the party I’m going to isn’t even in Hawkins, actually.”

Billy was intrigued; he hadn’t left Hawkins since his unwilling arrival in October. “It’s not?”

“I’ve got a cousin who lives in Glenwood,” Steve explained. “Her parents— my aunt and uncle, y’know—”

“I know how cousins work, dude.”

“Right,” Steve chuckled, looking down at his shoes and fiddling with his keys. “Well, anyway, my cousin is throwing a little party over in Glenwood tonight. I’d ask you to tag along, but if you were planning to go somewhere with Pamela, that’s totally—”

“I’m not going anywhere with her,” Billy interjected, trying with all his might to keep the rising excitement from his voice. “Where’s Glenwood?”

*Is the famous King Steve seriously asking me to a party? Seriously?*

“It’s just five or six miles west of here. You take Route Fifty-three, then make a left when you get to Sycamore Street. You could just, uh… follow me, I guess.”

“Okay.” Billy nodded and regarded his fellow alpha curiously. “Why the sudden invitation, though?”

Steve sighed. “Look, if you don’t wanna go, that’s—”

“Nobody said anything about not wanting to go, Harrington. It just kinda came out of left field.”

“You really saved my ass today, that’s all,” Steve said quietly, refusing to meet Billy’s eyes.

“I told you, it was no big deal.” Billy shrugged. “But sure, I’ll swing by your cousin’s little party in Glen-whatever, if you swear it’s not gonna suck.”

He chose his words deliberately to make it seem like he didn’t care one way or the other, but he
didn’t like the faint look of resentment that flickered across Steve’s face, almost like he regretted saying anything in the first place.

_No regrets, pretty boy…_

Billy paused and bit his bottom lip, debating for a moment before finally admitting the truth. “It just so happens that I didn’t really have anything better planned, so... why not?”

“Oh, well… guess I’ll see you there, then.” Steve opened his car door and sat down on the comfortable-looking leather seat. “Oh, and uh… happy birthday.”

Billy wanted to say something devastatingly witty or cool, but those bashful brown eyes had made his brain stop working— all he could do was mumble “Thanks”, then retreat to the privacy of his car as quickly as possible, praying that the parking lot was too dark for Steve to have seen him turning red.

What the hell is wrong with me? I’m blushing like some lovesick bitch who just got invited to the prom.

He couldn’t believe Steve had wished him a happy birthday. He was the only one that had said it all day; nobody else knew. Billy was so giddy about the fortuitous turn of events that it was almost embarrassing; his mind was racing and his hands were actually shaking on the steering wheel.

“Calm the fuck down,” he commanded himself sternly, switching on the ignition and savoring the warm air that gusted from the heater. “It’s just a dumb party… it’ll probably be boring and lame.”

_But Steve’ll be there— he invited you even though he totally didn’t have to, and he’s still technically available, right?_

Billy’s imagination was starting to run wild with the type of far-fetched scenarios that made his dick stiffen uncomfortably in his jeans.

Anything could happen at a party… he might get shit-faced and forget all about being a good little pastor’s boy for the night. For all I know, this could be, like, the best damn birthday of my life.

Billy felt so excited that he didn’t even mind having 'Head Over Heels' stuck in his head on a loop; he hummed the infectious tune under his breath as he pulled out of the Fair Mart parking lot and followed the glowing tail-lights of Steve Harrington’s BMW down the long, dark country road, out of Hawkins and towards the unknown.

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: Tears For Fears- Head Over Heels
“You need kissing badly. That’s what’s wrong with you… you should be kissed and by someone who knows how.”

— ‘Gone with the Wind’ by Margaret Mitchell

Friday, March 8th, 1985: Part II

“Well isn’t this just great?” Steve muttered to himself as he sped down a long, pitch-dark road lined with looming sycamore trees. “What the hell have you gotten yourself into now, huh?”

Fifteen minutes earlier, he had encountered Billy Hargrove at the Fair Mart— they seemed to bump into each other more and more frequently— and he had absolutely no intention of inviting him to his cousin Diana’s party, but… well, that’s precisely what ended up happening.

*It was the dumb cashier’s fault… she put me on the spot. What was I supposed to do, let him spend his birthday all alone?*

“Uh, *yeah*, that’s what you were supposed to do,” Steve scolded himself, interrupting his own train of thought. “It’s none of your business what he does on his stupid birthday.”

Yet there he was, almost at his cousin’s house in Glenwood, with Billy following behind him in that flashy blue Camaro of his. Whenever Steve glanced in his rearview mirror, he could see the same glowing pair of headlights, occasionally fading from view when he rounded a corner but always reappearing when the road straightened again.

*I can’t believe he actually wanted to come…*

Steve could still picture the strange look on Billy’s face— that annoyingly perfect, chiseled face— when he was asked if he’d like to come to the party that night. It was the same look of cautiously hopeful disbelief he might expect to see on a stray dog being offered a piece of meat.

*What was he thinking, that I was gonna yell “Just kidding, sucker!” and drive away?*

If anyone were to grill him on the specifics, Steve would say that he’d only invited his former rival because it seemed like the most decent thing to do in that particular situation. He hadn’t forgotten the way Billy had swooped in like Superman and saved his butt from certain failure in history that afternoon.

*I don’t want him to think I’m some kind of ungrateful shithhead… and it’s just one lousy party, for god’s sake. It’s no big deal.*

Steve slowed to a halt at a stop sign and switched on his blinker, watching that familiar pair of headlights get larger and brighter as they approached behind him. Squinting in the harsh glare of the lights in his mirror, Steve turned his attention back to the road and made a right, keeping his eyes peeled for his cousin’s house. Driving past it and having to turn around would be embarrassing—
Billy would definitely make fun of him if he got lost.

Diana lived on a quiet street in an affluent neighborhood that wasn’t much different than Loch Nora. Steve had visited her and his other cousins there countless times, but he had never been there for a party like this before. Diana’s parents weren’t exactly the jet-setting type, so Steve had been surprised when she had called him out of the blue to say that her father was taking her mother out for a weekend in New York City— Steve wasn’t really sure why his aunt and uncle were going, nor did he care; a party was a party.

The driveway was already packed with cars, so Steve pulled up in front of the house and switched off the ignition. Under normal circumstances, he would’ve spent a few moments checking his hair in the mirror and making sure there wasn’t anything in his teeth… but the bright glare of headlights as a certain blue Camaro parked right behind his BMW was all he needed to remind him that these were not normal circumstances.

*Can’t sit in my car fussing with my damn hair with Billy lurking over there... it looks fine, just get out.*

Steve had changed his clothes after school that day, aiming for an outfit that was dressy enough for a Friday-night party without going overboard. After trying a few different looks, he settled for a nice turtleneck sweater that his mother had given him for Christmas; it was black and sublimely soft— Steve hadn’t bothered to check the label, but he was pretty sure it was cashmere. He paired the sweater with snug-fitting grey slacks and a new pair of dark-blue suede Puma sneakers. He looked like a million bucks, and he knew it.

“Well, this is it,” he announced as he stood up from his car, gesturing awkwardly at his cousin’s large, red-brick residence.

Billy slammed his car door shut and gazed up at the house; he had a cigarette dangling from his lips. “Not too shabby.”

Steve retrieved his three six-packs of Heineken from the trunk and balanced them carefully; he paused to glance over at Billy, who had his six-pack of beer cans tucked under his arm.

*He bought those for himself, right? For his birthday? He shouldn’t feel like he’s gotta share ‘em with anyone.*

“You don’t, um… you don’t have to bring those inside, if you’d rather save them for—”

“Don't wanna be seen with my cheap-ass brewskis, huh?” Billy sneered. “Is that it?”

“What? No, I just—”

Billy snorted derisively. “Sorry I didn't buy a bottle of fuckin’ pinot noir.”

“Hey!” Steve shouted, a little louder than he’d intended. It worked, though— Billy finally shut up.

*Jeez, he’s so touchy.*

“Just… bring the Schlitz,” he said wearily. “Just bring it, okay? The more, the merrier. Now, hurry up before we freeze to death.”

Billy took one last drag on his cigarette and flicked it onto the icy lawn.

“Listen, Harrington,” he said after a brief pause. “Lemme carry one of those fancy six-packs before
you drop ‘em all.”

This time, Steve didn’t argue like he had in the convenience store; he was glad to have some help, since dropping the glass bottles of beer would be catastrophically humiliating.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, handing one over and turning to lead Billy up the long brick driveway.

They each held two six-packs of beer, walking in silence and weaving between the parked cars. Steve recognized his cousin’s sky-blue Mercedes-Benz— an enviably cool hand-me-down from the early seventies— but the others were all unfamiliar.

“Jesus,” Billy muttered behind him. “There’s, like, half a million dollars’ worth of cars in this driveway… holy shit, is that an Aston Martin?”

Steve glanced over his shoulder at the sleek, silver coupe. “I think so, yeah.”

“Jesus,” Billy repeated, shaking his head. “Those things can go from zero to sixty in five seconds, y’know?”

“Uh… cool.”

Steve liked cars, of course, but that didn’t mean he knew how fast his own could accelerate in five seconds or why he should care. Billy, on the other hand, struck him as the type who probably read ‘Hot Rod’ magazine on the crapper.

They climbed the porch steps and stood on the doormat, scuffing their shoes— a scratched pair of black biker boots stomping alongside a brand-new pair of suede sneakers. Steve rested one of the six-packs of Heineken on a wrought-iron bench so he could ring the doorbell.

“I don’t hear any music,” Billy commented.

Steve shrugged. “Diana’s probably keeping it down so the neighbors won’t tell her parents about it when they get back from their trip.”

“You sure it’s not ‘cause this party is totally lame and everyone’s just in there sippin' tea and playing Scrabble or some shit?”

“Guess there’s only one way to find out,” Steve replied dryly.

The front door finally opened, and his cousin Diana squealed with delight.

“Oh my god, you’re here! Come on in, it’s freezing out!”

As soon as Steve stepped inside the warm house, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and squeezed him tightly.

“How’ve you been, stranger? I haven’t seen you in forever!”

“I’m good, I’m good,” he chuckled into her fluffy brown hair, which smelled like Aqua Net and perfume.

“Oh… hang on, who’s your handsome friend?” Diana asked, releasing Steve and stepping back to eye his companion up and down. “Have we met?”

Billy gave her one of his signature pearly-white grins. “Not officially… I think I might’ve seen you at church on Christmas Eve, but we weren’t introduced. I’m Billy Hargrove.”
Her eyes brightened with obvious interest. “It’s really terrific to make your acquaintance, Billy… I’m Diana Harrington.”

*Is it really necessary for her to bat her damn eyelashes at him like that?*

“Hey,” she said suddenly, observing all the beer the boys were carrying. “That looks way heavy—c’mon, let’s stash those in the fridge and go say hi to the rest of the gang… they’re all in the den.”

As they followed her through the large foyer and down a long hallway, the sounds of music wafting from a distant room reached Steve’s ears; he wasn’t sure, but it sounded like disco.

“I’m really glad you guys brought drinks,” Diana told them as she led the way. “I made, like, a million Jell-O shots, but they’re still in the fridge… who knew they’d take so damn long to set? Here, lemme move a few things out of the way for you.”

She squatted in front of the refrigerator and shoved some wine coolers into the vegetable drawer, then stood up and sat on the edge of the kitchen table while Billy and Steve put the beer inside (all eighteen bottles and six cans of it).

“Heyyy, when did you get here?!”

They all looked over and saw Brett strolling into the kitchen, grinning broadly and heading straight towards Steve. The tall, dark-haired, twenty-something man wrapped one arm around Steve and rumpled his hair; he smelled like aftershave and pot. Brett had been a friend of the family for as long as Steve could remember, and had always treated him like a little brother.

“Hiya, buddy— long time, no see! How’ve you been?”

“Not too bad, how about you?” Steve wriggled out of the taller alpha’s playful embrace and reached up to tidy his hair.

“Can’t complain.” Brett opened the fridge and whooped loudly when he spotted all the beer.

“Alriiiiiight, Heineken! Now we’re talkin’… hang on, who the hell brought the Schlitz?”

*Uh-oh…*

Steve glanced over at Billy, who was standing to the side with his arms folded across his chest.

Brett selected a bottle of Heineken and shut the fridge door, chuckling and shaking his head. “Man, who’d wanna drink that watered-down piss when you’ve got the good stuff from Germany?”

“Brett, be nice,” Diana scolded with a nervous giggle, looking warily at Billy. “One beer’s just as good as another, right?”

“Not to a man of impeccable taste, Diana dearest— oh, hi!” Brett exclaimed with forced enthusiasm, finally seeming to notice Billy’s presence in the kitchen. “Sorry, did you bring the Schlitz, pal? I didn’t mean any offense—”

“None taken,” Billy lied stiffly, moving past him to open the fridge and pull out two cans of the cheap beer he’d brought; he stuffed one in his jacket pocket, then popped the top on the other. “And Heineken’s imported from Holland, not Germany.”

“Uh… I don’t think you two have met, right?” Diana said quickly. “Brett, this is Billy Hargrove—
maybe you remember him from Christmas Eve, when we went to my Uncle Mark’s church. Anyway, he’s a good friend of Steve’s.”

_I don’t know if I’d go that far, but okay…_

“A good friend of Steve’s, huh?” Brett repeated, smiling thinly at Billy and grudgingly extending a hand for him to shake. “So, you two go to Hawkins High together?”

Billy nodded, but instead of shaking Brett’s outstretched hand, he ignored it and took a long swig from his can of Schlitz.

_Jesus Christ…_

Steve wasn’t sure if he regretted bringing Billy to the party, or if he just wished Brett hadn’t shown up. He could almost smell the tense hostility lingering in the air; it was unpleasantly metallic, like a sweaty fistful of old pennies.

Diana must have smelled it, too; she wrinkled her nose and looked from Billy to Brett, then at her cousin.

“Oh, Lord,” she groaned, seeming to arrive at a conclusion Steve couldn’t completely comprehend. “You brought an **alpha**?”

_So what?_

“If it’s gonna be a problem, I can show myself out,” Billy muttered defensively, gripping his can of beer.

“Terrific idea,” Brett snapped with a haughty tilt of his chin.

Steve couldn’t believe the situation was escalating so quickly; he had never known Brett to be so antagonistic, and he didn’t think the idea of Billy leaving was remotely terrific.

“No, no, there’s… there’s no problem whatsoever,” he stammered, stepping closer to Billy. “Right? We’re all just here to have a good time, that’s all.”

The words rang hollow, though—the two hostile alphas were still shooting each other death glares. Diana just stood there, looking exasperated.

*I’ve gotta do something before one of them starts throwing punches._

Without pausing to think, Steve looked directly in Billy’s blue eyes and pressed a hand against his chest; he could almost feel the body heat radiating all the way through the thick sweatshirt he was wearing under his black parka.


To his surprise, Billy took a deep breath and nodded— even the angry furrows in his brow relaxed. Diana seemed relieved; she rested her hands on her hips and shook her head. “Jesus, you guys… I don’t want any of that alpha posturing bullshit at my party, got it? I’m dead serious.”

“Sorry about that,” Billy mumbled, addressing Diana but refusing to look in Brett’s direction. “It’s cool.”

“Well, good,” she said primly, then shifted her attention to Brett. “How about you, tough guy? Are
you gonna be cool, or what?”

“Yeah,” Brett grumbled, looking slightly abashed as he took a few steps backwards. “Sorry.”

An awkward silence descended upon the kitchen, and for a few moments the only sounds were the
hum of the refrigerator and the distant sound of music and laughter.

“Hey, I know what we need!” Diana exclaimed brightly in an obvious attempt to relieve the tension.
“We’ve gotta have something to smoke. Brett, please tell me you brought some mary-jane.”

Brett patted the pocket of his Members Only jacket and smiled at her. “When have I ever let you
down, sweets?”

“I knew there was a reason I invited you,” she said with a little smirk, her heeled boots clicking as
she headed towards the kitchen door. “I hope you brought plenty, ’cause I’m gonna rally the
troops… oh, and they’re all betas, so try to keep a lid on that dumb he-man alpha crap, okay?”

“Okay,” they muttered in unison, like a trio of disobedient boys who had just gotten a scolding from
their mother.

“And try not to whip out your dicks and get in a pissing match while I’m gone,” she called over her
shoulder, rolling her eyes. “Honestly, boys can be so stupid, sometimes…”

………………..

Diana declared that she would personally murder anyone who smoked in her parents' house, so
everyone put on their coats and hurried outside to the large deck in her backyard. Brett had a few
pre-rolled joints stuffed into his pack of Parliaments; he lit two and passed them around. There was a
bright porch light shining down onto the deck, and soon the chilly air was white with billowing
clouds of smoke.

Steve took part in a few scattered conversations, but he was terrible with names and found most of
the party guests either boring, obnoxious, or both. The only people he really knew were his cousin
Diana, a girl named Sophie who had been her best friend since kindergarten, and Brett.

Oh… and Billy, obviously.

He wasn’t surprised to see that Billy was in high demand, particularly amongst the young ladies,
who clustered around him to flirt and ask thousands of questions.

“So, you really prefer being called Billy? Not, like, Bill or Will or something?”

“Are you sure you’re only eighteen? You look like you’re our age, at least.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Do you have a job? Oooh, a record store? That is so rad.”

“Yeah, I bet you know, like, a lot about music.”

“Do you work out a lot? You look like a guy who knows his way around a gym.”

Steve told himself he wasn’t jealous; he had his own fair share of admirers at the party, after all. But
he was still bothered, somehow, and he felt oddly relieved when Billy managed to escape and weave
towards him across the cold, crowded deck.
“How’s it going, Mister Popular?” Steve teased.

“Just peachy,” Billy grumbled, taking a puff on the joint he was holding. “This shit is surprisingly decent.”

Steve held out his hand, and Billy passed it to him. He was no expert, but it did seem like superior-quality pot; his head felt lighter already, and it didn’t make him cough quite as much as the stale skunk-weed Tommy used to bring to parties, back in the old days.

Billy shivered and pulled up the hood of his parka. “Decent joints or not, I still think that Brent guy—or whatever the hell his name is—seems like a colossal dickhead. He smells funky, too.”

Steve dimly recalled that Billy had seemed to dislike Brett at the Christmas Eve church service, when they had first seen each other; it felt like a million years ago, even though it hadn’t even been three months. He hoped he hadn’t made a huge mistake when he invited Billy; it had never occurred to him that Brett would be at the party and that the two alphas would instantly start behaving like snarling, territorial dogs.

He eyed Billy warily. “I know he can be kind of a jerk sometimes, but… you’re not gonna pick a fight with him, are you?”

“Not if he doesn’t start one,” Billy answered flatly. “I’ll just stay upwind and keep my distance.”

“Good, because Diana’s right—there can’t be any crazy macho-man drama tonight, okay?”

“Crazy macho-man drama?” Billy repeated, pretending to look scandalized. “I don’t have a dramatic bone in my body, Harrington.”

Steve choked on the weed smoke he’d just inhaled and laughed so hard he started coughing.

"Don't die on me, for Christ's sake,” Billy chuckled, thumping him on the back as he gasped for breath. ”Talk about dramatic..."

………………..

Nobody wanted to stay outside in the cold a moment longer than necessary, so as soon as the two joints had been passed around and burned down to tiny nubs, everyone trooped back indoors and hung their coats in the large hall closet.

When Billy shrugged off his black parka and pulled his sweatshirt over his head, Steve’s eyes widened at the sight: under all those layers, he appeared to be wearing the exact same dark-red shirt from the night in November when they had fought. This time, though, it looked much tighter—either it had shrank in the dryer, or Billy’s already-impressive muscles had grown even bulkier in the months since Steve had last seen that particular shirt.

Diana and her friend Sophie had evidently noticed, too; their eyes roved greedily over every inch of Billy’s well-built, five-foot-ten frame.

“Nice top,” Diana remarked appreciatively, reaching over to casually brush her fingers over one of his round biceps.

*Christ, she’s not being very subtle… how much did she smoke?*

Once everyone’s jackets and coats had been hung in the closet, Diana herded all her party guests into the large living room, where she dimmed the lights and switched on the radio; she cheered gleefully
when she found a station that had just started playing ‘My Sharona’.

A few moments later, Sophie appeared in the doorway carrying a large tray of little Dixie cups.

“Who wants Jell-O shots? Come and get ‘em, party animals!”

Steve had never had one before, and when Brett shoved two into his hands, he stared down uncertainly at the quivering, bright-red gelatin before tipping his head back and squeezing the contents of both little cups into his mouth.

“Blegh,” he grimaced, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

It wasn’t what anyone would call appetizing— like Diana said, the Jell-O hadn’t set completely and the generous quantity of vodka in her recipe made it taste like cherry cough syrup— but booze was booze, so Steve shrugged and helped himself to another.

*Screw it... nobody likes a party pooper, right?*

Already beginning to feel pleasantly stoned, he sat down on a sofa and surveyed the crowded room. Almost everyone was laughing, talking, and slurping down Jell-O shots, but not Billy— he was crouching by the brick hearth, carefully adding another log to resurrect the dying fire.

“Come a little closer, huh, a-will ya, huh? Close enough to look in my eyes, Sharona.”

Steve watched him from afar, trying not to notice the way his broad shoulders strained at the fabric of that ridiculously tight, red shirt he was wearing.

*His jeans are really tight, too... doesn’t he own any clothes that fit?*

He tried to ignore the way the glowing embers and rekindled flames illuminated Billy’s face and made his eyelashes cast spiked shadows around his blue eyes.

“Keeping it a mystery, it gets to me. Running down the length of my thigh, Sharona.”

Shifting uncomfortably on the couch, Steve swallowed his third Jell-O shot in one gulp and ordered himself to snap out of it. Only a major weirdo, he reasoned, would keep staring at Billy Hargrove while there were at least half a dozen cute college girls in the room.

Billy stood up from the fireplace and wiped his hands on the front of his jeans, glancing around the room before his eyes landed on Steve.

“Is this seat taken, amigo?”

Steve shook his head and scooted further over on the small sofa; he had never cared for the term ‘loveseat’, and he liked it even less in that moment, when Billy was plopping down next to him. He briefly considered pointing out that there were other unoccupied places to sit in the spacious living room, but... he didn’t really mind Billy’s presence, if he was being completely honest.

“Are those things any good?”

Steve was too high to immediately understand what he was talking about. “Huh?”

Billy pointed at the empty little cup in Steve’s hand.

“Oh,” he chuckled, crumpling up the Dixie cup and tossing it carelessly over his shoulder. “Not really... but they taste like like they’re half-vodka, so there’s that, I guess.”
Billy tilted his head to the side and smiled; he seemed to be staring at Steve’s mouth. “Maybe you should have a couple more… you’re starting to look like you did on Valentine’s Day.”

Steve looked down and covered his lips self-consciously with his hand, remembering the stupid heart-shaped lollipop that had stained his lips pink. He sort of resented Billy for reminding him of his almost-forgotten humiliation.

“Jesus,” he muttered, his words muffled by his palm. “Is it really that bad?”

“Nah.” Billy reached over and gently tugged his wrist away from his mouth. “Forget I said anything. You can barely tell.”

Steve was alarmed by the way he could still feel Billy’s touch on his skin, even after he had let go. He rubbed his hands on his slacks for no reason and laughed nervously.

*Man, those Jell-O shots sure kicked in fast…*

Diana suddenly emerged from the crowd, cackling at a joke someone had told as she squeezed herself onto the loveseat between Billy and Steve; her lips and teeth were slightly pink.

“Hey, fellas! Having a good time?”

Steve nodded, shifting over to give his cousin more room. “Sure.”

“How ’bout you, hot stuff?” Diana asked, smiling at Billy. "You havin' a good time?"

“I’m not havin' a good time…” Billy said with one of his movie-star grins. “I’m havin' a great time.”

*Oh, Lord…*

Diana was obviously smitten; she kept her body twisted towards Billy, gazing at him like he was the only person in the room. “Has anyone ever told you that you kinda look like a young Rod Stewart?”

Steve snorted. “No, he doesn’t.”

*Is she crazy? They look absolutely nothing alike.*

“I adore Rod Stewart,” Diana gushed, ignoring her cousin. “I’ve had a poster of him in my room since, like, seventh grade.”

Her best friend, Sophie, wandered over and perched on the arm of the sofa, right next to Billy.

“Whatcha guys talking about?”

“Rod Stewart,” Steve replied, jerking his head in Billy’s direction. “Can you believe she actually thinks he looks like—”

“He does, though!” Diana declared indignantly. “They’ve both got that really cool, shaggy blond hair, you know?”

“Sorry, but I’m gonna have to side with Steve on this one.” Sophie looked over at Billy and giggled. “If Rod looked half as good as Billy, he’d sell twice as many records. Can’t you just picture him in those skin-tight leather pants from the video—”

“All right, ladies, all right,” Billy interjected smoothly, running his fingers through his wavy hair.
Steve suspected he was enjoying all the attention.

*If he isn’t, then he’s one hell of a good actor.*

“So, how long have you two been friends?” Sophie asked, glancing from one boy to the other.

Steve’s mind went blank. “Uh…”

“Couple months,” Billy answered vaguely.

*Are we friends, now? After everything that’s happened? I guess we might be… I dunno what else you’d call it.*

“And you’re both gonna graduate soon,” Diana sighed wistfully. “God, I remember senior year like it was yesterday.”

“You’re only twenty-two,” Steve pointed out. “It wasn’t *that* long ago.”

“Feels like it, though. Funny how I’m supposed to be the responsible one, but here I am corrupting my baby cousin and giving him weed and booze and—”

“I’m not a baby,” Steve countered, sitting up straighter as though he needed to demonstrate that he was almost half a foot taller than her. “I’m eighteen, for Christ’s sake… I can handle it.”

“Oh, sure, I forgot,” Diana laughed. “You’re an actual-factual *adult* now… when the hell did that happen?”

“Last fall,” he retorted haughtily. “I can vote and I don’t even need a fake ID to buy cigs anymore.”

“Well, whatever.” Diana flapped her hand dismissively. “To me, you’ll always be a skinny little goofball with braces and scabby knees. Remember how you used to tell bad knock-knock jokes at the dinner table? Oh, and how you memorized all the lyrics to those ABBA songs and drove everyone crazy?”

*Can you please shut the hell up?*

Steve cringed and tightened his lips like he’d just taken a bite out a lemon.

“Wait… *ABBA*?” Billy snorted from the other end of the sofa. “Seriously? Jesus, that’s—”

“Today’s his birthday,” Steve blurted, desperate to change the subject. “So he’s eighteen now, too.”

Diana’s eyebrows shot up, nearly disappearing beneath her fluffy bangs.

“Oh my *god*,” she exclaimed, clapping her hands like an excited little kid. “It’s your birthday today? That’s amazing!”

Billy shot a resentful look at Steve. “It’s really not a big deal…”

“Not a big deal? Of course it’s a big deal, silly! I’m, like, totally *honored* you’d choose to spend your birthday at my little soirée.”

“Um… you’re welcome?” Billy mumbled stiffly as Diana wrapped an arm around him and tousled his hair.

Steve wished she wouldn’t keep trying to find little ways to touch Billy, like she had some kind of
god-given right to, just because she was a girl.

*If some drunk guy she just met kept doing that to her, it wouldn’t be cool, right?*

“The music stopped,” he pointed out dryly, pointing at the stereo; ‘My Sharona’ had, indeed, come to an end and a commercial for Coca-Cola was blasting from the radio. “Want me to pick something new?”

“No, no, I’ve got it,” Diana said cheerfully, rising from the couch and swaying a little as she crossed the room to crouch beside a shelf filled with records. “What are you in the mood for, Billy? Birthday boy oughtta get some kind of vote, right?”

Steve snorted and glanced sideways; Billy seemed to share his doubts.

“Well, that depends on what my options are… got any Metallica? Venom?”

“Uh, no,” she scoffed, looking over at him like he was crazy. “I’d just as soon go turn on the garbage disposal and listen to that— oh, here we go!”

Steve sat up straighter on the couch and squinted at the album in her manicured hands. It was mostly blue, with a photo of a platinum-blond man embracing a faceless woman wearing leopard-print pants: Rod Stewart’s ‘Blondes Have More Fun’.

“Man, seventy-nine was a great year,” Diana sighed as she slipped it from its protective sleeve and set it lovingly on the record player.

After a few seconds of soft crackling, ‘Do Ya Think I’m Sexy?’ began blasting from the speakers in the corners of the room and all the girls whooped like a gaggle of sorority sisters.

“Wanna dance, blondie?” Diana called out, beckoning to Billy with both hands as she bobbed her head in time with the disco beat.

Steve glanced over at Billy and felt a strange tightness in his chest as he watched him rise from the sofa and walk towards Diana.

*I’m not drunk enough to sit here and watch this…*

Steve glanced around the dark room until he spotted a half-empty bottle of Absolut vodka resting on a nearby card table; he didn’t see any cups, so he made sure nobody was watching before taking a quick swig directly from the bottle.

*Ugh.*

He couldn’t spot Billy or his cousin from where he was standing, but he knew they must be somewhere in the throng of gyrating bodies. The thought made him raise the bottle to his lips again — the vodka burned his throat like melted glass.

A girl he didn’t know danced over to him and asked him something he couldn’t hear.

“What?”

She stepped closer, practically brushing her lips against his ear. “Do you wanna dance?”

Even though she seemed sweet and had a cute pair of dimples, Steve shook his head without giving her offer a second thought.
“Sorry, but I’m pretty wasted,” he said, almost shouting to be heard over the music.

It wasn’t a lie— he really didn’t feel like dancing with anyone, not when his head was starting to spin. All he really wanted to do was sit down somewhere.

The loveseat he’d vacated was still empty, so he plopped back down onto it and sank slowly into the cushions and embroidered throw pillows. The room was tilting back and forth and he felt like the soft couch might swallow him whole.

*If I just, like… disappeared, how long would it take people to notice?*

Steve was rocked by a sudden wave of guilt about Barb, the girl who had gone missing in his Loch Nora backyard, and how many hours it had taken for anybody to notice or care that she had vanished without a trace.

*Quit thinking about that depressing shit, already…*

He closed his eyes to keep the room from spinning, but there was no escaping his dark thoughts or Rod Stewart’s raspy crooning.

“He’s acting shy, looking for an answer… c’mon honey, let’s spend the night together. Now hold on a minute, before we go much further! Gimme a dime so I can phone my mother.”

Closing his eyes wasn’t really improving matters, so he opened them again— and saw Billy coming towards him. Steve bit his lip as he watched the way way Billy’s golden-brown waves bounced around his annoyingly perfect face, and the way that tight red shirt hugged the curves of his muscles. He tried not to notice his lips (which were nicer than any guy’s ought to be, in Steve’s opinion) but how could he ignore what was directly in front of him?

*Wait, is… is he saying something? To me?*

Those lips were moving, and Steve realized that Billy was mouthing the lyrics along to the chorus.

“If you want my body, and you think I’m sexy, come on honey, tell me so…”

Smirking provocatively at Steve, Billy’s hands went to the front of his shirt and unsnapped it a little more; it was practically opened to his navel, now. Combined with everything else— the wild, curly hair, silver earring, tight jeans, and seductively swaying hips— he looked more like a rock star than most actual rock stars.

*W-what the hell is he doing?*

Wide-eyed and beginning to panic, Steve squeezed his thighs together and bit his bottom lip until it hurt, alarmed by the familiar sensation between his legs.

“If you really need me, just reach out and touch me, come on, sugar, let me know…”

“Jesus, I’m gettin’ outta here,” he slurred under his breath, standing up suddenly and lurching past Billy towards the hallway.

*Don’t follow me… please don’t follow me.*

Mercifully, Billy didn't pursue him, and Steve stumbled down the hall on his own. He made a face when he passed a guest bedroom that had suspiciously sexual sounds coming from behind it— the unmistakable symphony of a mattress creaking rhythmically along with erotic gasps and moans.
“Ah! Ah! Ah!”

“Lovely,” he muttered, shaking his head as he continued towards the bathroom, where he locked the door and slumped against it, squeezing his eyes closed. “This can’t be happening, this can’t be happening…”

Was there something besides marijuana in that joint?

There was no point in denying it or wondering why it was happening—his dick was definitely hard. Not completely, one-hundred percent erect, but it was getting stiffer by the second and Steve was panicking.

“Shit, shit, shit…”

This is all his fault… I shouldn’t have invited him.

Sighing with frustration, he unbuckled his belt and dropped his pants to his knees. He refused to jerk off—that was absolutely not happening. Instead, he pulled his dick out of his briefs, leaned over the marble sink and took a deep breath before turning on the tap and splashing ice-cold water on it.

“Aw, Christ!”

It was horribly unpleasant, but it did the trick; within half a minute, his stiffening shaft shrank back to its regular, non-erect state. Ever since he hit puberty, Steve had been more than a little proud of how long it was compared to the others he’d glimpsed in bathrooms and changing rooms, but at this particular moment he felt nothing but shame and disgust.

Seriously… what the hell is my problem?

Before pulling his slacks back up, he shuffled over to the toilet so he could pee. He never would have thought it was possible to be angry at his own penis, but there he was—glaring down at it like it had betrayed him.

“I know you’re wet and freezing, but it’s what you deserve;” he scolded, blotting some of the water off with a piece of toilet paper. “You’re crazy, a-and confused, and you’re embarrassing me, you big, stupid—”

“Who’re you talking to in there, Harrington?”

The low, familiar voice spoke suddenly from behind the bathroom door, making him flinch in shock. Billy?

“N-nobody!” Steve yelled, hastily flushing the toilet and stuffing his miserably cold, damp dick back in his underwear. “It’s, uh, it’s just me in here.”

He has the worst timing…

“Well, quit talking to yourself and hurry up, will ya? I’ve gotta take a piss.”

There was nobody in the world he wanted to see less than Billy, but what could he do—tell him to go find a different bathroom?

He’s gonna get suspicious and think I’m jerking off, or taking a huge dump.

Steve double-checked his appearance in the bathroom mirror to make sure he looked ‘normal’ before
opening the door. He shoved past Billy without looking at him, keeping his chin up and his eyes directed straight ahead.

“Hey,” Billy called after him, lingering in the bathroom doorway. “You okay, man?”

“Yep!” Steve replied, hoping his voice didn’t actually sound as high-pitched as he feared. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

The music grew louder as he approached the den; it still sounded like Rod Stewart, but Steve didn’t recognize the song. When he stepped back into the crowded room, he discovered that the comfortable couch he had vacated was now occupied by a couple he didn’t recognize—they were kissing passionately and the boy kept trying to reach under his girlfriend’s skirt, grinning when she repeatedly smacked his hand away.

Jeez, everyone's getting drunk and horny...

“Steeeve!” Diana yelled from across the room, where she and Sophie were swaying to the music. “Get over here and dance, ya big dummy!”

He really just wanted to sit down somewhere, but he trudged towards his cousin, anyway.

“Hey, listen,” Diana said slowly, like she had just thought of something wonderful; she seemed to have spotted the couple necking on the couch. “We should totally play Spin the Bottle!”

“Whaaaat?” Sophie exclaimed, running over to turn the volume down on the stereo. "Really?"

Oh, no… she can't be serious.

Some of the other guys in the room seemed to share Steve’s opinion—they groaned and rolled their eyes—but most of the ladies seemed enthusiastic about the idea.

“It’s kid stuff, but who cares?”

“Yeah, all the boys here tonight are cute, so…”

“Takes me back to eighth grade.”

“More like sixth grade, you skank.”

“Oh my god, Mel, you’re hardly one to throw stones.”

“Man, those were the good old days,” Diana sighed wistfully, like she was sixty-two instead of twenty-two. “When we were so young and played, like, Seven Minutes in Heaven and all those dumb junior high party games.”

“We have almost the same amount of girls as guys,” Sophie pointed out, scanning the room. “So it’s perfect!”

Jesus, they really are serious...

“What’s perfect?” Billy asked.

Steve hadn’t even noticed him return from the bathroom.

“My mental-case cousin wants us all to play Spin the Bottle,” he grumbled.
Billy snorted and quirked his eyebrows. “What... seriously?”

“You’re gonna join us, right?” Diana and Sophie pleaded in unison. “It’s gonna be so fun!”

Billy looked right at Steve and winked. “Sure, I’ll play… if that’s what everyone else is doing.”

*Stop winking, asshole!*

Steve really didn’t want to have to run to the bathroom again to repeat the torturous ice-water treatment.

“This is so childish, guys,” he chuckled, trying not to look too dismayed as everyone gathered in the center of the room. “I mean, what are we gonna play next— Twister? Truth or Dare?”

“Hey, that’s a great idea!” Diana’s eyes brightened, which made him wish he hadn’t said anything. “If everyone else wants to, maybe we can play Truth or Dare later, or Never Have I Ever. Oh, come on, Steven! What’s with that mopey mug?”

“Yeah, buddy!” Brett chimed in, appearing suddenly behind Steve and patting his shoulder. “If the gals wanna play a round or two of Spin the Bottle, where’s the harm? Nobody here’s got any cold sores, right?”

“Or AIDS,” a boy named Gary said loudly, pausing to burp before taking another swig of beer.

“Ew, you guys!” Sophie crinkled up her nose. “So immature.”

“Yeah, do you mind?” Diana rolled her eyes. “Nobody’s got a cold sore, and I’m not sure you can even get AIDS from, like, kissing.”

“Just butt sex,” Gary snickered. “They don’t call it the gay plague for nothing.”

“Oh my god, Gary!” Diana looked exasperated as she bent down to pick up one end of the Persian rug on the floor. “Shut up and help me roll up this rug, will you?”

“Aw, why?” Gary complained.

*God, he’s annoying. What the hell was she thinking, inviting a jerk like him?*

Billy didn’t seem very impressed by Gary, either; he shoved past him to help Diana.

“You can’t spin a bottle on a damn rug, man… now, move over.”

Once the rug had been rolled up and propped up in a corner, Diana took all the cushions off the couches and tossed them down on the bare floor. She chose one close to the fireplace and sat down daintily, then looked up expectantly at everyone else.

“Well, c’mon… get down here, everyone, I can’t play by myself.”

*Christ, this is a terrible idea.*

Steve sat down uncertainly on one of the floral pillows beside his cousin, tucking his legs beneath him and clasping his hands tightly in his lap. He glanced up when Brett chose the cushion right next to him.

“I haven’t played this dumb kid stuff in, like, ten years.” Brett grinned at him and clapped him on the back. “You excited, buddy? This is gonna be a riot!”
“What’s there to be excited about?” Steve mumbled, wondering if it was too late to excuse himself and go outside for a cigarette.

_Diana would probably bitch about it, and everyone would ask me why I don’t want to… and why the hell don’t I want to, anyway?_

One by one, everyone in the room chose a cushion on the hardwood floor, until they were all seated cross-legged in a somewhat lopsided circle.

“Alright, here goes nothing!”

Diana went first, and after several rapid rotations the bottle pointed at Brett. Some people whistled and clapped; Steve backed out of their way while she leaned over to kiss Brett.

_She’s an omega and he’s an alpha, but there’s obviously nothing going on between them… funny how that works._

He didn’t really pay close attention to everything that happened next; he still felt a little woozy from the weed and booze. At some point, it was Gary’s turn; he kissed Sophie. Then it was Sophie’s turn, and the bottle landed on Diana. Both girls giggled shyly and gave each other a sweet little peck on the lips, which was received with plenty of applause and an enthusiastic whistle from Brett.

“Okay, Steve, it’s your turn.”

_Crap._

The ‘game’ had been progressing so rapidly that he’d completely lost track of whose turn it was; he was pretty sure they must have skipped some people.

“Uh... okay.”

Steve reached over to give the green bottle a spin with a quick flick of his wrist. It seemed to spin forever— around and around and around— before finally beginning to slow down. When it finally stopped and he saw that it was pointing directly across the circle at Billy, his whole body tensed and his mind went blank.

“Whoops!” Brett laughed. “If it lands on a dude you get to spin again.”

Steve nodded quickly and cleared his throat; he refused to look at Billy. “Oh, right. Yeah, I knew that.”

_When Sophie and Diana kissed, it wasn’t a big deal, though…_

He sighed and spun the bottle a second time; it pointed at Brett.

“Oh, come on,” Sophie groaned. “It landed on a guy again?”

“Well, it’s a little unorthodox, obviously, but I don’t mind if he doesn’t,” Brett said with a lecherous grin, waggling his eyebrows and leaning over to wrap an arm around Steve's shoulder.

_That’s not what you were saying a few seconds ago, when it pointed at Billy…_

The thought made his eyes wander across the circle and widen in surprise; he hadn’t seen that look on Billy’s face since the night at the Byers’ house in November.

_Why’s he glaring at Brett like that? Jesus, if looks could kill…_
Diana nudged him impatiently with her elbow. “Spin it again, Steve! Third time’s the charm.”

It ended up pointing at the girl who had asked him to dance earlier. Steve still couldn’t remember her name, but it didn’t matter; he crawled over to her and smiled politely before giving her a chaste peck on the lips.

*Why am I playing this dumb game?*

He started paying more attention to what was happening when it was Billy’s turn. It was impossible not to notice how hopeful some of the girls looked—they watched the bottle’s rotation with rapt interest and hungry excitement in their eyes.

*Take a chill pill, ladies.*

The bottle finally wobbled to a halt, pointing halfway between Diana and Steve.

“Pucker up, girl!” Sophie called out, hooting with laughter. “Man, some people have all the luck.”

*It’s pointing to me more than it’s pointing at her, though…*

“Okay, okay.” Diana smiled as she smoothed her hair and sat up straighter, awaiting her smooch.

Steve squirmed uncomfortably and stared down at his shoes, wishing he hadn’t opted to sit next to his cousin; he didn’t want to see Billy crawling across the circle with that strange, unreadable expression in his eyes.

*God, I can’t stand it.*

Diana sat there expectantly with her hands resting primly in her lap, but as soon as Billy kissed her, she grew bolder and reached up to hold onto his shoulders.

*She doesn’t have to touch him so much, does she?*

The kiss probably only lasted two and a half seconds, but it felt like a lot longer to Steve; everyone in the room but him clapped and said “Aww”, like they were guests at a wedding.

*Screw this.*

“Where are you going?” Diana whined as Steve rose to his feet.

“Just gonna go have a smoke or something,” he mumbled, quickly stumbling from the room and down the hall to the kitchen, where he opened the refrigerator and pulled out one of the last bottles of Heineken.

*Damn, we drank a lot... I don't even see any cans of Schlitz left.*

“There’s gotta be a bottle opener around here somewhere,” he muttered to himself as he scanned the countertops, which were cluttered with empty plastic cups, Cheez Ball containers, beer cans, crumpled napkins, and bottle caps.

“Lookin’ for something, Harrington?”

*Crap.*

Billy was watching him from the kitchen doorway.
“Just, uh…” Steve held up his bottle of beer, stubbornly refusing to make eye contact. “I can’t find an opener thingy… maybe the universe is trying to tell me I’ve had too much.”

When Billy walked over and took the beer from him, their fingers brushed together and Steve felt that same, strange electricity that he did whenever they touched without warning. He stood there silently as Billy pulled out his car keys, wedged one under the cap and—pop!—sent it bouncing onto the countertop.

“Here you go,” he said with a little smile, passing it back to him.

*Damn, that was actually pretty cool.*

Steve was more impressed than he wanted to admit; he knew how to shotgun a can of beer, but that was the lone talent in his party-trick arsenal.

“Thanks.” He took a long swig, then pointed at the fridge. “I think there’s one more in there, if you want…”

“Maybe later.” Billy reached in the pocket of his tight, halfway-opened shirt and fished out a joint. “For now, I’d rather spark this up.”

It was slightly squashed, but other than that the joint looked exactly like the ones they had all shared on the deck a few hours earlier.

“Where’d you get that?” Steve asked curiously. “Did you swipe it from Brett?”

Billy’s smile twisted into a smirk as he gave his lighter a few flicks; his eyes glinted mischievously in the flame. “You gonna tell on me?”

Steve shook his head; he was no snitch.

Billy hopped up onto the counter and reached over to open the window above the kitchen sink, then blew a long stream of smoke into the cold blackness outside.

“It’s still gonna stink, y’know,” Steve remarked, fanning the air in front of him with his hand. “Diana’s gonna kill you if she comes in here and sees you smoking... her mom’s got a nose like a bloodhound.”

“So, does that mean you won’t be having any?”

Pinching the joint between his thumb and forefinger, Billy held it out to him and quirked his eyebrow invitingly.

“I didn’t say that,” Steve muttered as he reached over to take it.

*Smug bastard… of course I want some.*

He lifted his eyes to the ceiling and took a long drag, thinking of things to say; even boring small-talk would be preferable to this awkward silence.

“So, um… are you having fun? Glad you came?”

“Sure.” Billy shrugged. “I’ve been to worse parties.”

“Yeah… me too.”
Steve hoisted himself onto the counter on the other side of the sink and exhaled smoke out the window, trying not to remember the last party he had attended—the one on Halloween, when Nancy had revealed how she truly felt about him.

“You’re bullshit.”

He was startled back to the present when Billy suddenly reached across the sink and brushed something off the shoulder of his dark cashmere sweater—lint or a strand of hair, probably.

“I think Diana likes you a lot,” Steve blurted without thinking.

Shit! Why’d I say that?

Billy drew his hand back and frowned.

“Diana,” he began, slowly and distinctly pronouncing each syllable, “…is drunk.”

“Yeah,” Steve chuckled. “She really is.”

Why are you talking about her? Change the subject.

He took another nervous puff on the joint. “Have you, uh… have you ever dated an omega before?”

Billy picked at a small hole in his jeans and didn’t look up at him. “Why, have you?”

“Who, me?” Steve shook his head. “Hawkins is a pretty small town, in case you didn’t notice. There’s hardly anyone like us there—at least, anyone who’s our age. I just thought that since you’re from a big city, maybe you’ve had more… uh…”

“Opportunities?” Billy suggested flatly; his expression was guarded and impossible to read. “Well… there was this one omega chick who used to go to my old church. That’s ancient history, though.”

“Oh.”

Steve was disturbed by the tiny prickle of curiosity—or, God forbid, envy—that he felt towards the mysterious girl from California.

What if they had a soul bond but had to break it off when his family moved to Indiana?

Steve cleared his throat. “So, um… it didn’t work out with her?”

“Obviously not.”

“You know what would be funny?” Steve asked impulsively, ignoring the voice in the back of his head begging him to shut up. “If you had a… y’know, a connection with Diana and we ended up being family… like, cousins-in-law, or something.”

Billy scowled. “I’m not interested in becoming your goddamn cousin, Harrington.”

“I didn’t say you were,” Steve clarified hastily. “I just—”

“Is that why you brought me here tonight?” Billy asked hotly, finally looking directly at him. “You thought it’d be ‘funny’ to try and set me up with Diana?”

“W-what?” Steve spluttered incredulously, dismayed that the conversation had taken such a sudden downward turn. “No!”
“Then why the hell do you keep yakking about her?”

“Okay!” Steve snapped resentfully. “Christ, I’m sorry I said anything!”

*Why do I always have to open my big mouth? And why does he have to take everything the wrong way?*

Billy went back to poking at the hole on his Wranglers for a minute before looking up at him again and sighing impatiently. “You plannin’ on finishing that whole thing yourself, amigo?”

“What? Oh!” Steve hadn’t realized he was hogging the joint; he hastily passed it back, feeling his cheeks grow warm despite the freezing cold air from the window. “Sorry about that…”

*Even though it wasn’t his, in the first place… he stole the damn thing.*

“Don’t sweat it.”

Billy tapped the ash off the end into the sink, then turned on the faucet to wash the grey mess down the drain. For a minute they sat in pensive silence again— Billy smoking and Steve sipping his beer — and listened to the *drip, drip* of the sink and the faint rhythm of whatever song was playing out in the living room.

Billy cleared his throat. “Look, I’ve got nothing against your cousin, dude. Diana seems like a really cool chick, all things considered. It’s just that, uh… well, she’s not my type.”

*But she’s an omega.*

Steve tried to look utterly uninterested as he swallowed a mouthful of beer. “No?”

*And she’s pretty.*

Billy shook his head and passed the joint back to Steve. “Not by a long shot.”

*Don’t ask. For the love of all that’s holy, don’t ask.*

Steve nervously ran his fingers through his hair, noticing the way Billy’s eyes followed the movement— those strangely hypnotic eyes that were the same soft shade of blue as his favorite pair of jeans.

*Oh, screw it.*

Pinching the little joint carefully so he wouldn’t drop it, Steve took a final puff to fortify his nerves. “What’s, uh… what’s your type, then?”

Billy hopped down off the counter and stepped towards him. “You really wanna know?”

Steve swallowed a lump in his throat and shook his head in obstinate opposition to the curiosity burning in his mind.

*Am… am I your type?*

He wasn’t sure how he felt about the idea of being anyone’s ‘type’, because what the hell did that even mean? It made him think of a police line-up of guys that all looked approximately like him: pale, brown-haired, and five-foot-eleven, with a similar build and eye color. Steve didn’t want to be a ‘type’, he just wanted to be himself.
Whoever that is…

He sat on the counter, stoned and frozen in place with his feet dangling above the floor. He towered above Billy when he was up on the counter like this, but he still felt small and vulnerable, somehow. Maybe because there was something hungry and almost predatory in Billy’s eyes.

Why’s he looking at me like I’m a three-course meal?

The joint was too small— more of a roach, at this point— and it began to burn his fingertips. Steve didn’t know what else to do with it, so he tossed it in the sink and washed it down the drain.

Billy opened his mouth to say something, but he stopped and glanced over his shoulder when there was a sudden shout of laughter coming from the hallway, like someone might be approaching.

Steve had almost forgotten that they weren’t alone; there were several other people in the house, and anyone could walk in at any moment.

What if someone saw us and thought something strange was going on?

“Let’s get outta here,” he suggested, jumping down onto the floor and glancing around the kitchen for an escape.

“What?” Billy looked confused. “Like, out of this room, or the whole party?”

Steve wasn’t sure what he meant, either; all he knew was that he didn’t want anyone to come barging in on their conversation— not when it felt like they were finally starting to understand each other a little better. Without giving it a second thought, he reached out and grabbed Billy’s forearm, tugging him towards the back of the room.

Startled, Billy smacked his hip against the corner of the kitchen table and groaned. “Ow, shit… where are we going, dude?”

“I dunno, maybe to the deck or something,” Steve answered quickly. “I could really use a cigarette.”

Where the hell is the back door?

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Billy mumbled from behind him. “No need to drag me.”

Steve was so stoned that he hadn’t even noticed he had a hand wrapped around Billy’s forearm; he released it hastily and felt the blush returning to his cheeks. “Sorry! Uh… here we go.”

He grabbed the nearest doorknob and yanked it open, hoping the icy winter air might help cool his red-hot face.

Oh.

It was nothing but a pantry: four feet wide with built-in wooden shelves, each crammed with canned food, neatly folded dishtowels, and boxes of cereal.


He took a step back and flinched when he bumped into Billy, who grabbed his shoulders to keep him steady.

“It’s okay, I gotcha,” he said quietly, close enough that Steve could almost feel his warm breath.
Too close... way, way, way too close...

Steve stepped away quickly and laughed, painfully aware of how his voice seemed to be pitched a little higher than usual.

“T-too many doors in this dumb kitchen,” he stammered, attempting to move past Billy so he could give the other door on the opposite wall a try.

“Harrington.”

“That’s gotta be it, over there… or maybe that’s just the laundry room—”

“Harrington,” Billy repeated, moving to the side and blocking his retreat again. “Why the hell are we running outside without any jackets?”

Shit.

“Uh…”

“Or cigarettes?” Billy added, a teasing glint in his eyes. “Jesus, you’re really baked like a cake, huh?”

Billy took a step closer, forcing Steve to stumble backwards, bit by bit, until he was standing in the shadow of the pantry doorway.

What’s going on?

“I noticed you looked kinda miffed earlier,” Billy murmured, sticking a muscular arm out to lean against the doorframe. “Back when we were playing that stupid-ass game.”

“Miffed? Nobody’s miffed. W-what do you mean?”

Steve’s heart was pounding so hard, he wouldn’t be surprised if Billy could hear it, too. After a night as crazy as this one, he thought, nothing would ever surprise him again. Without thinking, he retreated further into the darkness of the pantry; he could smell something sweet, like packages of sugary cereal and marshmallows that hadn’t been closed properly.

I can smell him, too… God, he smells nice.

“You felt ripped off, right?” Billy’s voice was so quiet that it was almost hard to hear. “So, tell me—did you really open this door ‘cause you got lost, or was it ‘cause you wanted to play another junior high party game?”

“I, uh… I… what game?”

Billy took his hand off the doorframe and pushed him, just hard enough to make him stagger backwards against the shelves.

“You ever play that one called Seven Minutes in Heaven?”

Steve inhaled sharply, fighting through the thick fog of thoughts cluttering his mind to find words, any words. He felt like he could see the future, or at least the next few seconds of it, playing out in front of his eyes like a tiny movie preview— he knew what was about to happen.

I mean… nobody’s here. Nobody has to know, right?
He took a shaky breath, stepping forward so that their bodies were just an inch or two apart— Billy had never smelled so intoxicating before.

“You smell really nice,” Steve admitted reluctantly. “It’s getting on my nerves, to be honest.”

“You don’t smell so bad yourself, pretty boy. I always figured it was some kind of fancy, rich-guy cologne.”

The ‘pretty boy’ nickname no longer annoyed Steve the way it once had; he couldn’t detect even the tiniest trace of mockery in the words.

“It—it’s just Polo,” he managed to whisper, glancing past Billy at the dimly-lit kitchen beyond the pantry.

_We can’t play Seven Minutes of Heaven with the door hanging open, though..._

As if he was having exactly the same thought, Billy turned and pulled the door closed with a soft _click_ that sounded impossibly loud in the small space.

Blinking in the sudden blackness, Steve reached out uncertainly until his hand collided with Billy’s chest— under his splayed fingers, he could feel the cotton shirt, the tiny metal pendant, and the warm, naked skin of an exposed pectoral.

_Oh my god…_

Something about not being able to see anything made Steve feel at least ten times bolder, like nothing he did or said was real or counted in any kind of tangible way (all the beer, Jell-O shots, and pot coursing through his system probably weren’t doing much to keep him tethered to reality, either).

_There’s no way any of this is actually happening… right?_

If it was a dream or drunk hallucination, though, it was the most realistic one he’d ever had in his life. Steve could feel everything: the toes of his sneakers scuffing against Billy’s boots, the soft fabric and firm skin of Billy’s chest under his trembling hand, Billy’s calloused fingers wrapping around his wrist, Billy’s knees bumping against his own, and Billy’s warm breath on his cheek. He could even feel that maddening little curl of hair tickling the side of his face, and the rounded tip of Billy’s nose.

“Goddamnit,” Steve whispered in surrender as he closed the tiny gap between them.

For a fraction of a second, it felt exactly like kissing a girl. He had never been with anyone who was almost the same height as him, so it was unusual to not have to bend his head down, but other than that, it was familiar territory: soft lips that parted slightly at the press of his own, hesitant fingers venturing into his thick hair, and that same electric thrill of triumph.

_God, this is… it’s…_

Steve was reminded that he was definitely _not_ kissing a girl a moment later, when Billy suddenly shoved him back against the pantry shelves with a force that almost knocked the breath from his lungs.

“Ow, Jesus…”

There was no time to complain, because Billy’s lips found his again— eager and aggressive. Steve was only dimly aware of the wooden shelves digging into his body at evenly-spaced intervals— a shelf behind his knees, behind his upper thighs, against his back, and another one behind his neck.
When he shifted his arm to get more comfortable, his hand bumped into something—a box of Bisquick or cereal—and knocked it to the floor.

“Whoops,” he chuckled breathlessly. “Glad it wasn’t a jar of pickles—”

Billy shut him up with another perfectly-executed kiss.

_Holy shit…_

Steve was stunned by the effect it was all having on him; his knees trembled unsteadily and his boner had returned in full force. He squirmed, but there was nowhere to hide and no ice-cold water he could use to bring himself crashing back to his senses—there was only Billy, pinning him against the shelves and kissing him like there was no tomorrow.

The only sounds in the otherwise silent space were their mingled breathing and the slightly wet harmonics of the kissing itself; at one point, Steve thought he could hear the faint _clink_ of their belt buckles colliding.

His dick was getting alarmingly hard and he didn’t know what to do about it. Poking Billy’s thigh would be mortifying, so he casually dropped one of his hands down to the front of his slacks and pushed on his cock, directing it down his left pant leg—it was uncomfortable as hell, but preferable to letting it stick out like a flagpole.

“Are you jerking off?” Billy whispered against his open mouth.

_Oh, fuck._

“What? No!” Steve hissed, quickly moving his hand away from his crotch.

“It’s fine if you are, dude…just don’t cream your pants.”

Steve shoved him roughly and sent him stumbling back into the shelves on the other side of the pantry.

“Whoa, whoa! Easy, there…don’t be mad,” Billy laughed, reaching out for him in the darkness. “C’mere.”

“I wasn’t jerking off,” Steve mumbled stubbornly. “I was just…”

“Hiding your hard-on?”

“No!”

Billy wrapped a strong, thick arm around his waist and tugged him closer, then brushed his hand slowly over the front of his slacks.

Steve flinched like he’d been burned.

“W-what the—” He couldn’t even manage to choke out a full sentence, he was so startled.

_Jesus, he’s an animal._

Apparently, Billy approved of whatever he’d felt in Steve’s trousers, because he tightened his grip on his waist and laughed again—low and husky, this time.

“I knew you had a thing for me, Harrington,” he growled. “I fuckin’ _knew_ it.”
“Sh-shut up! It’s only ‘cause of all that weed and, uh… well, if you must know, I’ve been going through a pretty long dry spell in that department, and—”

Steve stopped babbling when he felt a finger pressing urgently against his lips.

“Shhh!” Billy whispered. “Hear that?”

Steve held his breath, which was difficult considering how heavily he’d been breathing a few seconds earlier. In the sudden silence, he could hear the hum of the refrigerator, the faint beat of seventies music playing in the den… and the ominous clop-clop of a woman’s platform heels on the kitchen linoleum.

Crap… who’s that?

There was a thin line of light shining dimly at the very bottom of the door, and Steve’s eyes had adjusted just enough to see the outlines of Billy: the tips of his wavy hair, his shoulders, his arms… but that was all, and Steve was glad. He didn’t need a mirror to know that his cheeks were probably as pink as bubble gum and that his hair was sticking up in all directions after Billy’s fingers had raked through it.

The footsteps stopped and they heard the fridge being opened, accompanied by some comically tone-deaf singing.

“Ooh, my little pretty one, my pretty one, when you gonna gimme some tiieee, Sharona…”

“Jesus,” Steve chuckled softly, which prompted Billy to shush him again.

“Shh!”

He doesn’t want anyone to see us like this… he’s probably ashamed. I should be ashamed, too. I mean… what the hell are we doing here?

Steve was starting to feel a little panicky—his heart was pounding even harder than it had been when Billy had first backed him into the pantry, and his palms were sweaty. When he wiggled away enough to wipe his hands on his slacks, his elbow bumped against something on the shelf behind him.

Clunk!

It was probably just a can of tuna, but in the quiet, confined space it sounded like Steve had knocked a bowling ball on the floor.

Uh-oh…

They both inhaled sharply and froze.

The terrible singing stopped. “Um… hello? Is there, like… someone in the closet?”

Steve couldn’t help letting out a snort of laughter, which was promptly muffled by Billy’s large, warm palm covering his mouth.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get rid of her,” Billy assured him under his breath. “Shut up and try not to knock anything else over, okay?”

Steve nodded as Billy opened the door and closed it promptly behind him.
“Hey, there! It’s, uh… Sophia, right?”

“It’s Sophie, but you can call me whatever you want.”

Oh, jeez…

In the darkness of the pantry, Steve made a face and shook his head, grossed out by Sophie’s flirting but relieved that she didn’t seem sober enough to get suspicious.

“So, handsome,” she said in a voice dripping with interest and Absolut. “What the heck were ya doin’ in there, gettin’ a snack?”

“I was trying to find the back porch,” Billy explained without missing a beat. “But I must’ve gotten a little lost… guess I had a few too many, you know?”

“The back door’s right over there, silly,” Sophie giggled. “But you don’t even have a coat on! And your shirt’s halfway unbuttoned… not that anyone’s gonna complain about the view, I’m sure.”

Sophie’s tipsy laughter made Steve inexplicably angry; he clenched his jaw as he heard her noisy shoes on the kitchen floor again, which made him picture her stepping closer to Billy.

Quit embarrassing yourself and get away from him, already. He’s not interested… right?

Billy chuckled and changed the subject. “What about you, huh? Were you looking for another beer, or something?”

“No, thanks. I dunno why boys even like that grody stuff… are there any wine coolers left?”

“Maybe. Let’s see.”

Steve heard the fridge door open and pictured Billy chivalrously peering inside for a garishly-hued bottle of Bartles & Jaymes, possibly with Sophie ‘accidentally’ bumping against him as she looked inside, too.

Ugh. God, this sucks.

Steve was still rattled by what had just happened in the pantry. His heart was pounding, his mouth was dry, and the dizzy, tilting sensation had returned.

I… I’ve gotta sit down.

Trying to be as silent as possible, Steve slowly slumped down and sat on the hard linoleum, where he spent the next few seconds hugging his knees against his chest.

What the hell was that, earlier?

“Looks like you’re in luck… there’s one left, just for you.”

“Oooh, and it’s my favorite, strawberry daquiri! Thanks a mill.”

“No problem.”

Did that really just happen, or am I dreaming?

Steve knew it was stupid, but he pinched his arm, anyway, and winced at the sharp pain.
Yep. Wide awake.

As much as he wished Sophie would take her damned wine cooler and go away, the thought of what Billy might do when they were alone together again made his heart thump like a bass drum.

*Is he gonna go back to… to kissing me and stuff?*

Steve raised his hand to touch his lips, still finding it extremely difficult to believe that barely a minute earlier, Billy’s mouth was shoved against his own.

*Why the hell did he do that? I know he’s probably wasted, like me, but still…*

“Billy? Could you please open this? I dunno where to find a bottle opener around here…”

*Just unscrew it, you dumb skank.*

Steve could smell something sweet nearby, and when he felt around on the floor for the box he’d knocked off the shelf earlier, he realized it was some kind of sugary cereal.

*Smells just like Cinnamon Toast Crunch… it must be open already, if I can smell it. Diana won’t mind if I have some, right?*

He was so hungry that his stomach was making audible gurgling sounds. He picked up the box and opened it as quietly as possible, sneaking his hand inside and pulling out a handful of little cinnamon sugar-dusted squares.

*Who knows how long their stupid conversation is gonna take.*

“So, are you, like… seeing anyone right now?”

Steve froze, his mouth still full of half-chewed cereal. The ‘stupid conversation’ suddenly had his undivided attention.

“You *are*, right?” Sophie continued. “I mean, you’re way too gorgeous to be single.”

Steve leaned forward, crushing the box in his lap as he tried to get his ear as close to the door as possible. He couldn’t hear Billy’s answer, though, and guessed that he must either be nodding or shaking his head; Steve didn’t know which possibility he preferred.

“It’s okay,” Sophie said, giggling nervously. “You don’t have to say, if you don’t want. I totally get that it’s, like, none of my beeswax.”

*Damn right, it’s not.*

“It’s cool,” Billy replied, apparently opting to ignore the nosy question altogether.

There was an awkward silence that lasted a few seconds, followed by another one of Sophie’s self-conscious giggles and an artificially sweet “Byeee!”

*Good. Get lost.*

He heard the diminishing sound of her platform shoes clopping away— they blended confusingly with the heavier footsteps that grew louder as they approached.

Just before the door swung open, Steve saw Billy’s boots darkening the strip of light shining at the bottom of the pantry door.
“Oh, hi,” he mumbled, looking up and squinting in the sudden brightness.

Billy snorted with amusement, and Steve had to admit that he probably looked silly, sitting cross-legged on the floor with a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch on his lap.

“Got the munchies, huh?”

Still blinking as his eyes adjusted to the light, Steve hastily closed the top of the cereal box and shoved it back on one of the pantry shelves. To his intense embarrassment, his legs wobbled and he lost his balance as he rose to his feet, and Billy reached out to help him.

“I got it, I got it,” Steve muttered, batting his hand away and forcing himself to stand up straight.

So… are we just gonna pretend all that stuff didn’t happen?

“C’mon,” Billy said quietly, jerking his head towards the front of the house. “Wanna go home? It’s getting pretty late.”

“Why?” Steve protested, glancing down at his watch. “It’s barely even… oh, crap. It’s already one in the morning? How’d that happen?”

Billy gave him a gentle push towards the hallway. “Time flies when you’re having fun.”

Having fun, huh? Is that what it was?

“Where’re my keys?” Steve mumbled to himself, patting the pockets of his slacks.

“You are way too fucked up to drive. I’ll take you home.”

“I’m fine.”

“You can barely walk in a straight line, dude.”

Steve scowled. “Well, what about you?”

“What about me?” Billy shrugged and opened the hall closet to search for his jacket. “I haven’t had a drink in an hour or two… and you smoked most of that joint, remember?”

“Oh,” Steve chuckled sheepishly. “Sorry about that…”

As Billy pulled their things from the closet, Diana appeared in the hallway, swaying slightly. “Oh, are you guys leaving?”

“Yeah, I’m driving him home,” Billy replied. “Is it okay if he comes to get his car tomorrow?”

Aw, jeez… c’mon.

“I’m not that drunk,” Steve muttered stubbornly. “I’m okay to drive, seriously—”

“Steven Gabriel Harrington,” Diana interjected sternly, crossing her arms across her chest. “You are most certainly not okay to drive, so you can quit it with that nonsense right now, got it?”

“Yes, Mom.”

Did she have to tell him my middle name? It was bad enough that she had to bring up ABBA...

If Billy thought it was funny, he didn’t show it; he just tugged his sweatshirt over his head, then
fluffed out the ends of his hair before putting on his black jacket.

“You could sleep here, too, y’know,” Diana offered. “Sophie’s already starting to doze off on the couch, and I think Brett’s gonna spend the night in my brother’s old room upstairs.”

Steve was exhausted, but he didn’t want to spend the night at his cousin’s house. What he wanted, more than anything, was to be back in his own familiar home, where he could take a nice, long shower before finally climbing into his soft bed. He wanted complete and total privacy to mull over the events of that night.

He didn’t even need to say as much, because Billy seemed to understand.

“That’s really nice of you, but he probably just wants to go back to Hawkins… I’ll take good care of him, don’t worry.”

Take good care of… me?

Steve’s palms were sweaty again and he bounced a little on the balls of his feet, not sure if it was the weed, the vodka, or the memory of what they’d done in the pantry that was making him feel so keyed-up all of a sudden.

So… we’re gonna be in his car? In the middle of the night? Just the two of us?

“I could drive him home!” Brett suggested loudly from behind them, jerking Steve away from his jumbled-up thoughts.

“Don’t creep up on people like that,” Diana scolded, laughing as she swatted his arm. “What are you tryin’ to do, give us all heart attacks? Anyway, I thought you’d already gone to bed.”

“I just wanted to make sure this big-haired goof wasn’t sneaking off without saying goodbye.”

“Sorry, Brett,” Steve mumbled. “It was good seeing you tonight, man.”

“Like I said, kiddo— if you need a ride, I’m at your service.” The cheerful twinkle in Brett’s dark eyes changed to something a little less friendly when they shifted in Billy’s direction. “I still remember the way to your house… does he know the way?”

“Uh…” Steve couldn’t tell if he was teasing or being serious.

Please don’t pick a fight…

“Didn’t your mama ever tell you not to get shit-faced and take rides from strange men?” Brett added, making him cringe.

God, stop making this weirder than it needs to be.

“Thanks, but it’s fine,” Steve chuckled with forced cheerfulness; he glanced nervously over at Billy, who was glaring like a gargoyle at the older, taller alpha. “And he’s not exactly a stranger, so…”

“Oh, go to bed, Brett!” Diana rolled her eyes and shoved him gently towards the doorway. “You had more to drink tonight than Billy and Steve put together… and besides, I think Sophie blocked your Aston Martin in the driveway, so unless you feel like pawing through that trash-filled duffle bag she calls a purse to find the keys to her Caddy, it looks like you’d better stay put.”

“Here you go,” Billy said quietly, holding out Steve's wool peacoat.
“Thanks.”

“Alright, well... smell you later!” Brett patted Steve on the back and waved. “Drive safe, and don’t let any cops pull you over. I’m hittin’ the sack.”

Steve was relieved to see him go— Brett was usually a pretty nice guy, but there was no telling what he might say when he was drunk, and being around Billy seemed to bring out the worst in him.

“Uh, Steve?” Diana giggled, pointing at his wool coat. “What’s that you were saying about not being drunk, hon?”

Mystified, Steve paused and looked down, then felt his cheeks flush; he’d just stuck his right arm into the wrong coat sleeve.

“Here, lemme help.” Without waiting for a response, Billy took the coat from him and held it up, like he was helping a little kid get dressed.

“Aw, what a gentleman,” Diana remarked as Steve meekly put his arms into the correct sleeves.

“I can’t find my gloves,” Steve mumbled to himself, checking each of his pockets and feeling increasingly like a helpless four-year-old. “Where the hell did they go?”

“Are you sure you’re good to drive, Billy?” Diana fretted, peering into his blue eyes like she wanted to make sure they weren’t bloodshot.

“Yep,” Billy replied as he pulled a pair of knit gloves from his jacket pocket— but instead of putting them on, he pressed them into Steve’s hand.

“You’ll take him straight home, right?”

Billy nodded solemnly. “Yes, ma’am. Straight home.”

Steve fiddled with the black gloves Billy had just given him— they were just the cheap ones you could find almost anywhere for a dollar, but it was a surprisingly kind gesture, all the same.

Diana wasn’t quite finished expressing her motherly concerns. “It’s just that you hear about car crashes all the time, and... well, just promise me you’ll be careful, okay?”

“We will,” Billy said, smiling confidently at her. “Promise.”

Steve wished she would quit worrying so much; he was worried enough, as it was... though it felt more like anticipation than actual worry, if he was being honest.

_What the hell am I gonna do if he tries to make a move or something? He could just, like, pull over and cut the lights and—_

“Thanks so much for coming, you two.” Diana reached up and rumpled Steve’s hair. “Don’t tell any of our other cousins, but you’ve always been my favorite.”

“Bye,” Steve said, bending down to give her a quick hug. “You threw a great party... see you later, okay?”

“Yeah, see you next month.”

“Why, what’s going on next month?”
Diana laughed and punched his shoulder. “Easter’s next month, genius! You weren’t planning on skipping Nana’s luncheon, were you?”

“Oh, right… no, I’ll be there.”

His stomach growled at the thought of his grandmother’s cooking; she made the best devilled eggs and glazed ham.

*Jeez, I’m starving…*

When he and Billy were halfway down the driveway, they heard Diana calling after them.

“Yoo-hoo! Hey, Billy! If you’re not doing anything special with your family on Easter, you’re welcome to come, too!”

Billy paused to look over his shoulder and smile at her.

“Thanks! I’ll, uh… I’ll definitely keep that in mind.”

Steve hadn’t bothered to stop walking; he rolled his eyes and shook his head.

*God, she’s persistent.*

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You don’t have to come to my grandma’s house.”

Billy chuckled as he dug in the pocket of his parka and pulled out his keys. “What, so you don’t want me to?”

“It’s not that, it’s just…” Steve struggled to think of what to say; it was hard to find the right words when he was this tired and stoned. “It’s gonna be *boring*, y’know? A-and besides, your mom’s probably got something planned for Easter Sunday already—”

“*Step-mom*,” Billy corrected quietly.

Steve winced, realizing his error. “Oh, right… sorry.”

*Great job reminding him of his dead mom, you idiot.*

Billy didn’t look very bothered, though. If anything, he seemed cheerful—whistling ‘Do Ya Think I’m Sexy?’ as he opened the passenger side door for Steve and bowed, gesturing at the Camaro with an exaggerated flourish of his hand.

“Your chariot awaits, your highness.”

“Highness? You’re the so-called ‘Keg King’ now, not me.”

The frozen, dead grass crunched beneath Steve’s feet as he walked over to the car and lowered himself into the passenger seat.

“I haven’t done a keg stand since that Halloween party,” Billy scoffed. “And I’m not in a hurry to do another one, to be perfectly honest.”

Steve raised his eyebrow skeptically as Billy sat down in the driver’s seat and slammed the door.

“Yeah, right… what about college?”
“Do I look like frat boy material to you, Harrington?”

Steve snorted. He was pretty certain that guys who weren’t in fraternities were known to do the occasional keg stand, but he didn’t want to get into another pointless argument. The topic had piqued his curiosity about something, though.

“Are you gonna go? To college, I mean?”

Billy frowned as he turned the key in the ignition. “Nah… not this year, anyway.”

Steve nodded and held his hands up to the warm air gusting from the vents; even with Billy’s gloves on, his fingers felt frozen. “Yeah, I didn’t bother applying anywhere, either… hey, what’s this?”

He bent down and picked up a small bundle from the floor; it was a paper bag from ‘Hawkins Vinyl & Cassette Emporium’ with a cassette tape inside.

“Put that down!” Billy exclaimed, reaching over to grab it.

Steve twisted away from him, dumped the contents of the bag onto his lap, and started laughing.

_Tears For Fears?_

“That’s not for me,” Billy clarified hastily. “I, uh… I bought it for Max.”

Steve kept laughing; everything seemed ten times funnier than it would when he was sober.

“I’m serious!” Billy insisted, snatching the tape out of Steve’s hand and stuffing it back in the bag. “As if I’d buy some corny crap like that for myself.”

_So, Mr. Tough Guy likes pop… I knew it!_

“Why would you buy something for Max, though?”

Billy revved the engine and didn’t reply.

“Don’t tell me it’s her birthday today, too?” Steve teased.

“Maybe I felt like doing something nice for the little carrot-top twerp,” Billy muttered, glancing at his reflection in the rearview mirror and fussing with his curls. “Is that so fuckin’ unfathomable?”

“No, it’s… it’s kinda fathomable, I guess,” Steve admitted, even though he wasn’t entirely sure what the word meant.

Remembering how he had found Billy humming along to ‘Head Over Heels’ at the convenience store just a few hours earlier, Steve smiled coyly at him and arched one of his eyebrows.

“Look, if you wanna pop in the ‘Tears For Fears’ tape, I swear I won’t tell any—”

“Pipe down and put your seatbelt on.”

_What if he really did get it for Max?_

“She seemed like she was having a great time this morning,” Steve said cautiously, glancing over to gauge Billy’s reaction. “That little snowball fight in the parking lot was kinda… well, it was good to see.”
The corner of Billy’s lips curved into a smile and he met Steve’s eyes for just a moment. “Hard to believe that was just this morning.”

“Yeah.”

It was hard to believe—the snowball fight, the history test, and their chance meeting at the Fair Mart all felt like they had happened a long time ago. Their strange little… *encounter* in the kitchen pantry seemed like a long time ago, too.

*Don’t start thinking about that… change the subject, already.*

“Boy, what a day,” Steve said awkwardly, cringing because it sounded like something his father would say.

“Mm-hm.”

“What’s this?” Steve asked, referring to the music. It wasn’t his style at all, but he was still talkative from all the weed he had smoked and wanted to drown out the confusing thoughts in his head.

“A band called ‘Alien Sex Fiend’,” Billy replied, keeping his eyes on the road; he smiled when Steve burst out laughing.

“Alien… *Sex* Fee? Seriously?”

Billy chuckled as he reached out to turn down the volume. “*Sex Fiend.* You like it?”

“Uh… not really, no.”

“Not your jam, huh?” Billy switched off the tape player and turned on the radio, instead. “Fine—pick something else.”

“I… well, I don’t know,” Steve mumbled, reaching out and hesitantly turning the little knob. He felt guilty that Billy had switched off his music just for him.

*But at least I don’t have to listen to Alien Sex Friend or whatever.*

“You should turn your tape back on,” he suggested after the first few stations he tried were only playing commercials. “It’s your car and it’s your birthday, so go ahead.”

“Not anymore, it isn’t.”

“It’s not your car anymore?”

Billy laughed and reached up to the dashboard to tap the little digital clock display. “It’s not my *birthday* anymore.”

“Oh.”

Steve felt extremely stupid.

“Hey, I know,” Billy said suddenly, brushing Steve’s hand out of the way to take control of the tuner knob. “June—my boss at the record store, y’know—told me about this little independent station that plays some decent stuff… was it eighty-nine point three, or…?”

When he found the station he turned up the volume. Steve had no idea what the song was or what the singer was saying, but it was soothing and suited his current state of mind: stoned and sleepy.
Steve rested his head against the vibrating car window and looked at his reflection in the side-view mirror; in the dim glow of the passing street lights, his face looked paler than usual, his eyes looked larger, and his hair was dark and shiny.

“Pretty boy like you has got nothing to worry about.”

“I’ve got plenty to worry about,” he mumbled under his breath.

Billy glanced over at him. “What?”

“Nothing.”

They approached a train crossing up ahead, with flashing red lights and a boom barrier creaking down to keep cars off the tracks. Steve could hear the distant hum of the train, but he couldn’t see it yet.

Billy sighed as he braked in front of the barricade. “Shit… this better not be one of those trains that goes on forever and ever.”

When it finally roared into view, they could tell from its three enormous engines that it probably was going to be a really long one— it was slow, too.

“Great,” Billy grumbled, smacking the steering wheel in exasperation. “Well, that’s life in the sticks for ya.”

Steve yawned and pulled the collar of his peacoat up, slumping down in his seat. “It’s not so bad… you’ll get used to it.”

“If I’m here long enough… which is doubtful as hell.”

Oh.

Steve frowned and chewed on his bottom lip; he didn’t like the sound of that. A rogue image of Billy swam into his mind— whooping and sticking his middle finger in the air as he zoomed off in his Camaro immediately after graduating in June, leaving Hawkins (and everyone in it) far, far behind.

“So, uh… where are you gonna go?” Steve asked casually.

He just said he wasn’t gonna go to college...

Billy shrugged. “Depends.”

“On what?”

“Why do you care, Harrington?” Billy looked directly at Steve, arching one of his perfect eyebrows. “Don’t tell me you’d actually miss me…”

Oh, shut your smug trap.

Steve was too buzzed to think of a satisfying retort to put Billy in his place, so he just muttered “You wish” and sank down even lower in his seat, staring out the window.

They sat there for the next few minutes without talking, listening to the moody song on the radio and watching the seemingly endless train pass by. Steve was tired and stoned, but he couldn’t fall asleep; instead, he watched Billy tapping his fingers impatiently against the steering wheel, oddly fixated on the movements. He had never seen hands like Billy’s before. He knew he wouldn’t be able to
describe what exactly was so special about them— they were just hands, after all— but he couldn’t take his eyes off them. He felt a humiliating twinge of yearning in the pit of his stomach when he remembered the way those hands had pushed him back against the shelves in the pantry and reached down to touch his—

“What’re you looking at?” Billy asked with a curious tilt of his head.

“Nothing,” Steve lied hastily.

He could still feel all the alcohol and weed in his system wreaking havoc with whatever part of his brain was in charge of inhibitions and self-control.

*He wouldn’t mind, right? I mean, he started it…*

Billy’s hand was *right there*, resting on his denim-clad thigh. It was barely ten inches away, and Steve was itching to reach over and touch it. His heart pounded a little faster, even though he was fairly certain that he wouldn’t be rejected— Billy was the one who had pushed him into the pantry, after all.

*We didn’t even get a full seven minutes in ‘heaven’… dumb old Sophie had to come barging in.*

Unable to resist, Steve swallowed his fear, pulled off his left glove and reached over to touch Billy’s hand. He didn’t really know what he was doing; he just trailed his fingertips from his wrist to his knuckles.

Billy stared down at their hands, then glanced up at Steve; in the dim car interior, his blue eyes looked silvery-black.

Steve knew he wasn’t likely to get another opportunity like this again— alone with Billy? Late at night? Tipsy, high, and sleep-deprived?

*It’s now or never.*

Without moving his hand away from Billy’s, Steve licked his lips and leaned closer.

*BEEEEEP!*  

They both flinched. There was a car behind them honking its horn, informing them that the train had passed, the barricades had been raised, and the light had turned green.

“Shit,” Billy muttered, flooring the gas pedal and speeding ahead.

They didn’t speak for the next few minutes, during which Steve rested his head on the window and watched his breath fog the glass.

*This has gotta be the longest, weirdest night of my life…*

He yawned and idly drew a smiley face on the window with the tip of his finger.

“What’re you doodling over there?” Billy asked without taking his eyes off the road.

“What’re you looking at?” Billy asked with a curious tilt of his head.

“He wouldn’t mind, right? I mean, he started it…"

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“What’re you looking at?” Billy asked with a curious tilt of his head.
Jeez, I’m gonna conk out soon…

Each time the Camaro passed a street light, the little smile he’d drawn on the window was briefly illuminated… then it would fade back to darkness… and then it would be visible again when they passed the next street light… then it would darken again…

………………..

“Rise and shine, Harrington.”

The deep voice startled him back to consciousness and for a few confused moments, Steve had no idea where he was. He was so tired that he couldn’t even focus completely; his eyelids felt impossibly heavy.

Oh, right… I think I'm in his car.

“Wakey-wakey… you alright? We’re here.”

“Mm-hm.”

Steve didn’t know where ‘here’ was and he was too tired to care; his eyes fell shut again. He heard keys clinking as they were pulled from the ignition, followed by the loud slam of a car door.

Can’t I just, like… sleep here? Forever?

Steve instinctively shrank back into the passenger seat when his door swung open and the chilly night air wrapped around him like a blanket that had been left in the freezer.

“Up and at ’em, sleepyhead,” Billy ordered cheerfully.

Steve shivered and opened his eyes just enough to see where they were.

“Oh,” he laughed, blinking drowsily in the yellow glow of the car’s interior light. “Hey, it’s my house… how’d you find it?”

Ignoring the question, Billy reached into the car and proceeded to fumble awkwardly around Steve’s left hip, like he was searching for something.

Steve squirmed in his seat; his eyes widened in surprise. “What… what are you…?”

Billy’s face was so close— just an inch or two away— and Steve could smell him just as vividly as when they were crammed into that pantry together. Billy smelled like the ocean, which was impossible because Steve had never seen the ocean; he’d visited Lake Michigan once with his parents, but that definitely wasn’t the same thing.

Click.

Billy unfastened his seatbelt for him and began tugging him gently from the Camaro.

“Come on, buddy,” he muttered. “Let’s get you in bed.”

He wants to get me in bed, huh?

Steve chuckled softly at the absurdity of the situation: there he was— stoned, drunk, exhausted, and more turned on than he’d ever admit— getting half-dragged up his Loch Nora driveway by Billy Hargrove, of all people.
...completely crazy.

Steve tried to walk normally, but his limbs weren’t cooperating and he felt both ashamed and grateful when Billy pulled one of his arms up and placed it around his own broad shoulders.

“Just hold on, okay?”

Steve nodded obediently, then tripped on a crack in the driveway and lurched forward. He probably would have fallen face-first onto the pavement if Billy hadn’t grabbed him and hoisted him back to his feet.

“God.. sorry ‘bout that.”

“It’s fine, dude,” Billy replied quietly, tightening his arm around his waist as they approached the front doors. “Now, where are your keys?”

“I’ll, uh…I’ll get ‘em.”

Steve might be baked like a cake and three sheets to the wind, but he wasn’t quite so wasted that he needed Billy to start pawing through his pockets for him— the thought of those hands exploring his Brooks Brothers slacks was enough to make him squirm— so, he searched for the keys himself and sighed with relief when he promptly found them in his coat pocket.

But then he couldn’t get the damned thing in the keyhole.

“Crap,” he mumbled, poking the doorknob with his key. “Can you scoot over? Maybe we’re blocking the light— hey!”

Billy impatiently snatched the ring of keys from him and held them up to the porch light, squinting as he examined them.

“I almost had it, y’know,” Steve muttered, slumping wearily against the doorframe to support himself.

“Oh, yeah?” Billy rolled his eyes as he unlocked the door with ease. “You were trying to get into your house with your fuckin’ Beemer key, genius.”

Oh.

Embarrassed and annoyed, Steve spotted a rare chance to correct Billy and pounced.

“It’s actually pronounced Bimmer,” he said haughtily as he stepped into the dark, silent house and immediately tripped on the edge of a rug.

“Jesus!” Billy hissed, catching him yet again and holding him upright.

Steve was grateful that they were both wearing bulky jackets; while encircled in those well-muscled arms, he didn’t trust himself— or Billy, for that matter— to behave sensibly.

“There’s a, uh… a what-do-you-call-it, a light switch on the wall over th—”

“No lights,” Billy interjected, steering him towards the staircase. “Don’t wanna wake up your folks… is your room on the second floor?”

“Mm-hmm.” Steve reached out to steady himself on the wooden banister, but the moment Billy loosened his grip, his knees wobbled and he had to sit down right there on the carpeted steps. “I’m
fine, I’m fine… you can go home, now. Thanks for… for getting me here.”

He sighed wearily as he gazed up the flight of stairs; his head was starting to hurt and his bedroom seemed like it was a mile away.

*Just lemme sleep here… that’d be great…*

But Billy wasn’t going to let him curl up on the stairs like an oversized cat; he tugged him back to his feet and wrapped an arm around his waist again.

“C’mon,” he murmured into his ear. “I gotcha, man… let’s go, you can do it.”

There was an alarm ringing in the back of Steve’s mind, but it was faint and muffled, like it had been shoved under several layers of blankets and heavy quilts.

*We’re going… to my room? Where my bed is? Sometimes stuff happens on beds… like, bed stuff.*

Miraculously, they managed to reach the top of the stairs without further incident.

“Almost there,” Billy whispered breathlessly. “Which one is it?”

Steve flapped his hand in the general direction of his bedroom door and grunted something incoherent into the collar of his coat.

“What?” Billy hissed, twisting his head left and right as they passed each door. “I really don’t wanna barge into your parents’ room by mistake, so c’mon— which one is it?”

“Uh… that one?”

“What, you don’t know for sure?”

Steve snorted. “Okay, it’s absolutely, *definitely* that one.”

“It better be,” Billy muttered as he pushed open the door and helped him inside. “How many rooms do you *have* in this mansion, anyway?”

“It’s not a mansion,” Steve argued meekly, unsure whether he felt more like a giant rag doll or a sack of potatoes as Billy plopped him down onto the bed.

*Finally… thank God…*

“Nnnn,” he moaned, grateful to be back on the soft, familiar safety of his own down comforter.

His eyelids felt impossibly heavy, and he gave up on trying to keep them open. He felt Billy’s hands on his legs, lifting his feet up onto the bed and fumbling briefly with the laces on his shoes; he heard them clunk onto the floor, one after the other. Normally, he might be concerned about his socks smelling bad, but tonight he was too exhausted to care.

*Is he… is he gonna kiss me again?*

Steve was surprised when he felt the covers being pulled up to his chin and tucked around his shoulders. The small gesture was almost motherly and touched Steve more than he thought was possible; he fought a crazy impulse to reach out and…

*And… what, exactly?*
He didn’t know, and he was far too depleted to move his hands out from under the heavy blankets, anyway. He used his last scrap of consciousness to squint up at his unlikely caretaker and drowsily mumble his name.

“Billy?”

His eyelids drooped shut again and he felt the brief, gentle weight of a hand on his chest, all the way through his blankets and the thick coat neither of them had bothered to remove.

“Sweet dreams, pretty boy,” Billy murmured as he walked to the bedroom door and closed it behind him with a soft click.

Steve rolled over and smiled into his pillow, drifting swiftly to sleep. Incredibly enough, his dreams actually were sweet, for once; instead of demodogs and dead people, his slumbering mind was filled with secret kisses and strong hands that refused to let him fall.

Chapter End Notes

-Holy guacamole, that was long. 16k words for one chapter?? I wish I could give y'all kudos just for reading it, lol. You guys are awesome.

-Even though it's forty years old and has 84 million views on YouTube, I had somehow never heard 'Da Ya Think I'm Sexy' until a few months ago. If you, like me, have been sleeping on this infectious disco bop, please consider checking it out. I'm sure you'll agree that either Billy or Steve would pull off those leather pants way better than Rod Stewart; the man has his talents, to be sure, but he doesn't have much junk in the trunk.

-The unidentified melancholic song they listened to on the indie radio station is called ‘All Cats Are Grey’ by The Cure. It’s from 1981 and is one of my gloomy, rainy-day favorites.

Recommended listening: Big Giant Circles feat. Ashly Burch & Malukah—Outside the Realm

(^This is the ethereally beautiful humming song from the scene in ST2 when Jonathan helps Nancy get home safely and tucks her in after the Halloween party. There are some very intentional parallels between that tender scene and the one I wrote for our boys, but be warned: listening to ‘Outside the Realm’ while reading the end of this chapter may result in Feels.)
Chapter Notes

“As the deer panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after thee
You alone are my heart’s desire and I long to worship thee
You alone are my strength, my shield
To you alone does my spirit yield.”

— ‘As the Deer’ by Martin J. Nystrom, 1984

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday, March 10th, 1985

Billy couldn’t remember the last time he’d been in such a good mood. Ever since the party two nights earlier, he had floated around with a pesky smile that he couldn’t quite force back down into his signature bored scowl; when Max asked him what he was grinning about, the best he could do was twist it into a smirk and sneer something about life being a circus filled with clowns.

*Nosy little pest… I might not hate her like I used to, but she still needs to learn to mind her own damn business.*

Billy was in such high spirits, in fact, that he didn’t even know what music he was supposed to listen to. He had shuffled through every single cassette tape in his car, but the angry, snarling songs that usually made him want to thrash his head around didn’t move him when he was feeling this buoyant. How could he possibly listen to ‘I Don’t Give a Fuck’ or ‘Creeping Death’ when his brain wouldn’t quit playing ‘Walking On Sunshine’?

*Christ, when did I become such a sap?*

In the end, he didn’t listen to any music at all that Sunday morning as he drove the two miles to Hawkins Presbyterian Church; he just lit a cigarette and rolled the window down, enjoying the way the chilly wind whipped through the car and fluffed his hair, which was still slightly damp from his post-jog shower.

He had to admit, the small Indiana town could sometimes be downright *pretty*, especially in the early morning when the sunrise was slanting through the tall trees in the east and the birds were singing their breakfast songs. The sky was actually more blue than grey, for once, and the endless winter finally felt like it might be surrendering to spring.

He stretched his arm out the open window and let the breeze blow the ash off the tip of his Marlboro; there was a pleasant ache in his bicep from all the push-ups and weight-lifting he’d done the previous day. Both before and after his long shift on Saturday, he went on a long jog around his quiet neighborhood and did at least a hundred push-ups and crunches, so his whole body was sore (but in a good way). The exercise hadn’t done much to help him clear his head, though; all he could think about, with each sit-up and squat, was the party.

*Jesus, what a fucking party.*
At first, Billy hadn’t enjoyed himself on Friday night—not at all. Within five minutes of arriving, Diana’s obnoxiously tall, good-looking friend Brett had ridiculed the beer he’d brought and flirted with Steve, leaving Billy with a powerful urge to grab him by the popped collar of his Burberry polo shirt and slam his smug face into the nearest wall. And then there was the drunk asshole (Greg? Gary? Did it matter?) who had joked about gay plagues—Billy had come dangerously close to smacking the shit-eating grin off his face.

As the night progressed, Billy grew increasingly annoyed by all the wasted college girls hitting on him, but then he caught Steve looking at him with what might be jealousy and that was the moment he finally started enjoying the party. Hoping to see that sweet, sullen face again, Billy danced with the college girls and kissed Diana during Spin the Bottle; he didn’t want to do either of those things, obviously, but his half-assed plan actually paid off in the end—Steve looked bothered. Really, truly, bothered.

The memory of what followed in that fancy kitchen made Billy lick his lips and smile. He had finally plucked up the courage to just reach out and take what he’d been craving for so long, and it hadn’t ended catastrophically, the way he had feared. Instead of shoving him away and calling him a disgusting freak, Steve had not only let Billy kiss him but had actually kissed him back.

The thought of Steve Harrington—rich, preppy, and the best-looking guy in Hawkins, bar none—willingly making out with him in a pantry and pitching a tent in his expensive slacks was almost enough to make Billy believe in God again.

He tried to commit every single detail to memory: the way Steve’s soft lips parted, and how luxuriously thick his hair had felt between his fingers. He never wanted to forget that mouth-watering smell and the way those stoned brown eyes seemed to silently say, “If you want me, come and get me.”

It was impossible not to wonder what else might have happened if they’d had more time together. Billy had spent what felt like his entire Saturday trying not to think about it too much, but there were so many unexplored possibilities; as he replayed the events over and over he couldn’t help thinking about what he might have done differently if he could go back in time. He regretted not tilting Steve’s head to the side and kissing his long, mole-dotted neck while he had the chance, and he wished he’d seized the opportunity to feel Steve’s ass and slide his hands under his soft sweater, the way he’d done so many times in his dreams.

He was so fucked up… he probably would’ve let me, if dumb old what’s-her-face hadn’t barged in and ruined the mood.

Billy was so distracted by his lustful reverie that he sailed past the church and had to make a U-turn two blocks down the road. He flicked his cigarette butt out the window as he pulled into the church driveway and scanned the parking lot; there were only a few other cars at this early hour and his attention was immediately caught by a very familiar dark-red BMW.

Guess someone gave him a ride to his cousin’s house to get it back.

As soon as he stepped into the welcoming warmth of the church narthex and hung his black jacket on the coat rack, Billy could hear the sound of Steve’s soft tenor.

“You alone are my strength, my shield, to you alone may my spirit yield…”

Billy pushed open the heavy doors of the sanctuary and strolled down the center aisle, trying very hard not to grin like an idiot when he spotted Steve standing behind a microphone in the corner, singing almost absentmindedly as he played his electric guitar.
“You're my friend and you are my brother, even though you are a king… I love you more than any other, so much more than anything.”

He had never quite gotten over how nice Steve’s voice was, and he wondered if he’d received lessons as a kid. The thought of Steve in some kind of youth choir— like the one in which his own little sister used to sing— brought a wistful smile to Billy's face.

“I want you more than gold or silver, only you can satisfy…”

Their eyes met for just a moment before Steve stumbled over the words and his voice cracked— he quickly looked down at his guitar in embarrassment, still plucking the strings of his Fender but no longer singing.

“What’s the matter, Steve?” Mr. Bunderson asked, his voice amplified by his own microphone. “If you need a cough drop, I’ve got a whole jar of Luden's up here.”

Billy had barely noticed anyone else was in the room— the music director was sitting at the piano, playing along with Steve’s guitar with his one good hand (the other, still encased in a bulky cast, was cradled in a canvas sling).

Julian Bunderson was a short, slender man with neatly parted red hair, glasses, and a slightly comical midwestern accent. He was probably in his mid-thirties, but his boyish build and high voice made him seem at least a decade younger. Despite his broken wrist, Mr. Bunderson had been coming to church for the past several weeks; he couldn’t play the piano with his wrist in a cast, obviously, so he participated by singing and directing. His classically-trained contralto was note-perfect, but Billy reserved the (admittedly rather biased) opinion that Steve’s voice was superior.

Plus, Steve doesn’t have a corny accent from Canada or Minnesota or whatever frozen shithole this old dork came from.

“Here, Billy— have a seat, why don'tcha.” Julian stood up from the little bench and smiled politely.

“Is that everything for today?” Billy asked as he sat down, gesturing at the thin stack of photocopied sheet music on the piano.

“Yeah, you betcha.”

Billy felt a little strange taking over the job of a man twice his age, but it was very much worth it— he was handsomely paid for his time by Pastor Harrington and he got to hang around Steve for almost two hours.

Wonder if he’s thinking about that crazy kiss right now… is he blushing? Shit, I wish he’d turn around.

To Billy’s annoyance, Steve stubbornly refused to glance his way for the rest of the morning rehearsal and the entire first half of the church service; all Billy could see was the back of his blue blazer and an impressive mountain of shiny brown hair.

When Pastor Harrington stood up to deliver the sermon, everyone in the praise band left their positions to go sit with their families. Billy found Max and Susan on a pew towards the rear of the sanctuary, and he sat down silently beside his step-sister, whose long hair hung around her face like an orange curtain as she doodled on her bulletin.

Billy gazed up towards the first pew, where Steve was sitting next to his mother. He tried willing him to turn around and look at him, which had seemed to work sometimes, but on this particular morning,
Steve just sat there like a statue and kept his eyes on his father.

*What a good lil’ church kid… fuck, this is boring. Wish I could sneak outside for a smoke.*

The sermon lasted about twenty long, dull minutes, and when the pastor finally stepped away from the pulpit and four ushers stood at the front of the sanctuary with offering plates, Billy knew it was his time to shine. He cleared his throat and cracked his knuckles as he quickly strolled over to the grand piano and took a seat.

*Gonna be stubborn, huh? Yeah, okay… check this out, pretty boy.*

He had improvised a slow, soulful rendition of ‘Head Over Heels’ during his lunch break at work the previous afternoon. He doubted anyone in the congregation besides his step-sister would recognize the modern pop song, which was just as well—the only person in the room he was playing it for was Steve.

*I wanted to be with you alone… and talk about the weather.*

Billy sang the words along in his head as his fingers flew across the keyboard. Trying not to be *too* obvious about it, he glanced over at the front pew, where Steve was sitting next to his parents and staring down resolutely at his bulletin.

*I’m lost in admiration, could I need you this much?*

Billy kept silently imploring him to look his way, but it wasn’t until the very end of the song that Steve *finally* raised his head and met his eyes.

*Something happens and I’m head over heels…*

Almost as though Steve could somehow understand him, his cheeks flushed and he hastily looked down at his bulletin again, staring at it like it was the most fascinating thing he’d ever read in his entire life.

*God, he’s so pretty when he blushes.*

After the offering had been collected and Billy concluded his solo, the praise band reassembled and played another two songs, and then the morning’s service was over.

“May the Lord bless you and keep you, brothers and sisters in Christ!” Pastor Harrington said with a pearly-white grin, spreading his arms wide.

Billy got up from the piano bench, stretched, and made a beeline for Steve. He wasn’t completely sure what he was going to say, but he knew he’d figure something out.

*I could start with “Good morning”, then tell him he sang really well today, and if nobody’s listening I might mention the party and ask him if he can spare a minute to have a smoke in the parking lot, or—*

His path was blocked by Mr. Bunderson, the diminutive music director.

“Y’know, you sure pick some real interesting songs to play during the offering, Billy.”

*Please go away.*

Julian Bunderson didn’t seem like he was in any hurry, though. He cleared his throat like he was about to begin a long speech.
“Now, to be perfectly honest, I’m not sure how, um… appropriate some of these selections of yours really are for church. They’re a little… well, secular, to say the least.”

Annoyed, Billy’s jaw tightened and he recalled something the pastor had mentioned several weeks earlier, the first day he had been enlisted to be the substitute pianist.

“I wasn’t aware that ‘You Light Up My Life’ was in the hymnal,” he remarked dryly.

Julian looked surprised. “Who told you about that— Pastor Mark?”

“Yup.”

“Well,” he chuckled, sticking one of his long, skinny fingers under the cast just above his knuckles to scratch an itch. “The lyrics could certainly be applied in a liturgical setting because Christ lights up all our lives, don’tcha know.”

Yeah, right… Debby Boone wasn’t singing that song about God, she was singing it about some dude who was giving her good dick.

Billy resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Okay, well in that case, let’s just say I’m head over heels for Jesus.”

The older, shorter man didn’t look remotely convinced. “Uh-huh.”

“Besides, it’s not like there’s any cursing or hanky-panky in the song—”

“Holy buckets, I should hope not!” Julian’s already-too-large eyes widened behind their glasses and he glanced around furtively, even though the sanctuary was mostly empty and nobody was listening. “We are in the Lord’s house, for Pete’s sake!”

Man, I bet this little hoity-toity Jesus freak got beaten up a lot in school…

Billy snorted; he highly doubted that God would cast anyone into the pits of hell just for saying ‘hanky-panky’ in church. He suddenly noticed that Steve had finished zipping his guitar into its case and was taking off down the center aisle, striding as quickly as he could without actually jogging.

Damn! He’s making a run for it…

“Alright, Mr. Bunderson…” Billy pretended to check his watch, taking a few backwards steps towards the exit. “I’ve really gotta jet, so—”

“William Hargrove!” Pastor Harrington appeared out of nowhere and gave him one of his customary warm grins. “Glad I caught you before you scampered off!”

Aw, shit… I’m gonna be stuck here yakking with these boring old squares for the rest of my life, aren’t I?

Steve’s father smelled like expensive aftershave and was wearing an expertly-tailored grey suit with a green silk pastor’s stole draped over his shoulders. He patted Billy on the back and continued to chatter amiably.

“You sounded great today, as always, young man. Really fantastic. Hey, why aren’t you in the parlor? Edna Snyder— you know Mrs. Snyder, right?— well, she brought a platter of the most wonderful snickerdoodle cookies.”

“Uh…”
Billy attempted a thin smile that probably looked more like a grimace as he glanced over his shoulder at the exit; the doors had just swung shut behind Steve.

“They’re homemade, too, of course. Perfectly crisp around the edges, with a nice, soft center… I love it when you can actually taste the butter in a cookie, don’t you?”

*Jesus, is he ever gonna shut up?*

The pastor smiled at the music director and nodded at the sling he was wearing. “Say, how’s the old arm doing, Julian? Is it healing okay?”

“I mean, I hope so, sir…” The music director chuckled self-consciously and shrugged. “My doctor says the cast’ll come off in just a few more weeks.”

“Great, great… that’s great.” Pastor Harrington stepped over to Mr. Bunderson and wrapped an arm around his narrow shoulders. “We will all be so glad to have you back in the saddle.”

Billy was suddenly distracted from his extreme impatience when he noticed the way Julian seemed to be avoiding making direct eye contact with the pastor—he stared down at the carpet as Mr. Harrington gave him a brief, friendly squeeze.

*Why’s he turning so red… hang on… could this uptight dude be carrying a torch for Steve’s dad?*

The pastor smiled cheerfully at them both and said he hoped they’d get to sample one of Mrs. Snyder’s snickerdoodles before they were all gone, then strolled away to strike up a conversation with an elderly couple standing nearby.

Julian bit his lip and watched him for a few seconds before seeming to remember that Billy was still there.

_How did I not notice that before? It’s totally obvious, not to mention sad as hell… he knows the pastor’s, like, fuckin’ married, right?_

“Anywho…” Mr. Bunderson chuckled awkwardly as he straightened his bow tie. “Like I was saying to Pastor Mark just a minute ago, I’ll be gettin’ this gosh-darn cast taken off in a few more weeks. In the meantime, keep up the good work and, uh… just don’t play any satanic death metal, alrighty?”

Billy pretended to be crestfallen. “Well, that’s a massive bummer… I’ve spent hours practicing ‘Children of the Grave’ for next Sunday.”

Julian looked so horrified that Billy had to laugh.

“Just kidding, Mr. Bunderson— don’t have a cow, okay? I was just kidding. See you next week.”

*He’s light in his loafers. Man, I can’t believe I didn’t see it earlier… probably ‘cause I think about Steve too much.*

As Billy jogged down the aisle towards the exit, he wondered if the pastor’s son had noticed that there might be some subtle sort of forbidden flirtation between his father and the praise band leader… then decided it was unlikely. Billy might be completely head over heels for Steve Harrington but nobody could deny the boy was a bit of a space cadet.

………………
He reached the church parking lot just in time to see Steve’s dark-red BMW rounding the corner and disappearing from view.

“Pussy,” he muttered under his breath, scowling and shaking his head.

He wasn’t really upset, though. It was better, he reasoned, that Steve was speeding off without saying a word instead of confronting him with a solemnly apologetic look on his face. Billy would much rather be avoided than be forced to endure a tense conversation that began with “Look, we need to talk” and ended with “But maybe we could still be, like, friends or something.”

*If he’s running away like that, it’s gotta mean he still hasn’t made up his mind against me, right?*

He could work with that.

…………………

After dinner that night, Billy went for a two-mile jog and did push-ups until his arms felt like they were going to fall out of their sockets. He stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror and admired his physique; it was happening in excruciatingly slow motion, but his body was finally starting to look the way he thought it should. Ever since getting his weight low enough to be able to wrestle Steve in gym, Billy had completely abandoned his restrictive diet and had tripled his weight-lifting and calisthenics regimen. The results were impressive—he had put on at least six pounds of solid muscle and was starting to look a little like one of those body builders he used to admire from afar at the beach in Santa Monica. As he ran his hands over his taut abs, he closed his eyes and thought about Steve’s long fingers shyly exploring his body.

*He wants to, I just know it. He thinks I don’t see him checking me out, but I’m not blind… I’ve gotta think of a way to get him alone, sometime.*

…………………

Sleepy and satisfied after jerking off in the shower, Billy collapsed face-first onto his bed and fell asleep almost immediately. He had a long, confusing series of dreams which ended with an especially sexy one that took place in the school gymnasium. He dreamed that he and Steve were paired up during wrestling and neither of them had remembered to wear an athletic cup. As they rolled around and grappled on the mat, Billy could feel Steve’s hard-on right through the flimsy fabric of his uniform.

“Y’know, it’s a shame all these other assholes have to be here,” he whispered, leaning closer than he would ever be able to get away with in reality. “You ever wish you could just, like… snap your fingers and make people disappear?”

“W-what?” Steve stammered. “No…?”

He ran his hand down Steve’s waist and gripped his hip, making him quiver with pent-up yearning.

“Liar.”

Without giving it a second thought, Billy snapped his fingers in the air and everyone—Coach Fergus, Tommy, Phil, and all the other boys in the gym—instantly disappeared without a trace. He rolled Steve onto his back, then bent down and kissed him hungrily.

“Jesus,” Steve gasped when he lowered his mouth to suckle his neck. “We… we can’t.”

“Why the hell not?”
Steve let out a low moan when Billy ground their hips together. “Someone could come in, s-someone might…”

“So what?” Billy growled. “Fuck ‘em. This is my dream, and nobody tells me what to—”

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Evidently, somebody did tell Billy what to do: his old alarm clock, which had begun blaring at exactly five-thirty a.m.

“Ugh, shit…”

Beep! Beep! Beep!

“Shut the hell up, goddamn it.”

Billy reached a hand out from beneath his blankets and smacked the power button on his clock radio, sighing in the sudden silence. He usually hated Mondays, but today was different. Steve wouldn’t be able to ignore him the way he had at church.

Unless he chickens out and skips school… man, he’d better not.

Dismissing that annoying possibility, Billy whistled ‘Head Over Heels’ as he strolled down the hallway in his pajamas, surprising Max, who stepped out of the bathroom and regarded him with sleepy suspicion.

“It is way too early for all that whistling,” she managed to say while yawning. “What’re you so cheerful about, anyway?”

“What’s not to be cheerful about?” Billy quipped as he maneuvered past her in the narrow hallway. “It’s a beautiful fuckin’ morning and I’m about to beat my meat. Might take a nice, big dump, too.”

“Oh my god, EWW!” Max screeched, smacking his arm before stomping off towards her room. “You are so gross!”

Billy cackled and resumed whistling the moment he’d shut the bathroom door, partly to annoy his step-sister but mostly just because he felt like it. And why not? The boy of his dreams had kissed him — really, truly, actually kissed him— a mere three nights earlier and they were about to face each other again at school.

“You can run, but you can’t hide, pretty boy;” he murmured quietly to the mirror, leaning over the sink and staring into his own aquamarine eyes like Steve was on the other side of the glass. “I’m comin’ for you.”

Chapter End Notes

-Recommended listening: Teenage Bad Girl— Keep Up With You (Lifelike Remix)

-The character Julian Bunderson was a lot of fun to write and was inspired by Domhnall Gleeson, who I basically just shrank and endowed with a dorky Minnesotan accent, a
church job, a broken wrist, and a big gay crush. We'll be seeing a little more of him in the future, but this is mostly a Billy & Steve show :)

“Dizzy in the head and I'm feeling bad
The things you've said have got me real mad
I'm gettin' funny dreams again and again
I know what it means but… I can't explain.”

—‘I Can’t Explain’ by The Who (1964)

Monday, March 11th, 1985

Steve was having a dream… probably. He knew, in a detached sort of way, that this
couldn't possibly be real. Billy was wrestling with him in gym, just as he had dozens of times before,
but the vinyl mat beneath them felt different— more like a mattress, really— and neither of them
were wearing the dorky headgear like they ought to be. All the other students in the room seemed
blurred and oddly distorted, but the most striking difference of all was that Steve wasn't wearing an
athletic cup under his singlet; he was distantly aware of how his uncaged dick was growing stiffer
with each passing moment and pushing out the synthetic green fabric of the tight uniform.

Billy had apparently forgotten to wear his cup, too, because Steve could feel something large and
hard poking him as they rolled around on the mat, grappling for the most advantageous position; it
wasn't much of a fight, though— Billy was winning.

Of course he is… Jesus, look at the size of him.

As if feeling Billy's hard cock wasn't distracting enough, Steve was pinned in such a way that he
could feel those round biceps bulging with the effort of maintaining the hold. Since it was a dream,
nobody else in the room seemed to notice or care that Steve’s shoulders had been successfully pinned
to the mat for well over three seconds; the coach was nowhere in sight and there were no shrill
whistles putting an end to the match. Steve had no idea if it was the first round, second, or third.

“Y’know, it’s a shame all these other assholes have to be here,” Billy said in a low, husky whisper,
leaning in dangerously close. “You ever wish you could just, like… snap your fingers and make
people disappear?”

“W-what?” Steve stammered, squirming beneath him. “No…?”

“Liar.”

Billy raised his hand in the air and snapped his fingers— everyone vanished.

Whoa, that was cool.

Steve squirmed again beneath Billy’s crushing weight and managed to make the situation in his
singlet even worse by inadvertently rubbing their crotches together.

God, that feels good… way, way, way too good.
When Billy kissed him, all the pent-up tension in his body melted and he felt himself go limp.

“Jesus,” he gasped as Billy moved down to kiss the side of his neck. “We can’t…”

“Why the hell not?”

Steve wasn’t sure what to say to that. He was pretty sure this was all just a dream, but it was getting harder to tell… and some other things were getting harder, too.

Oh, crap… I’m gonna come if he keeps rubbing me like that… w-what are we doing? Aren’t we at school?

Feeling a sudden rush of panic, Steve struggled to string words together in a way that might make sense.

“Someone could come in, s-someone might—”

“So what?” Billy growled in his ear. “Fuck ‘em. This is my dream, and nobody tells me what to do.”

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Steve jolted awake, breathless and confused. For a moment, he thought it must be the middle of the night, but then he noticed the faint, greyish light of early morning illuminating the edges of his curtains. He twisted his head around to look at the display on his digital clock, the numbers glowing red in the semi-darkness.

“What the…” he mumbled sleepily. “Five-thirty? Seriously?”

His alarm wasn’t actually beeping at all; he had only dreamed it, and now that he was awake he couldn’t hear it anymore. Steve never set his alarm so early, and he double-checked to confirm that it was, indeed, programmed to go off at seven o’clock.

That’s weird… I could’ve sworn I heard an alarm. It sounded so real.

Steve sighed and sank back onto his pillow, afraid to close his eyes and go back to dreaming about… that. One major element of the dream had stayed with him, though, even when wide awake: his dick was jutting up insistently, visible beneath the blankets and demanding his immediate attention.

He stumbled across his bedroom to the bathroom and switched on the light, yawning as he picked a crusty crumb from the corner of his eye.

Jesus, this sucks... I oughtta be asleep.

Stubbornly delaying the inevitable, Steve ignored the uncomfortable situation in his flannel pajama pants and bent over the sink to splash cold water on his face, shivering when a few drops ran down his neck. He gazed up at his reflection in the mirror and blinked wearily, then heard a faint but unmistakable deep voice speaking as though it was in the bathroom right in front of him.

“You can run, but you can’t hide, pretty boy… I’m comin’ for you.”

Steve was so startled that he inhaled sharply and flinched away from the mirror; even though he knew, logically, that it could only be some lingering echo from the bizarre dream he’d just woken up from, it was still more than a little spooky.

“Stop it,” he whispered, both to himself and to the voice that almost seemed to be speaking from the
other side of the mirror. "Stop."

He squeezed his eyes shut and wiped the cold water from his face with a towel, scrubbing until his cheeks and forehead were pink and tingling. Then he sighed with resignation and pulled his pajama bottoms down to his knees.

*Nothing unusual about a little morning wood... it’s got nothing to do with that cocky jerk. I’m just going through a dry spell, that’s all. I’ll take care of this and go back to bed for a while. Who the hell wakes up this early, anyway?*

Steve managed to avoid running into Billy most of the morning, but then it was time for gym, which was definitely the worst possible class to have with someone he had shared a drunken kiss with at a party and dreamed about barely six hours earlier.

*Is he... gay? Am I?*

No, he assured himself firmly, he was *not*. That was impossible. He’d had sex with girls countless times over the past few years, and he’d enjoyed every minute of it (the girls had never complained, either). If he was gay, he would never have been able to get his dick up... right?

*Jesus, this is crazy. I shouldn’t be thinking about any of this stuff.*

He got to gym early and changed into his wrestling singlet in less than three minutes, then darted out of the locker room just as Billy and most of the other boys strolled in.

“Where’s the fire, Harrington?”

*Shut up.*

Steve prayed they wouldn’t be paired together, but it didn’t work—Coach Fergus ordered him to get on the third mat with Billy.

“Hey,” he said quietly as they got in their starting positions.

“Hey,” Steve mumbled, focusing on the dingy laces of Billy’s black Converse high-tops.

*Just be cool.*

The coach blew his whistle and all the boys began their matches. Steve tried so hard to avoid looking Billy in the eye or touching him more than necessary that he ended up pinned to the mat within the first minute.

“What the hell was that?” Coach Fergus bellowed at him from across the room, shaking his head with disapproval. “Get your head out of the clouds and focus! You’re getting crushed, for cryin’ out loud!”

*Well, yeah... he’s practically the size of a damn fridge.*

“Hope you weren’t too hung over on Saturday morning,” Billy said conversationally as he extended his hand.

“Oh, um...” Steve let himself get hoisted back up to his feet and adjusted the legs of his tight singlet, which had ridden up into his crack. “I think I slept it off, y’know? I didn’t wake up until, like, two o’clock.”
Billy snorted. “Must’ve been nice. I had to work all day.”

Steve rolled his eyes as he dropped down to his hands and knees, assuming the dreaded ‘bottom’ position. Since Billy had won the first round, he got to kneel behind him in the advantageous ‘top’ position, with his left arm wrapped around Steve’s waist and his right hand gripping Steve’s right elbow. As soon as the coach tweeted his whistle, the second round began.

Determined not to lose again, Steve quickly spun to the left to make his escape, but Billy held on tightly to his right forearm.

“Shit,” he hissed under his breath, wincing in pain— the more he pulled away from Billy, the further his wrist was twisted. “Ow! Th-that really…”

Billy immediately let go of his arm, but then he doubled his grip around his waist— he was effectively hugging him from behind.

Jesus, this is kinda…

Steve could feel his cheeks getting hotter as he wriggled helplessly and tried to rise to his feet. Billy’s broad chest was pressed against his back and he could actually feel his warm breath on his shoulderblades.

“L-lemme go,” Steve muttered in frustration, and for a fraction of a second he thought Billy was actually obeying him— he felt the muscles in those enormous arms relax and the vice-like grip loosen.

But it was just another one of Billy’s tricks. The moment Steve managed to twist his body around so he could duck down and escape, the larger boy fell forward onto him like a sack of bricks.

“You got pretty damn hammered at the party,” he panted as he attempted to grab both of Steve’s arms.

Don’t answer him… just ignore him, he’s trying to distract you.

“Do you, uh…” Billy caught his wrists and held them tightly, shoving his back down against the vinyl mat. “Do you even remember… everything?”

Steve paused, breathing fast and hard. “W-what do you mean?”

Everything? Is… is he talking about what happened in the pantry?

His memories from that night were jumbled-up and clouded by all the weed and alcohol he’d consumed. He remembered everything up until the game of Spin the Bottle pretty well, but then things started to get patchy. He remembered being confused by how jealous he got and almost scared by how he had reacted to Billy in the kitchen.

Self-conscious and exhausted, Steve tried not to look up at his opponent, but where else was he supposed to direct his attention? When he turned his head left or right, all he could see were those immense biceps and deltoids caging him in, and when he glanced down he tensed at the sight of his own narrow hips being straddled by Billy’s bulging thighs.

Crap.

Grunting with exertion, Steve struggled to keep his shoulderblades off the mat; losing another round might not be anything new, but that wouldn’t make it any less humiliating.
“Y’know, Harrington, it’s a real shame—”

Steve interrupted him by jerking one of his wrists free, only to have it snatched again.

“Quit wriggling so much, will ya? Anyway, like I was saying…” Billy nodded briefly in the general direction of a pair of boys wrestling on a neighboring mat. “It’s a shame all these other assholes have to be here.”

WAIT, WHAT?

It was exactly what Billy had said in the dream. Steve’s heart beat a little faster and his whole body stillled, noticing that Billy wasn’t even trying to pin his other shoulder to the mat; he had Steve trapped, but he didn’t seem like he was in any rush for the match to end.

“You ever wish you could just, like… snap your fingers and make people disappear?” Billy asked in a low voice.

“W-what?” Steve stammered, unnerved and beginning to feel like he had stepped into an episode of ‘The Twilight Zone’. “You mean, like a wizard or something?”

Billy smiled, arched an eyebrow and bent down even closer; some golden-brown hair was stuck to the sweat on his temples.

Steve would rather die than admit it, but he didn’t find the salty smell of Billy’s perspiration especially unpleasant; if he was being truly honest, he might even say he liked it.

“Knock it off,” he hissed.

“Knock what off?” Billy asked innocently, staring down at Steve with those eyes that reminded him of the greenish-blue waters of Lake Michigan. “We’re just wrestling, dude… isn’t that what we’re supposed to be doing?”

The last time they had made direct eye contact like this was in church, when Billy was playing ‘Head Over Heels’ and looking at Steve like he was the only other person in the room. The memory made Steve squirm and scan the room nervously, even though nobody seemed to be paying any attention to them; even the coach had his back turned, preoccupied with scolding Tommy.

“No full nelsons, dammit! How many times do I have to tell you blockheads? Go sit on the bench before you seriously hurt someone.”

In the dream from the previous night, Billy had snapped his fingers and actually made everyone in the room disappear. Steve wasn’t sure what would be worse: their current situation, with a bellowing, perpetually-angry gym coach and at least a dozen other teenage boys in the vicinity, or being completely alone with an irritatingly good-looking, thickly muscled alpha on top of him.

At least we’re both wearing cups this time… crap, don’t think about that.

“Alright, you win, asshole… get off me,” Steve grunted, finally managing to free his hands and shoving Billy’s chest with all his might; he tried to breathe through his mouth, but the strangely addictive smell was inescapable.

He rolled over and rose to his knees, refusing to take the hand Billy offered to him.

“God, I hate wrestling.”
“What’s that, Harrington?” Coach Fergus barked as he passed by with his clipboard.

“Nothing, Coach,” Steve mumbled. “It’s just… it kinda feels like we’ve been learning about wrestling forever. Are we gonna do anything else this semester?”

“Swimming!” Coach Fergus answered brightly. “You’ll start right after spring break, and then all of you punks will officially be Mr. Taylor’s headache, not mine.”

As the coach chortled and plodded away, Steve glanced back in Billy’s direction.

_Swimming? Jesus Christ…_

A treacherous image popped into his head without any warning: Billy Hargrove dressed in nothing but a tiny Speedo, with wet hair and water dripping down over all those round, taut muscles.

_Oh, shit._

He could feel his dick growing harder within the confines of his cup and jock strap; it was almost uncomfortable enough to actually _hurt._

“I… I’ve gotta go,” he stammered, taking a few stiff, backwards steps towards the doors.

“But we only went two rounds,” Billy pointed out, tilting his head and regarding him curiously. “You okay, dude? Don’t you wanna finish the match?”

“Uh, not really, no,” Steve muttered, clenching his thighs together.

“No, you’re not okay or no, you don’t wanna finish the—”

“Both!” Steve snapped, surprised by the shrill anger in his voice. “All of the above, alright? Jeez, leave me alone!”

_I’d just lose, anyway, so what’s the point?_

Losing a wrestling match or two wouldn’t be so terrible— his grade in the class was mostly based on participation, after all— but somebody noticing his hard-on and spreading rumors would be an absolute nightmare.

_Walk faster, almost there…_

“Where do you think you’re going, Harrington?”

The coach’s booming voice made him stop in his tracks, right beside the doorway.

“Uh… just the bathroom, sir,” Steve replied hesitantly, hoping he looked like an innocent P.E. student who urgently needed to take a leak.

“Ha! Lookit the weird way he’s walking,” Tommy jeered from his seat on a bench next to the supply bin; the pair of dumb betas sitting beside him guffawed and nudged each other. “You gotta piss, King Steve, or are you constipated and full of shi— _ow_!”

_A set of wrestling headgear had just shot through the air and hit Tommy on the side of his face with an audible _thwack_. He stopped laughing, leapt to his feet and turned a furious shade of red, whirling around and searching for the culprit as everyone snickered, including his so-called friends._

“Who the fuck threw that?”
Coach Fergus blew his whistle hard enough to hurt everyone’s ears. “Hey, watch the language!”

“But some asshole threw—”

“I don’t care, Hagan! Lose the potty mouth, pick up the damn headgear and put it in the bin.”

“But—”

“Quit whining, unless you wanna run laps. And I’d better not see anyone abusing the equipment, got it? It’s school property and you’re gonna respect it, or else. No chucking things around! You got that, Hargrove?”

“Loud and clear, Coach,” Billy called out in a bored voice, fluffing out his sweaty curls as he sauntered towards the weight room.

Oh.

Steve felt dumb when he realized who’d thrown the headgear at Tommy— of course it was him.

I can defend myself… he doesn’t have to do that kind of stuff for me.

It wasn’t like he really hated “that kind of stuff”, though. In a weird way, it felt a little like having a friend— someone who would rise to his defense, no questions asked.

Quit it. Just ‘cause he throws shit at Tommy doesn’t make him a friend. Half the school probably wants to throw things at that loud-mouth jerk, after all.

When Billy glanced over his shoulder and winked, Steve bit his lip and took a few more unsteady, backwards steps towards the door, almost tripping over the edge of a wrestling mat.

Jesus, what’s wrong with him? And what’s wrong with ME?

The memory of strong hands and masterful kisses in that dark, marshmallow-scented pantry returned to him suddenly, making him feel dizzy. His half-hard dick stiffened as though it was reminding him why he’d been rushing away to the bathroom in the first place.

Crap, crap, crap!

Steve rushed out of the gym, trying to distract himself from the humiliating situation between his legs by mentally adding up how many months it had been since he had spent time with a girl.

Nance basically dumped me on Halloween, so that’s three— no, two months in eighty-four, plus January, February, and, like… half of March.

He was startled to realize that he had been single for a whopping four and a half months, and since Nancy had never been “in the mood” during the last month or two of their doomed relationship, that meant he hadn’t had sex in at least half a year.

Six months? Christ, no wonder I keep getting boners.

“This is crazy,” he chuckled uneasily, his voice echoing in the empty corridor on the way to the locker room. “Totally batshit crazy.”

“It’s a shame all these other assholes have to be here.”

It was a strange enough thing to say on its own, but when Steve factored in how much it sounded
like the line from his dream, it went from strange to disturbing.

“Goddamnit,” he muttered under his breath, just like he had before letting Billy kiss him at the party.

Why didn’t I push him away? And why can’t I quit thinking about it?

“That stupid perv is ruining my life!” Steve declared dramatically, lashing out by kicking a nearby trash can. “Ow, shit!”

Now his big toe hurt, on top of everything else.

He doesn’t have a girlfriend… that doesn’t make someone gay, ‘cause I don’t have one, either, but… seriously, why the hell doesn’t he have a girlfriend?

As far as his own relationship status went, Steve was confident that there were plenty of girls at school who would go out with him if he asked; some of them might even let him get to home base on the first or second date. That wasn’t really the point, though. He simply didn’t want to start something new with anyone at Hawkins High.

Not with any of the girls, anyway.

Steve heard a record scratch inside his head and froze just outside the bathroom door.

Wait… what?

Chapter End Notes

-It wasn’t until after I selected ‘I Can’t Explain’ as inspiration for the title of this chapter that I realized Scorpions (of ‘Rock Me Like a Hurricane’ fame) made a cover (not until 1988 but whatever). Gotta love a little kismet. It’s fun to listen to the sunny mod original (Steve) and then the Scorpions metal version (Billy).

-The swimming concept is entirely inspired by this one great interview Joe Keery did with Seth Meyers in which he said Steve Harrington was originally supposed to be some type of swim team jock, which would seem to suggest that an early version of Hawkins High included a swimming pool (leave it to the Suffer Bros. to consider putting a lanky, mole-bespeckled beauty like Joe Keery in a skimpy swimsuit and then say “Nah, nobody wants that.”) Anyway, I intend to rectify this truly incomprehensible lapse in judgment. I could do with some Speedo!Steve in my life, couldn’t you?

-So, I don’t have any prior experience w/ writing A/B/O and I was doing a bit of research on actual pack dynamics when I came across this on Wikipedia: “Omega is an antonym used to refer to the lowest caste of the hierarchical society. Omega animals are subordinate to all others in the community, and are expected by others in the group to remain submissive to everyone. Omega animals may also be used as communal scapegoats or outlets for frustration, or given the lowest priority when distributing food.” Uhhhhh that sounds awful and there are some aspects of the animal kingdom that are truly fucked up. As you can probably tell, I haven’t been taking that particular route in this fic. Here, an omega isn’t something terrible, an omega is The One. I hope nobody is
too confused by my fumbling approach. If you are ever puzzled about something, please let me know in the comments and I’ll do my best to explain and possibly even try re-writing the bit that was confusing.
“So come on down and walk with me and tell me I'm your man;
I only wanna know a couple of things about you:
Where were you when I was in so much trouble with myself
And do you still believe in me like I believe…?

I've been thinking good good things about you,
Cool and warm, good good things about you,
If you've been thinking good good things about me,
So cool and warm when you put your arms around me.”

— ‘Good Good Things’ by Descendents (1985)

Thursday, March 21st, 1985

Billy had never been very good at waiting. His restless and impatient nature was firmly established eighteen years earlier when he arrived in the world three weeks ahead of schedule, squalling indignantly with tiny, balled-up fists and blood on his bald little head.

“Always in a hurry, with nowhere to go,” his father used to say.

As a child, Billy’s impatience often drove his parents crazy, whether he was climbing to the top shelf of their closet to steal a peek at his Christmas presents, burning his mouth on hot food rather than waiting a minute for it to cool off, or sticking a pint of ice cream in the microwave for fifteen seconds because it was frozen brick-hard and he wanted ice cream right freakin’ now.

Steve Harrington was a little like that ice cream, Billy thought: stubbornly dense and unyielding enough to bend a spoon in half.

If I keep warming him up, will he melt for me?

He didn’t want to scare him away, of course—not when it felt like he was finally making incremental progress—but reigning in his urges wasn’t easy. Every time he saw Steve, whether in the parking lot or the locker room, Billy had to fight the dangerous impulse to just… grab him. Grab him, shove him against the nearest surface (be it wall, car door, or the floor beneath their feet) and kiss him until he turned to jelly in his arms. In history class, where Billy sat right behind him, he often struggled to pay attention to the teacher because he was so easily distracted by all that glossy brown hair and perfect, mole-dotted neck. He tortured himself with memories of the party and wished he’d seized the opportunity to kiss that neck while Steve was stoned, drunk, and pressed against the pantry shelves.

Should’ve just gone for it and given him a damn hickey… a souvenir to remember me by.

Gym class was the most difficult challenge of all. Most days, Billy found time beforehand to lock himself in a bathroom stall and jerk off, but that wasn’t always enough to prevent uninvited erections.
That first Monday—a week and a half ago, now—had been especially trying. After getting a tepid response to his polite attempts at small-talk, Billy had thrown caution to the wind and borrowed a few choice phrases from the sexy dream he’d had the previous night.

*He turned so red... Jesus, that was cute.*

He was starting to think that he might have gone too far, though. They hadn’t gotten to wrestle together since that Monday because Steve was arriving later and later to gym class, and after some yelling and lecturing about the importance of punctuality, Coach Fergus would either bench him or banish him outside to run laps on the track as punishment.

*Is he avoiding me ‘cause he’s freaked out about how he feels, or am I just flattering myself?*

Billy may have felt a little flattered at first, but then Steve had stayed home from church, and though he showed up at school on Monday morning, he left just before gym and wasn’t seen for the rest of the day... or the next day... or the next. When Steve was absent *again* on Thursday, Billy was no longer flattered; he was worried. After making sure nobody was in earshot, he casually asked Coach Fergus if he knew where Steve was and learned that he was home sick.

“*It must be the flu or somethin’, since he’s just about missed the whole damn week,*” the coach had guessed.

*The flu? Shit.*

Billy hated going to school without Steve there; it was *so* boring. He couldn’t stand wrestling with other boys in gym and the sight of Steve’s empty chair in history class was more depressing than he thought possible.

“Why so glum, chum?” Maxine teased as she sat down in the Camaro beside her step-brother that afternoon after school.

“I’m not glum,” Billy muttered darkly, tossing his messenger bag in the backseat.

“Does it have anything to do with how much Steve Harrington’s been absent lately?”

“Hell, no!” Billy snapped, a little more loudly than he’d intended.

*Jesus, how does she even know about that? She’s too sharp for her own good.*

Max smirked. “You don’t have to work today, right? Maybe you could, like, bring him some soup or something.”

Billy rolled his eyes and opted against dignifying her corny suggestion with a reply; he turned on the radio to drown out anything else she might have to say.

He was hardly willing to admit to *himself* how much he missed Steve, so he certainly wasn’t about to admit it to his nosy little step-sister.

*Besides, I don’t miss him, I just... hope he’s okay. That’s all.*

…………………

After dropping Max off at the arcade to play Dig Dug with her friends, Billy drove to Old Cherry Road and let himself into the quiet house. Nobody was home, which was just the way he liked it; he was free to chug orange juice directly from the carton without Max whining about germs and
backwash or informing him that he looked like a gorilla when he scratched his armpits. He was very glad that he didn’t have to work that day; his job was easy and enjoyable enough, but he wasn’t in the mood to plaster on a fake smile for customers today.

The phone rang and Billy ignored it, as usual, but when he heard a familiar, gravelly old voice speaking on the answering machine, he sprinted through the house to pick up the receiver.

“Hey, Gramps, I’m here.”

“Billy?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Sorry I didn’t get to the phone sooner.” Billy sat down on the couch, settling in for what was likely to be a long conversation. “How’re you?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Damn arthritis has been flaring up, but other than that I s’pose I can’t complain about much. I was just calling to see how you were doing.”

“I’m okay.”

“How’s school? You gettin’ good grades?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“How’s your dad and, uh…”

When Grandpa Ron trailed off, Billy figured he’d forgotten the names of Neil’s new wife and stepdaughter and was too embarrassed to say so.

“Dad’s fine, and so are Susan and Maxine.”

“That’s great, that’s great. Y’know, I was wondering something, Billy.”

“Yeah?”

“Are there any omega gals at that new school of yours?”

Oh, great... here we go.

“Um, it's a really small town, so…”


Billy cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “Actually, since I’ve got you on the line, uh… could I ask you some things about that stuff?”

“What stuff?”

“You know… alpha and omega stuff.”


Billy had so many questions, and there was nobody else in the world he could ask. He’d rather jump off the water tower outside his high school than discuss the subject with Neil.

“Well, um… theoretically, if I did meet someone—”

“Ha! I knew it. Tell me more.”
Billy felt a little guilty for lying to his grandfather, but what else was he supposed to do— tell his old-fashioned, Roman Catholic grandfather all about Steve and ask him if he’d ever heard of two alphas having a soul bond?

“So, how would I know if there’s, like… if there’s something big between us? Y’know, something major.”

“You mean a bond, Billy?”

“Yeah. Like, is it an instantaneous, struck-by-lightning kinda thing, or—”

“No, no, no,” Grandpa Ron chuckled. “You’ve been watching too many of those Hollywood movies. A bond takes time— at least, it did for me and your Grandma Cathy. But trust me, you’ll know when it’s the real deal.”

“How, though?” Billy pressed, frustrated. “I mean, betas have been falling in love and going gaga for each other since the dawn of time, so how are we so different?”

His grandfather laughed again. “Oh, it’s different, all right… believe me. It’s more than love.”

Billy sighed. He wanted specifics, but it would feel way, way too weird to ask about how his grandmother used to smell or if there was anything unusual about the sex itself.

*Maybe if I just get him to talk he’ll say something useful.*

“Um… you and Granny Cathy met in high school, right?”

“That’s right,” Grandpa Ron said wistfully. “Lord, she was the prettiest thing I ever laid eyes on… stubborn as a damn mule, though.”

*Sounds like someone I know.*

“I won her over in the end, as you already know.”

“How’d you win her over?” Billy asked curiously.

“What kind of question is that?” The old man cackled. “With my good looks and charm, of course!”

“I’m serious, Gramps… how’d you do it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s been over forty years, Billy… most of it’s just run-of-the-mill stuff, like bringing her flowers and taking her to the movies. I didn’t give up, that’s for sure. You gotta persist— let ‘em know your intentions are honorable and you’re not gonna lose interest after five minutes.”

Billy twisted the phone cord around his finger and frowned. “But flowers and movies and stuff— how’s that any different from what regular couples do?”

*This isn’t helping.*

“Omega gals like dressing up and goin’ to the movies just as much as any regular beta woman, I suppose— hey! I just remembered something.”

“Something about what?”

“About what makes omegas different from the rest,” Grandpa Ron elaborated. “Cathy took my sweater.”
Billy wondered if he’d heard correctly. “I'm sorry, she what?”

*Maybe he’s finally starting to lose his marbles.*

“I had this varsity sweater, y’know— a real nice, red cardigan. Well, one day it went missing. My mother pitched a fit when she heard I’d lost it. Wasn’t until a month or two later that I finally found out where it went.”

“Wait… so Grandma really *stole* your sweater?”

“Ha! She sure did! *And* this old wool hunting cap I used to wear in the winter… that went missing, too.”

Billy found this very difficult to imagine; his dearly-departed grandmother had been honest almost to a fault. He could still dimly remember an occasion when he was seven or eight and accompanied her to the grocery store for some reason; much to his excitement, he spotted a ten-dollar bill lying on the floor. Billy had wanted to keep it, of course, but his grandma had insisted on taking the money to a cashier so that the employee could make an announcement about it on the PA system. When nobody came forward to claim it, the cashier handed the ten-dollar bill back to Granny Cathy, but instead of giving it to her bright-eyed, hopeful grandson, she tucked it in her handbag and declared she would save it for the offering plate at church.

*Man, I miss her.*

“It wasn’t until we started canoodling in her bedroom that I saw ‘em again,” Grandpa Ron continued. “She had my hat *and* my cardigan folded up under her pillow.”

“What? Seriously?”

The mental image of his grandfather sneaking into his grandmother’s bedroom in the early ‘40s for some “canoodling” was both bizarre and gross.

“Absolutely. Cathy was real embarrassed, at first, but I eventually got her to tell me that she was so partial to the way they smelled that she just couldn’t help herself.”

*That’s so crazy…*

Billy leaned his head back onto the couch and stared up at the beige ceiling. “Did she give you your stuff back, at least?”

“ Heck, no!” Grandpa Ron laughed. “Are you nuts? I didn’t want her to give any of it back… in fact, I let her have one of the shirts I was wearing that day, too.”

“So, Granny just had, like… a pile of your clothes in her bed?”

“Not sure if I’d call it a *pile*, but yes. She used to call it her ‘nest’, actually… like she was a bird, or a mama squirrel or something.”

“Was she, uh… y’know, pregnant?” Billy asked, feeling slightly squeamish about broaching such a personal topic.

“No, no… maybe I shouldn’t’ve said ‘mama’. She wasn’t a mama yet— we were necking, to be sure, but you really had to draw a line in those days if you didn’t wanna get in trouble. No fancy birth control pills or nothin’ back in the ‘forties, you know. My parents kept me under lock and key when she started havin’ her time of the month.”
“Time of the… you mean when she was on her period?” Billy was getting more confused by the second, and he really didn’t want to think of any woman on her menstrual period, much less his deceased grandmother.

“Period!” Grandpa Ron barked. “Lord have mercy, hasn’t Neil been telling you anything?”

“No,” Billy admitted. “But to be fair, I haven’t exactly, like… asked him about anything.”

His grandfather sighed with exasperation. “Listen, Billy— you’re eighteen now. There’re some things you gotta know, okay? When you meet your special lady, there’s something that’s gonna start happening on the full moon each month, and it’s got nothin’ to do with a damn period. At least, I don’t think it does… I’m no expert on the female side of things, y’know.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Billy said quickly, wondering again if his grandfather was losing his marbles or if he’d simply misheard the old man. “Rewind a little… something happens on the full moon?”

“That’s right.”

“Jesus, like a… are we like werewolves?”

“Werewolves? Ha!” Grandpa Ron cackled. “You’ve got one hell of a sense of humor, Billy, lemme tell ya. You’d give Rodney Dangerfield a run for his money. Anyway, it’s just one night a month, from sundown ’til sunrise… your omega is gonna go wild.”

“Wild?” Billy repeated dubiously.

“That’s right… there are some who call it ‘going into heat’ but I never liked to say that. I hated to think of my sweet Cathy— an angel, you know— bein’ described the same way you’d talk about a dumb dog, or some noisy alley-cat who oughtta be spayed.”

What the fuck? Going into heat?

“So anyway,” Grandpa Ron continued. “When that starts happening, it’s just about a done deal. She has her special time of the month, which’ll make you start going crazy, too.”

“What? W-what do you mean, crazy?”

I don’t like the sound of that…

The old man sighed again. “My father used to call it ‘the rut’, but that’s not much better than ‘heat’, if you ask me… we’re not goats or deer, and for us it’s just the one night a month, not a whole dang week or however long it is for animals. Make sure you talk to your dad about that when it starts happening, ’cause you’ll need his help to keep you inside.”

“Keep me inside?”

Billy hated the thought of his father having to come up with ways to physically restrain him in his room, even if it was only for one night each month.

This really does sound like some made-up werewolf shit.

“It’s for your own good, sonny… you don’t wanna be a papa yet, right?”

Billy snorted. “Uh, no.”

Pretty sure I won’t have to worry about that, but I’m not gonna tell Gramps I’ve set my sights on a
“Hang on,” Billy said slowly, trying to make sense of all this new information. “Did you have to barricade my dad in his room or something when he met Mom?”

“No, they met in college, which was outta my jurisdiction. Why else do you think they got married so soon and had you not too long afterwards?”

“Oh.”

Billy didn’t like to think of his mother getting insanely horny and letting a much-younger version of his odious father crawl through her dormitory window for a long, sweaty night of passion. He couldn’t stand being reminded of the simple biological fact that he had started out as nothing more than a squirt of Neil Hargrove’s jizz between his mother’s parted legs.

Blegh.

“So anyway, if you wanna find out if this lady friend of yours is the real deal, you might consider ‘forgetting’ an article of clothing someplace where she can easily find it. See what she does… might be interesting.”

“Isn’t that kinda weird and sneaky?”

“It was just a suggestion, Billy. You don’t have to.”

“Okay.”

Easier said than done… what would I leave behind, and where would I leave it?

“If you find out she’s collecting things of yours, that means she can’t get enough of the way you smell, and if that’s the case, then you know you might be headed for something real serious: a bond. She might be your soulmate.”

“Soulmate,” Billy repeated quietly, enjoying the way the word sounded.

He suddenly remembered a moment from the party, when Steve had drunkenly admitted something that Billy hadn’t registered as being significant, at the time.

“You smell really nice, and it’s kinda getting on my nerves.”

Grandpa Ron cleared his throat three times, and Billy heard the crinkling sound of a cough drop being unwrapped. “Hey, did your dad ever tell you about the dream-sharing?”

“Uh… Mom mentioned it once or twice, but I don’t really know anything about how it works.”

“Lord, that’s the best part! I really oughtta have a talk with Neil, ‘cause it’s absurd that he hasn’t told you anything about—”

“Don’t talk to him,” Billy begged hastily, “Can’t you just tell me everything?”

“Well, I’m happy to, but I really think your dad is the one who’s supposed to—”

“I can’t talk to him about this stuff, okay? Don’t ask me why, but I really can’t. Really.”

Grandpa Ron paused for a few seconds before speaking again. “Is he… is Neil bein’ a good father to you, Billy?”
Billy pressed his lips tightly together and swallowed a lump in his throat. He was momentarily brought back to that night in November, when his father had shouted at him and punched him in the face for the capital offense of pointing out that Maxine Mayfield wasn’t his real sister.

“He, uh… he tries his best,” Billy lied, trying to keep the emotion from his voice.

He didn’t want to disappoint his grandfather by telling him the son he and his beloved Cathy had raised was cold at best and cruel at worst, and he definitely didn’t want Neil to find out that Billy had said something negative about him behind his back.

“It really does a number on a man, to lose his mate,” Grandpa Ron remarked wistfully. “I miss Cathy like crazy— all day, every day— but we had a lot more time together than Neil got to have with your mama. I think he might still be a little bitter about that.”

A little? Jesus, he’s the most bitter old piss-pot I’ve ever met.

Grandpa Ron yawned. “Jeepers, I’m gettin’ sleepy. It’s almost one in the afternoon over here. Past time for my nap, I think.”

“Okay, Gramps. I’ll let you go, then. Thanks for calling, and for telling me all this stuff.”

“Hey, it’s no trouble at all.”

“I mean it.” Billy insisted, wishing he didn’t suddenly feel like crying; talking to the old man had summoned so many memories of his childhood in California. “Thank you for everything.”

“You’re very welcome, sonny boy. You give me a call any time you’ve got questions, you understand? Or if you just wanna talk. Even if it’s the middle of the blasted night, you can call me, okay?”

“Oh, okay. Thanks. Bye, Gramps… have a nice nap.”

Billy hung up the phone and sniffled.

“Get a grip,” he muttered to himself, rubbing his nose. "Don't be a goddamn crybaby."

He realized that his grandfather had never actually told him anything about dream-sharing. It was intriguing, but Billy wasn’t sure he wanted to hear all the details about something he would probably never be able to experience himself.

Even if I could somehow get Steve to like me a little and fool around, it’s not like we could ever be… soulmates. That’s impossible. Right?

It took Billy exactly forty-five seconds of pacing through the empty house to decide that he didn’t give a shit what was possible or not.

Fuck it. I’m gonna go see him.

Filled with stubborn determination and renewed purpose, he went to his room and pawed through his closet until he found his favorite sweatshirt— a black one with a hood and faded ‘Metallica’ logo— which he pulled over his head and topped with a denim jacket. He fussed with his hair in the mirror for a few minutes before grabbing his keys, locking the front door, and hopping in his Camaro. He was more than halfway to Loch Nora when he remembered something Max had said and suddenly
cranked the steering wheel to the left, doing a U-turn and heading back to Main Street.

“Maybe you could, like, bring him some soup or something.”

Billy stopped at the crowded deli and ordered a quart of chicken noodle soup to go. It was filled to the brim and steaming hot, with a thin plastic lid that didn’t inspire much confidence, so he strapped it tightly into the front seat of his car like a tiny passenger.

Last thing I need is a bunch of damn soup ruining my seats.

Fortunately, Billy remembered how to get to Steve’s house— more or less. He only made one wrong turn before finally finding the familiar street, which looked even more impressively regal in the light of day.

“All at once am I several stories high, knowing I’m on the fancy-ass street where you live,” he sang under his breath as he pulled up to the curb, grateful that nobody could hear him doing something as gay as improvising a number from ‘My Fair Lady’— a musical he had watched several times with his mother, when she was alive.

He unbuckled the warm container of soup, being very careful not to squeeze it too much, and held it in the crook of one arm as he trotted up to the house. There were no cars parked on the long driveway and Billy was already starting to form a contingency plan— what would he do if nobody was home?

I could leave the soup on the porch, maybe. With a note? No, definitely no note.

Billy cleared his throat, unsure why he suddenly felt so nervous, and rang the doorbell. When nobody had answered after ten seconds or so, he rang it once more.

Might be better if nobody’s home. This was a dumb idea.

“Oh, well,” he muttered, feeling foolish as he turned around and walked back down the driveway.

He froze when he heard the click of the front door being opened.

“Hargrove…? Is that you?”

“Oh, hi!” Billy said a little more brightly than he’d intended, turning around quickly.

Steve stood in the doorway, looking adorably confused and dressed neatly in chinos and a blue and yellow striped rugby shirt.

He doesn’t look very sick…

Billy was surprised; he expected Steve to appear (that is, if he felt well enough to appear at all) in silk pajamas and a Ralph Lauren bathrobe.

“Didn’t see your Beemer— sorry, Bimmer— so I thought maybe nobody was home.”

“It’s in the garage,” Steve said blankly. “What’re you, uh… what’re you doing here?”

Billy had already rehearsed his story on the short drive to Loch Nora. “I just thought you might wanna know what all the homework is. You’ve missed a lot, y’know?”
“Oh.” Steve pointed to the styrofoam container. “What’s that?”

“This?” Billy had almost forgotten he was holding the warm little tub. “Uh… it’s soup.”

Steve’s forehead crinkled. “Soup?”

“Yeah, soup.” Billy was starting to feel pretty self-conscious, which he instinctively disguised with sarcasm. “It’s a type of food you eat with a spoon.”

I shouldn’t’ve brought the damn stuff… shit, I knew this was going overboard.

“I know what soup is, smart-ass… but what’s it for?”

“It was Max’s idea,” Billy explained awkwardly, reaching up to fluff out the curls on the back of his neck. “Chicken noodle, y’know? ‘Cause I heard you’ve been sick.”

Is it too late to just chuck the whole thing in a fuckin’ shrub and leave?

Steve rested his head against the doorframe and chuckled; his thick brown hair flopped into his eyes. “Oh, man… I think I get it now.”

“What’s there to ‘get’? I know it was corny,” Billy mumbled. “You don’t have to take it if you don’t —”

“No, no, it’s fine.” Steve reached out impatiently. “Give it to me.”

Billy stepped closer and reluctantly passed him the container; at the same moment their fingers brushed together, their eyes met. He was pleasantly surprised when Steve didn’t immediately look away.

“Do, um…” Steve cleared his throat and took a step back into his house. “Do you wanna, like… come in for a minute?”

Do I? Hell, yeah!

Billy pretended he wasn’t ecstatic and kept his expression as neutral as possible. “Sure… why not?”

As he followed Steve through the foyer, Billy gazed around like he was visiting a museum.

God, it’s absolutely fucking massive.

“You gonna have some of this stuff with me?” Steve called over his shoulder, rounding a corner and leading Billy into a large, gleaming kitchen; his bare feet made no sound on the pristinely clean floor. “It actually smells pretty good, and I never had lunch today.”

Billy wasn’t the world’s biggest chicken noodle soup fan, but he nodded and leaned against the counter, watching as Steve opened the container and poured some soup into two matching mugs.

“C’mon,” he said quietly, passing a spoon and a steaming mug to Billy. “Let’s go downstairs.”

Why, what’s downstairs?

The vast house was completely silent and Billy wished there was a way to ask Steve if he was home alone without sounding like he had devious ulterior motives.

I couldn’t really try anything, anyway… not when he’s got the flu or whatever. Nobody wants to
Walking carefully so he wouldn’t spill his soup, he followed Steve through an enormous living room to a door that appeared to lead down to some kind of furnished basement.

“Now, this is pretty sweet,” Billy remarked as he headed down the narrow, carpeted stairway. “Looks like you got a cool rec room down here, huh?”

“Mm-hm... you ever play video games?”

“Not as much as my sister, but yeah.” Billy smiled at the unexpected memory of hours spent in his North Hollywood bedroom with only his beloved Atari console for company. “I used to play ‘em all the time, back home… mostly Dig Dug, Space Invaders, and—”

“Pac-Man?”

“Yup.”

If someone had told Billy the previous fall that in less than five months he would be eating soup in a basement and talking about video games with Steve Harrington, he would definitely not have believed it. Yet, there he was.

“Well, I have Pac-Man if you wanna— hey, I know!” Steve’s soup sloshed precariously as he hurried over to an old coffee table that had a Nintendo console sitting on it along with a small nest of tangled electric cords and an eighteen-inch television set that was already turned on. “Have you ever played this one called Mario Brothers?”

“I’ve heard good things about it, but no.”

“Oh, man,” Steve said with a grin, pressing a button on the video game console that made a cartridge pop out; he tossed it aside carelessly and rummaged briefly in an old Nike shoebox until he found the cartridge he was searching for. “You’re gonna like it, I promise— it’s pretty easy and super fun; I’ll show you.”

Billy had never seen him so excited before.

*Just like a little kid.*

“Well, don’t just stand there.” Steve flapped his hand impatiently at the sofa. “Have a seat, already.”

Billy sat down obediently, took off his denim jacket, and glanced around. The couch, the old coffee table, and most of the furniture in the large room seemed to be relics from another generation— the ‘50s or ‘60s, perhaps. Billy guessed that Mrs. Harrington had decided, at some point, that the furniture was too shabby or unfashionable to keep upstairs and sent it down to Steve’s den.

“Mario and Luigi,” Billy read the blocky letters aloud from the black screen. “Two players can play as a team or compete against each other.”

“So, which way do you wanna play?”

“Which way do you wanna play?” Billy tossed the question right back at him, well aware of the implied parallels but unsure if Steve was sharp enough to catch anything so subtle.

He wasn’t.

“I mean, playing as a team would make more sense,” Steve said slowly as he set his mug of soup
down on the carpet next to a huge leather beanbag chair. “Since you’ve never played before. Right?”

Jesus, he’s dumb. But so, so cute.

Billy smiled as he took a sip of warm, well-seasoned chicken broth from his mug. “Alright—teammates it is. So, am I gonna be Mario or Luigi?”

“Uh… it doesn’t really matter, they’re basically exactly the same.”

“Tell you what: I’ll be Mario, you be Luigi. You like green, right?”

Steve nodded, picked up two controllers and passed one to Billy. The small, rectangular plastic brick had a cord attached to one end and five buttons: select, start, A, B, and a cross-shaped joystick. It was nothing like the controller for Billy’s old Atari console, and he stared down at it curiously, hoping he wasn’t about to make a complete ass of himself.

“Okay, so that makes you player one and me player two,” Steve said, using his controller to enter their names.

Billy was startled by the little thrill he got just from seeing Steve slowly type the letters B-I-L-L-Y onto the screen, and then S-T-E-V-E.

Our names look good together.

After playing for just fifteen minutes, Billy felt like he had gotten the hang of the game and his competitive streak made an appearance, evidenced by occasional outbursts of “Hey, that coin was mine!” or “You made me run into that fuckin’ turtle, man!” or “Get your ass outta my way, Luigi!”

He had never heard Steve talk so much before in the entire half-year they’d known each other. The chatter was strictly game-related, of course, but it was still nice to see Steve let his guard down and relax, for once. He laughed a lot more, too—an adorable chuckle Billy tried to memorize, along with those warm brown eyes that drooped a little and crinkled in the corners.

I wish we could just stay down here like this forever, laughing about stupid shit and playing video games.

“See, you gotta jump up and hit the platform from below. Yeah, like that. Then jump up and bonk it out of the way—”

“Bonk it out of the way? What the fuck?”

“See, you didn’t get to it in time.”

“Why’d it change color? Shit, it’s speeding up!”

“Don’t touch the little swirling fireball thingies, man.”

“I’m trying, Harrington, jeez. I can’t make Mario’s fat little ass run any faster than this.”

“Well, how fast could you run in overalls?”

“As if I’d ever be caught dead in overalls. Do I look like a fuckin’ farmer?”

“They’re plumbers, though.”

“They are?”
"Sure. Italian plumbers. That's why there are so many pipes. Hey, watch out! There’s one coming from each direction and they’re gonna— whoops, you’re dead!"

Billy couldn’t remember the last time he’d enjoyed a lazy afternoon so much; an hour and a half passed in what felt like no time at all.

“Fuck! I died again.” Billy tossed his controller down on the couch. “Those goddamn sewer turtles really piss me off.”

He had gotten so worked up about the game that his armpits were starting to sweat; he took off his hoodie and tossed it carelessly beside him on the sofa.

“So, is this all you’ve been doing the past few days?”

“Yeah… and other stuff,” Steve replied vaguely without taking his eyes off the TV screen.

*What ‘other stuff’?*

“Well, at least you don’t seem *that* sick… you’re not, like, laid up in bed feeling miserable and puking, right?”

Steve’s uncomfortable silence made Billy a little suspicious.

“*Right, Harrington?*”

Steve cursed under his breath when a Fighter Fly landed on him, sending poor Luigi plummeting off the screen. “Yeah, about that. I’m, uh… not really sick.”

“What? Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Man,” Billy said slowly, shaking his head. “I didn’t *think* you looked sick… you haven’t coughed once the whole time I’ve been here. You’re seriously telling me you’ve been *ditching* since Monday?”

Steve nodded sheepishly. “I wrote a note and forged my mom’s signature. Gave it to Phil on Monday night and he dropped it off at the office for me on Tuesday morning. It’s not a huge deal, though… we didn’t have any tests this week, right?”

“No…”

“Any big homework assignments due?”

“Not really, but… I mean…” Billy was astonished and more than a little impressed; he had always thought Steve was too much of a goody-goody to play hooky. “That’s unexpectedly punk rock of you, Harrington.”

*Wonder what other rules he might be willing to break…*

Steve chuckled modestly and Billy had to laugh along with him, because nobody could possibly look *less* punk rock than the boy sitting across from him with primly crossed ankles, preppy chinos, and a rugby shirt with sky-blue and butter-yellow stripes.

“You’re not gonna tell anyone, are you?”
Billy bristled; he was almost offended. “Hell, no! You really think I’d squeal on you?”

“No, I guess not.”

“I might not always be the world’s nicest guy, but I’m no rat.” Billy stared at him until he finally glanced up and met his eyes. “You can trust me, dude.”

“I know,” Steve said hastily, looking away again. “Sorry.”

“But… why the hell have you been staying home? I can understand blowing school off for one day, but four? Jesus.”

Billy didn’t like to think of what Neil would do to him if he found out his son had ditched school; whether it was four days or just one afternoon, the punishment was guaranteed to sting and leave bruises.

“I wasn’t just sitting at home,” Steve mumbled, keeping his eyes glued to the television screen. “On days when my mom was around, I’d sometimes take a long drive… or I’d go to the quarry and just, like, listen to music and think, y’know?”

“No, I don’t know.” Billy arched an eyebrow and willed him to look at him. “Think about what, exactly?”

“Oh, nothing in particular,” Steve replied vaguely; he refused to meet Billy’s gaze but the way he chewed on his bottom lip betrayed his discomposure. “Just, uh… stuff.”

Stuff, huh? Stuff like me?

Billy had no idea how to ask the question that was weighing on his mind without risking humiliation. He briefly considered not asking him at all, but he had to know.

“You weren’t staying away all this time to, um… avoid me, right?”

Steve looked at him sharply. “What?”

Billy sighed and chose his words carefully. “I know I can come on a little strong sometimes, but—”

“That’s the understatement of the year,” Steve muttered, rolling his eyes.

They both fell silent for a minute. The fact that Steve had completely dodged his question hadn’t been lost on either of them; Billy could tell because Steve’s cheeks were a little pink, he was refusing to meet his eyes again, and as they kept playing the game he started making stupid mistakes that lost him the next three rounds.

Am I getting under your skin, amigo?

Billy really, really wanted to walk over to Steve’s beanbag chair, kneel down in front of him and cup that pretty face in his hands; he could almost see it happening, in his mind. But he resisted the urge, telling himself that such a brazen approach might scare Steve and result in him never asking Billy to play video games with him again. What had seemed so simple at Friday’s party now suddenly seemed impossible, when they were both completely sober and the lights were on.

But he’s blushing… and he keeps looking at me. Fuck it. Fortune favors the bold, right?

Billy glanced over at him and licked his lips. “So, if you’re not really sick, does that mean we can—”
They both flinched and looked towards the stairwell when they heard a door slam from somewhere within the enormous house.

“Does that mean we can… what?” Steve asked warily, his brown eyes widening.

“Nothing,” Billy muttered, intensely irritated at whoever was about to spoil his rare alone-time with Steve. “Forget it.”

*Guess we won’t be making out, then.*

“Crap, the soup!” Steve groaned, dropping his controller and flopping back onto the beanbag chair. “I just remembered I left the rest of it there on the counter…”

“So what?” Billy replied as he pouted at the TV screen and took his annoyance out on a Shellcreeper. “Being outta the fridge for an hour or two won’t make it go rancid.”

*Someone just had to come home right when things were gettin’ good, huh? Jesus, what shitty timing.*

“My mom thinks I went to school,” Steve hissed. “What’s she gonna say about chicken noodle soup? That’s, like, the official food of being under the weather. She’s gonna know something’s up.”

“Oh. Right.”

Billy felt guilty; he knew he shouldn’t have brought it.

*How the hell was I supposed to know this crazy punk was faking it, though?*

“Steve, honey…” Mrs. Harrington’s gentle voice sounded strangely amplified in the stairwell. “Are you down here?”

“Oh, yeah! Hi, Mom!”

“Hello, dear. And hello to you, too, Billy! I thought I recognized that spiffy blue car parked outside. How are you, dear?”

“I’m great, thanks,” Billy replied politely, like he hadn’t been considering ravishing her son a mere fifteen seconds earlier. “How are you?”

“Just fine, just fine… a little tired, maybe.” She patted her neatly permed brown hair and turned to leave, then paused. “Oh, Steve? Where did that soup on the countertop come from?”

Steve’s eyes grew round with panic and he glanced helplessly at Billy, who cleared his throat while he conjured up a quick fib.

“It’s mine, Mrs. Harrington. I’m not sick or anything, but I was, like, really craving some chicken soup today for some reason, so I stopped by the deli on my way over here. We both had some.”

“Huh. Well, if you boys aren’t too full, I just popped a spinach lasagna in the oven and I’m going to make a nice salad. Are you staying for supper, Billy?”

“Oh, um… no, I don’t think so.” Billy smiled courteously. ”Thanks a million, though. I think I’m gonna head home and do some homework.”

“Well, alright,” Mrs. Harrington said as she walked back upstairs. “Another time, perhaps.”
Billy waited a few moments until he heard her soft footsteps fading away, then looked regretfully at Steve.

“Sorry about the soup, man. I never should’ve—”

“No, no, it’s okay,” Steve interrupted, holding up his empty mug. “See? It was better than I thought it was gonna be. So don’t sweat it, alright?”

Billy checked his watch. “Shit, it’s almost six…”

Steve rose to his feet and yawned, covering his wide-open mouth with one hand and using the other to poke the power buttons on the TV and Nintendo console.

“You got somewhere to be?”

“Kinda, yeah,” Billy admitted, thinking of his step-sister waiting impatiently outside the arcade. If he was too late, she might just skate home, which would only work out well if Neil wasn’t home yet to see that Billy had shirked his duties, yet again.

“Hot date?” Steve quipped without smiling.

“Hotter than the one we just had?” Billy teased back, gesturing at the Nintendo set. “Not possible.”

Just as he hoped, Steve pursed his lips and looked flustered.

So cute.

“The one we just… but, uh, this wasn’t a date,” he chuckled uncertainly. “It was… y’know, it was…”

“Yeah, I know.” Billy met his eyes and winked. “I was just messin’ with you, dude.”

Steve stood up straighter and stepped closer, holding out his hand. “Here, gimme your mug. Mom can’t stand it when I leave dishes down here.”

Billy deliberately let their fingers brush together as he passed over his mug and spoon; sure enough, Steve flinched at his touch and turned away quickly.

That keeps happening.

Before following him upstairs, Billy tugged on his denim jacket and cast a quick, backwards glance over his shoulder at the black sweatshirt he’d “forgotten” on the couch.

It’s worth a try, right? Maybe Gramps was on to something.

He climbed the stairs a step or two behind Steve, shamelessly enjoying the excellent view of his hips and butt, which looked a little curvier than usual in those pleated chinos. Billy imagined what might happen if he reached out in the dimly-lit stairwell and gave that round little bottom a good, hard squeeze. Would Steve suddenly freeze like a statue, or keep walking and pretend nothing had happened? Would he drop the empty mugs he was carrying and tell Billy to never darken his doorstep ever again?

Better not get greedy and push my luck... his mom's home, so he's gonna be extra jumpy.

“Goodbye, Billy!” Steve’s mother called from the kitchen as they walked to the front door.
“See you later, Mrs. Harrington!”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay for din—”

“Yeah, Mom, he’s sure!” Steve answered for him, rolling his eyes as he knelt down in the foyer to pull on his Puma sneakers.

Billy hadn’t been expecting Steve to put on shoes and escort him outside, but that was exactly what happened.

*What a gentleman.*

They ambled slowly down the long driveway in companionable silence. The sun was setting behind the trees that surrounded the Harrington’s large property and there was an early-springtime chill in the evening air. Billy tucked his hands in the pockets of his denim jacket, relieved that Steve hadn’t noticed that he was wearing it over just a black t-shirt and that the Metallica sweatshirt was missing.

*I’m probably just kidding myself, but… let’s see what he does when he finds it.*

The Harringtons had a long driveway, but it wasn’t nearly long enough for Billy, who wished he could keep strolling with Steve forever. They reached the curb in less than half a minute, and Billy took his time fishing his car keys out of his pocket.

“Well, thanks for havin’ me over.”

“I didn’t exactly ‘have you over’, though… you just kinda showed up on your own.”

“Yeah, ‘cause you tricked me, you sneaky little punk,” Billy grumbled defensively. “It’s not my fault you had me thinkin’ that you were, like, stuck at home dying of scarlet fever or some shit.”

“I didn’t *trick* you.”

Billy twirled his keyring on the end of his finger, stalling for more time before he had to get in his car and drive away. “Admit it, Harrington— you deliberately bamboozled me in the hopes of scoring some free soup.”

Steve laughed. “Alright, you got me. It *was* pretty good soup, too. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Billy took one cautious step forward, halving the distance between them. When Steve looked at him but didn’t move away, Billy scrapped his original plan to be as devastatingly suave as possible and reached out for one of Steve’s hands.

*He’s not gonna reject me. He won’t.*

And he didn’t— not at first, anyway. They both stared down at their interwoven fingers, and Steve hesitated for just a moment before lightly dragging his thumb over one of Billy’s silver rings. The tiny movement was intimate enough to make the hairs on Billy’s arm stand up, and he craved more… more, more, *more.* But then they heard a car door slam somewhere nearby, jerking them back to the present.

*Oh, for fuck’s sake. It’s always something.*

Billy clenched his jaw as Steve hastily pulled his hand free and wiped it on the front of his chinos.
“S-sorry,” he stammered, taking a step backward and glancing up and down his darkening street like he expected to see someone giving them the stink-eye. “It’s just… you never know who might be watching.”

“Yeah,” Billy muttered sullenly, crossing his arms. “Wouldn’t wanna give some nosy snob the wrong idea.”

Steve opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again without saying anything. Surprisingly, he didn’t immediately turn away and retreat to the safety of his large house; he just stood there indecisively, looking conflicted as he chewed on his bottom lip and refused to meet Billy’s eyes.

*Coward.*

Billy knew he wasn’t much braver, though— not if he was being completely honest. Instead of growling “Screw the neighbors” and dramatically pulling Steve in for a kiss like he was a Hollywood heartthrob, all he did was clear his throat and change the subject.

“You planning on playing hooky again tomorrow, or…?”

“No, I’ll be there.” Steve stuffed his hands in his pockets, almost like he didn’t trust his ability to keep them to himself. “I’ll come to school.”

“Cool.” Billy jerked his thumb towards his car. “Well, uh… I’ve gotta go pick Max up. See you later, man.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

Steve turned and trotted back towards his house, and Billy took one last longing look at his shapely ass before climbing into his Camaro and slamming the door.

*God, is he trying to kill me?*

His car still smelled strongly of chicken bouillon and celery. Billy switched on the ignition, stuck a cigarette between his lips, and rolled down the window, closing his eyes as he let in some cool evening air. It was hard to hear much over the rhythmic rumbling of his car engine, so he didn’t notice the sound of rapid footsteps until they were right outside his window. He opened his eyes just in time to see a familiar hand reaching into his car to pluck the unlit cigarette from his mouth.

“Hey! What’re you—”

Steve didn’t let him finish. He grabbed Billy’s face with both hands, bent down into the car and smushed their lips together.

*Holy shit!*

Billy blinked in shock, but neither of them bothered closing their eyes— the kiss only lasted three seconds before Steve pulled away breathlessly and jogged back up his driveway.

*Did that really just happen?*

Billy blinked again and slowly raised a hand to his lips. The kiss was much shorter than the one they’d shared at the party on Friday, but it still felt more… *significant*, perhaps because they were both completely sober; there was no weed or booze that Steve would be able to blame, this time.

He looked at the rearview mirror and grinned when he realized that Steve, whether he was aware of
it or not, was running off with Billy’s Marlboro still pinched between his fingers.

“What a sneaky punk,” he chuckled, reaching in his jacket pocket to pull another cigarette from the pack. “It’s all good, though… you can keep it, pretty boy.”

Chapter End Notes

-Recommended listening: Ramones- Judy is a Punk (in the cinematic version of this fic that exists in my head, that song starts blaring the moment Steve leans into Billy’s window)

-I also listened to 'Brand New Colony' by The Postal Service while I was editing; the old-school video game sounds and fluffy lyrics mesh well with this chapter. It's from 2003, when I was a sophomore, so it makes me think of my own time at high school.

-Fun fact: bean-bag chairs were invented in the late ’60s and became a huge trend in the ’70s. They were advertised in JCPenny catalogs and such. I think it is entirely plausible Steve had one as a kid and kept it be it was so damn comfy.
Chapter Notes

“I’m not dumb, just wanna hold your hand.
So alright.”

— ‘Paper Tiger’ by Spoon

Friday, March 22nd, 1985

Steve knew it had been a terrible idea to miss so much school as soon as he saw how pitifully far behind he was in his first two classes. His impulsive sabbatical to clear his head hadn’t even worked; after almost four days of lounging in his BMW at the quarry until three o’clock in the afternoon— smoking Parliaments, listening to the radio, daydreaming, and overthinking everything— his head was no clearer.

And that was all before Billy Hargrove had decided to show up at his house on Thursday with chicken soup and an enigmatic smile. What was Steve supposed to do in a crazy situation like that— just take the soup and close the door in his face?

He looked sort of… lonely.

Steve didn’t like to admit it, but he was pretty damn lonely, too, and had been for a long, long time. He hadn’t realized the full extent of it until the moment he parted ways with the boy who’d spent the last two hours eating soup and playing video games with him. There was no point in denying it: Steve had a great time and wished Billy didn’t have to go so soon.

He wasn’t sure what was more surprising about the day before— when Billy reached out and took his hand or the fact that Steve let him. It was right there on the street, though, where anyone could see, so Steve had pulled away in the end; he could still picture the disappointment in Billy’s eyes.

Just like a sad golden retriever.

It had made Steve feel surprisingly guilty, which was probably what spurred him to sprint back to the Camaro, stick his head through the open window and give Billy a hasty goodbye kiss.

Holding a guy’s hand and kissing him goodbye? Who the hell am I?

It was almost impossible to wrap his head around— he had kissed a boy twice, now. Twice! The first time, he’d been lonely, drunk and stoned, but the second time… well, he was still plenty lonely, but he was perfectly sober and that hadn’t stopped him.

I’m going crazy… Jesus, this is all so nuts.

It would have been easy to never repeat the drunken events from Diana’s party if the kiss in the pantry had been terrible— bad breath or too much tongue, perhaps— but it wasn’t terrible... not by a long shot. It was better than kissing a girl, even; not a single one of the young ladies Steve had been with— not Laurie, Amy, Becky, nor Nancy— had lips like Billy Hargrove. Those girls probably
wished they had lips like that, Steve thought: temptingly full with a perfect cupid's bow and—

Brrriiiinnnng!

Startled by the loud bell, he jerked in his seat and made the annoying beta sitting in front of him twist around and snicker.

“Rise and shine, Harrington, it’s time for your favorite class: recess.”

Steve rolled his eyes and stifled a yawn. “I wasn’t asleep.”

“Have a good weekend, everyone!” Mrs. Jarvis said brightly from her desk in the front of the classroom. “Remember to look over the review questions at the end of chapter nineteen, okay? Some of you could really benefit from the extra practice.”

She looked directly at Steve and raised one of her thin, grey eyebrows.

Yeah, yeah… don’t worry about me, I’ll study. I’ve got the whole weekend.

As Steve bent down to shove his notebook into his bag, his hand brushed against the soft cotton fabric of a black sweatshirt— the one he had found in his basement rec room the previous evening. He’d stuffed it in his backpack and brought it to school that day to return to Billy.

I can give it back to him during gym… and speaking of gym, I’d better not get a freakin’ boner again.

He tensed with embarrassment at the memory of the last time he and Billy had wrestled together in P.E., nearly two weeks earlier. It was all Billy’s fault, of course; how else was Steve supposed to react when he had a thickly muscled alpha— armed with the aforementioned perfect lips and impossibly long, dark eyelashes— pinning him to the floor?

“Oh, shit,” he whispered to himself as he hurried out of the classroom into the noisy, crowded hallway.

It turned out that he didn’t need to worry about pitching a tent in P.E., because his body had betrayed him even earlier than he expected.

Goddamn it, not again… this is ridiculous.

“Yo, Steve!” Phil called out to him from across the hall, so tall that he stood at least a head taller than all the students surrounding him. “Over here!”

Not a good time, Phil.

“I’ll, uh… I’ll see you in gym, okay?”

Steve walked faster, moving with the stiff gait of someone who seriously needed to pee.

“Crap, crap, crappity-crap…”

He was grateful that it was recess, at least, so he would have enough time to… well, take care of the problem in his pants. Normally, he used the fifteen-minute stretch of free time between second and third period to stash some books in his locker, chat with Phil, or grab something to eat from the vending machine, but words like normally— already almost meaningless after all the extremely abnormal horrors he’d witnessed— meant even less to him ever since a certain blue-eyed alpha had sped into Hawkins in a flashy Camaro.
Nothing about me is normal, anymore. Not a damn thing.

Steve rushed through the crowd— ignoring anyone else who called out to him— and darted into the restroom at the end of the long hallway. Since it was recess, the smelly bathroom was crowded with teenage boys— some pissing into urinals, some sneaking a quick smoke, and others staring at themselves in the scratched mirror as they fixed their hair or popped their pimples. Steve made his way past them all and found a vacant stall in the corner, slamming the door and locking it carefully behind him.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!”

There was a massive brown turd floating in the toilet. He made a face and pinched his nose as he lifted his foot and stomped on the handle, flushing the filth out of sight. Being forced to look at— and smell— some other guy’s shit was almost gross enough to alleviate the uncomfortable stiffness between his legs, but Steve knew who awaited him in gym class. Jerking off now was his best option, if he didn’t want to repeat what had happened the last time he and Billy had faced off on the wrestling mat.

He sighed with relief when he unzipped his jeans, stuck his hand down into his briefs and began stroking his dick.

There’s no way I should be doing this at school, but damn, it feels nice.

He had to close his eyes, breathe through his mouth and try his best to block out the stupid conversations the boys outside his bathroom stall were having, but all the extra concentration was worth it in the end; Steve felt ten times more relaxed once he finally came. He bit his lip to keep himself from moaning with satisfaction as he released a hot little spurt into the toilet— letting out an audible moan in a crowded bathroom, after all, was a guaranteed way to get himself ridiculed until graduation.

Steve flushed the toilet a second time, tucked his softening dick away and made sure his fly was zipped before emerging from the stall. As he strolled over to the row of sinks, he whistled “Takin’ Care of Business”— an admittedly immature post-bathroom habit he had started when he was eight.

“Hey, Harrington.”

Steve looked over sharply and felt his chest tighten at the unexpected sight of Billy Hargrove standing at the sink beside him, rolling up the sleeves of his waffle-knit shirt.

“H-hey… where’d you come from?”

Billy jerked his head in the direction of the stalls behind them. “Takin’ care of business, just like you.”

I wasn’t taking a dump, though, I was… wait, was he in the stall next to me? No, I would’ve recognized those old boots he always wears.

Trying to look casual as he washed his hands, Steve dropped his eyes to the floor and felt them grow rounder— instead of his usual biker boots, Billy was wearing all-black Converse high tops with red shoelaces.

Jesus, I think he WAS in the stall next to me. What were the odds?

“You like ‘em?”
“Huh? Oh.” Steve cleared his throat and nodded. “Yeah, I’ve never seen anyone around here with those.”

“Well, Indiana’s not really known for its rad fashion... no offense.”

Steve was suddenly self-conscious about his basic white Nikes— the same ones that a dozen other kids in town wore.

“What is Indiana known for, anyway?” Billy continued with a maddening little smirk. “The Indie 500 and, uh… corn, maybe?”

“Oh, shut up.” Steve pursed his lips, pouting as he rinsed off the antiseptic-smelling soap. “We can’t all be from Hollywood.”

“True.”

“And it’s not my fault my parents decided to live somewhere so boring.”

“Also true.” Billy nodded sagely as he tugged four brown paper towels from the dispenser on the wall. “But I’m glad they did, though.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Billy repeated, handing two of the towels to Steve and glancing around; there were only one or two other guys using the bathroom, now. He stepped closer and smiled like Steve had said something funny. “Take a wild guess, pretty boy.”

There he goes again with that ‘pretty boy’ shit and that stupid, perfect smile…

Steve was ninety-nine percent sure that his face was turning red. He stammered something incomprehensible about needing to go, then almost ran out of the bathroom before he did or said anything crazy.

"Jesus Christ, what if he heard me? I mean, I wasn’t being loud or anything, but still…”

If his face wasn’t red before, it definitely was now. Steve was starting to wish he hadn’t gone to school that day; he’d already ditched the first four days of the week, so what harm would missing Friday possibly do? Third period had barely even started yet, and Billy Hargrove was already making him doubt his own sanity… and sexuality.

I’m not gay, goddamn it. He probably is, but I’m not. I’m just… just…

Steve wondered if “lonely, horny, and constantly confused” counted as a sexual orientation.

Steve was one of the first students in the gym locker room. Since Billy was right behind him in the main hallway bathroom, he expected to see him strutting into the locker room at any moment, but tried not to think about that too much as he stripped out of his clothes; he didn’t want to start blushing
again or— God forbid— get another boner. When he pulled his jock strap up onto his naked body, he hesitated for a few moments and made sure nobody else was in the aisle before twisting his head around to glance at his own ass, which didn’t impress him very much— it was pale, dotted with moles, and almost comically obscene in the skimpy jock strap.

It’s not hairy or pimply, and it’s not as flat as Phil’s, but it’s not that terrific. It’s just a butt… right?

As the large, concrete-floored room gradually filled with chattering high-school boys, Steve sighed and started stepping into his wrestling singlet. He would never admit it, of course, but he was a little disappointed that Billy wasn’t there to see him in all his jock strap-garbed glory; it was strangely rewarding— empowering, even— to catch those arrogant blue eyes wandering down to steal peeks. Maybe that cocky know-it-all has a weakness, after all.

“Hey, Steve,” Phil Curtis greeted cheerfully as he walked down the aisle and opened his locker. “Welcome back… you must’ve been really sick, huh?”

“Yeah, I… I had the flu,” Steve lied, bending down to tug the tight singlet up to his thighs. “But I’m feelin’ a lot better, so—”

“Oh, shit, look out!” Phil shouted suddenly, pressing his back against the lockers. “Rat-tail alert!”

“Huh?”

Steve didn’t even have time to turn around before he heard a familiar raspy cackle followed swiftly by a painfully sharp sting on his bottom.

“Ow, shit! What the hell?”

He instinctively covered his injured buttock with both hands and backed away, stumbling because his silly singlet was still only pulled up to his thighs.

Jesus, it feels like I got stung by a wasp…

“Ow, what the hell?”

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Jesus, it feels like I got stung by a wasp…

“Ah, man!” Tommy jeered, looking around and encouraging the other beta boys in the aisle to laugh along. “Did you hear the way he yelped like a bitch? Do it again, Stevie Boy, that was a riot!”

“Get bent, asshole!” Steve snapped angrily as he massaged his sore butt cheek with one hand and used the other to awkwardly tug on his singlet.

“You’re the one who’s bent, Harrington.”

Tommy smirked and twisted the towel into a rope again, then whipped it dangerously close to Steve’s groin, making him curse and twist around to protect his manhood from another snap of the wet towel.

Shit, I forgot to put on my cup… he could do some serious damage.

“Stupid jerk! I’m gonna—” Steve pinched his eyes closed and winced when Tommy seized the opportunity to strike his exposed ass. “Jesus Christ!”

It hurts it hurts it hurts… don’t cry, Steve, c’mon…

Some of the boys standing nearby snickered, and he wanted to punch every one of them in their stupid, useless faces— when had these betas all become so disloyal? Once upon a time, they had rallied behind him and respected him… or, he thought they had.
Now they’re all laughing at me.

Steve was starting to see red; he gritted his teeth and glared at Tommy, blinking back hot tears— his ass really, really hurt.

“Goddamn it, you sack of shit! I’m gonna kill you!”

“Not if I kill him first,” someone growled.

Even if Steve didn’t recognize the voice, he could tell who was behind him just by the startled panic in Tommy’s eyes.

“Oh, h-hey, Billy,” he chuckled uneasily as he backed away. “What’s up, man? King Steve and I were just kiddin’ arou— ow!”

Billy had stormed over to Tommy and socked him in the jaw.

Holy shit!

Tommy dropped his twisted towel and made a run for it, but he didn’t get far. Billy lunged after him like a mountain lion and snatched the back of his t-shirt.

“Hey, man, lemme go! I said I was just joking!”

“Do you see me laughing?” Billy yanked on Tommy’s shirt like it was a leash and half-dragged him down the aisle.

The other boys were laughing and shouting even more than they had been before— they were getting quite an entertaining show. Steve stood back against the lockers as Billy stormed by with Tommy in tow; he hastily tugged his singlet on the rest of the way and watched the spectacle with wide-eyed curiosity.

Where the hell is he taking him…?

“Let go of me!” Tommy squawked; his voice sounded odd with the collar of his crewneck tightened around his throat. “You’re gonna rip my shirt! Quit it! I can’t breathe!”

“You sure are yammering a lot for someone who can’t breathe,” Billy remarked coldly as he led the way to the bathroom.

Attracted by all the noise and cursing, most of the other boys in the locker room were following Billy and Tommy from a safe distance; some were still dressed in their regular clothes and others were just in their underwear. Steve followed, too, wearing the ridiculous green wrestling singlet and his white tube socks; when he walked into the bathroom he carefully stepped around the suspicious little puddles on the cold floor.

“W-what’s the big deal, man?” Tommy spluttered, looking around the bathroom warily. “I thought you couldn’t stand the stupid prick! Y-you beat the shit outta his yuppie ass a few months ago, remember?”

Billy ignored him, even as the wriggling beta reached back and tried to take a wild swing at him. A few boys said “Ohhhh” when they heard the sound of ripping cloth; Tommy had jerked away hard enough to tear his own shirt, which was still clutched tightly in Billy’s fist.

“This shirt was brand-new, you asshole!” Tommy shouted, turning an even darker shade of red. “My
Unmoved, Billy grabbed his shoulders and shoved him roughly towards a bathroom stall—the one that nobody ever used, with a missing door and a cracked toilet seat.

*Oh, my god... he's gonna give him a swirly.*

Steve stood back against the sinks and found a small measure of relief by pressing his sore, stinging buttocks against the cold porcelain. It was ironic, he thought, that Tommy was probably about to experience the punishment he’d merrily inflicted on so many younger, weaker kids. Though Steve had never personally administered any swirlies—he didn’t like the idea of getting toilet water splashed on himself—his hands weren’t exactly clean; he used to watch from a distance and laugh as Tommy dunked his victims.

_Feels like a hundred years ago..._

“Look, I-I’m sorry, okay?” Tommy babbled, still trying to escape. “I’m sorry, Billy! Jesus, I never would’ve done it if I knew you’d get so bent outta shape. I’m real sorry, buddy.”

“How many times do I have to say it, asshole? I’m not your buddy.”

The muscles in Billy’s arms bulged beneath his shirt as he grappled briefly with Tommy—if they weren’t dressed in regular clothes and standing outside a bathroom stall, it would look like they were wrestling. Once Billy had both of Tommy’s arms pinned tightly behind his back, he steered him around to face Steve.

“And another thing: I’m not the one you should be saying ‘sorry’ to... so try again, Freckles.”

Bewildered, Steve looked from Billy to Tommy and back again.

_Is he serious?_

“It, uh... it’s okay, I don’t need an apology,” he muttered hastily, wishing there weren’t so many nosy spectators in the room. “He wouldn’t mean a word of it, anyway. He’s full of shit.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” When Billy nodded, the corkscrew of hair above his right eye bounced like a golden spring. “Still, it’s never too late to learn some manners.”

_Yep, he’s serious._

“But... but guys snap each other with towels all the time,” Tommy whined, refusing to look in Steve’s direction. “You’re goin’ way overboard, man.”

Steve couldn’t quite tell from where he was standing, but Billy seemed to be gripping both of Tommy’s wrists with just one hand and was using the other to grab a fistful of his straight brown hair—though it was barely two inches long.

_Impressive technique._

Billy jerked on Tommy’s head and forced him to look at Steve. “I’ll give you one more try, asswipe.”

Steve and Tommy glared at each other for a few tense moments. It was hard to believe they had once shared an easy-going camaraderie, in the long-gone days before Steve started dating Nancy Wheeler and their friendship had evaporated into thin air.
Like it never even existed… we could’ve stayed friends, Tommy. Why’d you have to be such a stubborn jackass?

Billy was the first to break the uncomfortable silence. “Well, suit yourself. Ready for your baptism?”

“For what?”

Billy tugged Tommy into the bathroom stall and shoved him down to his knees like he was about to be executed.

“Aw, shit, man, what the hell?” Tommy tried to stand up again, but Billy easily overpowered him. “All this ‘cause I rat-tailed that stupid airhead—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Billy snarled, grabbing his right wrist and the back of his neck. “Don’t talk about him.”

Jesus… he’s really not dicking around, is he?

Tommy thrashed helplessly and tried to hit Billy with his free hand, but he couldn’t really reach him in his compromised position.

“Now, without further ado,” Billy announced dramatically to his rapt audience. “I baptize thee, Thomas Freckles Hagan, in the name of the father…”

Ignoring his pleading whines of protest, Billy shoved Tommy’s face down into the toilet bowl and flushed. All the boys that had gathered in the bathroom hooted and jeered; it seemed that Tommy’s insincerity and relentless shit-talking hadn’t left him with many true friends.

“…In the name of the son…”

Billy dunked him again. He had a gleefully savage look in his eyes that Steve hadn’t seen since the night at the Byers’ house in November.

He’s enjoying this, isn’t he?

The onlookers in the bathroom had all started to chant, “Dunk, dunk, dunk!”

“And in the name of the holy spirit.”

Billy repeated the dunk-and-flush treatment a third time before finally releasing his grip and backing out of the stall. Almost all the boys in the bathroom yelled “Amen!” at the top of their lungs, then burst into laughter at the sight of Tommy staggering towards them. His dark hair was dripping with toilet water and stuck to his forehead in a spiked fringe; his face was flushed with rage and embarrassment.

“I hope you enjoyed that, Hargrove,” Tommy spat as he stormed over to the paper towel dispenser. “Because you’re dead.”

Everyone was still laughing— well, almost everyone. Billy was wiping his hands on his jeans, looking cool and unruffled, and Steve was staring at him with mingled admiration and self-conscious exasperation.

Is he gonna do shit like that every time someone isn’t nice to me? People are gonna start to wonder what’s going on between us…

“You’re toast,” Tommy continued, yanking out another brown paper towel with each
underwhelming threat. “You’re dead meat. I’m gonna tell my brother, and you’re gonna end up
crawlin’ back to California when we’re done with you. You’re—”

“WHAT IN THE SAM HILL IS GOING ON IN HERE, BOYS?”

Oh, crap. Game over.

Steve turned his head just in time to see Coach Fergus charge into the bathroom, plowing through the
small crowd of high-schoolers like they were bowling pins.

“You two, get over here, now!” The coach pointed a sausage-like finger at Billy and Tommy. “Why
aren’t you in your wrestling gear yet? And why’re you all wet, Hagan?”

“Because Billy’s a freakin’ maniac, Coach! He gave me three swirlies and you gotta—”

“Three what?” Coach Fergus snapped impatiently. “Speak English and spare me the juvenile lingo.”

“It means he got his head dipped in the commode, sir.” Billy crossed his arms and leaned casually
against the bathroom wall, looking almost bored. “Dunked and flushed— standard procedure for
whiny little wimps who don’t know their place.”

“Shut up!” Tommy yelled, lunging towards him. “Your stupid new sidekick’s the real wimp, and
you’re a f—”

“That’s enough!” The coach bellowed angrily, grabbing both boys by the collars of their shirts and
struggling to keep them from punching each other. “You two are going to the principal’s office!”

“But Billy started—”

“Shut your mouth for once, Hagan! Quit your grousing and finger-pointing. I’ve heard enough!”

Coach Fergus hauled Billy and Tommy out of the bathroom and steered them towards the locker
room exit. Most of the boys watched and laughed, still entertained by the unexpected show, but
Steve followed them without a word or a smile and wondered what punishment Billy was about to
face for the stunt he’d pulled.

I hope he doesn’t get in too much trouble.

Just before they rounded the corner and disappeared from view, Billy managed to twist around and
wink at Steve, raising his right fist in the air and sticking up just his pinky and forefinger in the
universally understood gesture of heavy metal.

“Rock on, huh?” Steve chuckled softly and shook his head, raising his own hand to imitate the
gesture. “Jesus, he’s such a crazy weirdo.”

“He sure is,” Phil agreed, appearing beside him and looking sympathetic; his own flat ass had been
rat-tailed countless times by bullies like Tommy. “By the way, I don’t think that’s how you do the
sign of the horns, man… if you stick your thumb out, too, doesn’t that mean ‘I love you’ in sign
language?”

Oh, Christ.

Steve put his hand down hastily and headed back to his locker to put on his gym shoes.
When Steve got home from school that day, he realized the black Metallica sweatshirt was still wadded in the bottom of his backpack— he had somehow made it through the entire school day without remembering to give it back to Billy.

*I didn’t forget on purpose, though… definitely not.*

Even though he was all by himself in his bedroom, Steve glanced around to make sure nobody could possibly be looking before he slowly raised the sweatshirt to his face and inhaled. The faint notes of laundry detergent, cigarettes, and Paco Rabanne cologne were barely noticeable; all he could really smell was… Billy.

Steve closed his eyes and kept breathing in the scent, amazed by the way it transported him back to the previous day, when Billy had looked him in the eye and reached out for his hand.

“If I’m in trouble,” he sighed, tossing the sweatshirt on his bed and pacing around the room. “Deep, deep, trouble.”

He spotted a Magic 8 Ball lying on top of his dresser, half-covered by a sock, and picked it up. It was a childish thing to keep around, he realized, but the heavy plastic ball had always been one of his favorite toys and even though it was dusty and neglected, he still didn’t want to throw it away.

Feeling extremely foolish, he held the black ball upside-down and asked aloud, “Does Billy Hargrove like me?”

When he turned the ball over, the little blue triangle read ‘WITHOUT A DOUBT’ in capital letters.

Steve pursed his lips and lowered the ball again.

*I sorta knew that, already, after all the shit he’s done for me.*

“Well… is he gonna keep trying to hold my hand and kiss me and crazy stuff like that?”

He flipped the Magic 8 Ball over again and peered at the little window.

‘OUTLOOK GOOD’

“Oh.”

*Guess I already knew that, too.*

Steve thought for a moment— what else could he possibly ask? His eyes drifted back over to the hooded sweatshirt lying on his bed.

“Let’s see, uh… am I gonna give Billy his sweater back?”

He took a deep breath and flipped the ball over one more time.

‘MY SOURCES SAY NO’

“Oh, they do, huh?” Steve scoffed and set the ball back down on the dresser. “And what sources would those be, exactly? You’re just an old plastic toy.”

Even though he was just bored and kidding around, Steve was annoyed with himself for even pretending to do something as immature as consult a Magic 8 Ball. He walked over to his bed and picked up the black sweatshirt, but hesitated before stuffing it back into his schoolbag. He could almost hear Billy’s voice in his head, husky and low just like it was in the pantry.
“I knew you had a thing for me, pretty boy... I fuckin’ knew it.”

Had Billy called him ‘pretty boy’ on that occasion, or just Harrington? The memories of that night—exactly two weeks ago, now—were fading with every passing day, but they could still make Steve bite his bottom lip and press his thighs together. There were new, fresher memories, too: Billy looking at him with that strange, lonely expression while he played ‘Head Over Heels’ on the piano. Billy straddling him and saying undeniably flirtatious things in gym. Billy bringing him soup because he thought Steve was actually sick. Billy holding his hand. Billy throwing headgear at Tommy and dunking his head in the toilet just for giving Steve a hard time.

_I mean, he probably didn’t even realize he forgot the old thing, right? He totally won’t care if I hang onto it for a few days..._

Steve folded the sweatshirt and hastily shoved it in the back of his sock drawer—he would decide what to do with it later. What he was definitely _not_ going to do, he told himself sternly, was keep sniffing it like some kind of creep with a perverted obsession. It would stay hidden in the drawer, for now, until Steve returned to his senses and gave it back to Billy.

_In the meantime... finders keepers, losers weepers._

Chapter End Notes

-Recommended listening: ‘Paper Tiger’ by Spoon. It’s definitely not an ‘80s song, but it makes me very nostalgic about high school because it came out in 2002- my freshman year. And I think Steve would like it... so alright.
Chapter Notes

“Crazy, but that's how it goes
Millions of people living as foes
Maybe it's not too late
To learn how to love and forget how to hate.”

- 'Crazy Train' by Ozzy Osbourne (1980)

Friday, March 29th, 1985

The principal of Hawkins High gave Billy a whole week of after-school detention, from Monday to Friday. Billy didn’t regret what he’d done to Tommy the previous week— that freckled prick was asking for it— but he wished he’d chosen a punishment that wouldn’t have gotten him caught so easily, because detention was boring and inconvenient as hell.

He didn’t care very much about not being able to drive Max home or to the arcade after school; once the last of the winter snow melted, she was able to skate around town and often got rides from Nancy Wheeler. Since she had completely depleted her stash of quarters and wasn’t going to the arcade quite as often, she usually ended up at the Wheeler’s house, which was still the ‘designated hangout’. Even Neil had grudgingly agreed, after receiving a phone call from Mrs. Wheeler herself, to allow his precious step-daughter to spend her afternoons there.

So, Billy wasn’t worried about Max— she would be fourteen soon and could take care of herself. The main problem Billy had with detention was the way it interfered with his job; he had no choice but to call his boss at the Hawkins Vinyl & Cassette Emporium and sheepishly explain why he wouldn’t be able to start his shifts at the usual four o’clock— not that week, at least. Fortunately, June Clearwater was one of the coolest people he had ever met and just laughed about it.

“Yeah, I know that Tommy kid… he used to come by the store with Steve Harrington all the time. Try to behave yourself, okay, hon? I don’t wanna have to train a new employee just ‘cause you can’t resist sticking people's heads in the crapper or whatever it is you crazy kids do for fun these days.”

As for the disgraced Tommy Hagan, he had been quiet and sullen since last week’s toilet-dunking incident. He didn’t say a word to Billy in gym, nor for the entire two hours they had to sit in the library each day after school, studying in silence while the humorless old Home Ec teacher did the crossword puzzle. It was mind-numbingly boring, but at least he’d gotten a ton of homework finished during the last five days.

Detention might be the bane of Billy’s week, but it wasn’t the main feature— not by a long shot. On Sunday, Steve had lingered with him after the church service, talking and smoking in the parking lot. On Monday, the coach made them wrestle in P.E. and Billy let Steve win; it was worth it to look up from the mat and see his proud, exhausted little smile above him. Nothing very interesting had happened on Tuesday or Wednesday, but on Thursday they got to wrestle again, which was as tense and thrilling as it always was, and Friday was the best day of all, because on Friday it rained.
Billy wasn’t normally a big fan of rain; it always made his hair frizzy and kept him from going out to the parking lot to eat his lunch— typically a soda from the vending machine and a cigarette— like he did most days. He hated sitting in the cafeteria, which was noisy and thronged with kids he couldn’t stand, but where else was he supposed to go when it was pouring outside?

*I dunno why, but I’ve got a good feeling about today.*

He stepped through the double doors and glanced around the large room, wrinkling his nose at the strong aroma of fish sticks and creamed corn.

“Hey, Billy! Over here!”

“C’mon over and sit with us!”

There were several girls he recognized from English class seated at a nearby table, and they were all calling out to him and waving.

“You wanna sit next to me, Billy? Hey, scoot over, Brianna!”

“He hasn’t even gotten his tray yet, Allison.”

“Well, I could line up and get his food for him…”

Billy barely even heard them; he’d just spotted a familiar head of shiny brown hair over at a table in the corner.

*There he is.*

“Not today, ladies,” he said carelessly as he strolled through the large, crowded room.

Steve was sitting across from that tall, skinny beta named Phil at a half-empty table, laughing about something. As usual, he looked like he was ready for a Ralph Lauren photoshoot in his polo shirt, navy corduroys, and pricey running shoes.

“Is this seat taken?”

Steve looked up, startled; the cafeteria’s fluorescent lights cast bright reflections in his dark eyes. “Oh, um… sure.”

“Sure, it’s taken?”

“No, I meant… sure, you can sit here.”

Billy smiled at Steve’s awkward, floundering response. “Thanks, Harrington.”

He plopped his bag down on the table and sat beside him on the attached bench, carefully keeping a foot or two of space between them— he could already smell Steve, though his intriguingly sweet scent was smothered by the oppressive stink of fish fingers.

“Aren’t you gonna go get some lunch?” Steve asked, pointing out the conspicuous absence of a plastic tray.

“Nah, I don’t think so.” Billy looked distastefully at Steve’s fish sticks. “How the hell can you eat that shit?”

Steve shrugged and bit one in half. “They’re not the greatest, but they’re not the worst, either…”
“Well, they sure smell the worst. Jesus, is that mayo?”

Billy gestured at the tiny paper cup on Steve’s tray and grimaced; he had loathed mayonnaise ever since he was five years old, when he mistook a similar-looking jar of it for marshmallow fluff and stuck a huge spoonful of the white, eggy glop in his mouth (he spat it out on the kitchen floor and his father said that’s what he got for being such a greedy little piglet).

“They ran out of tartar sauce,” Steve explained, “So I guess they thought this would be better than nothing.”

“Well, they’re wrong. Haven’t they ever heard of ketchup?”

“In Europe, people like to dip their fries in mayonnaise,” Phil piped up. “My dad went on a business trip to Belgium and he said it’s totally normal.”

Billy made a revolted face and puffed out his cheeks like he was keeping in a mouthful of vomit. “Are you trying to make me ralph?”

“I wish they had ranch dressing.” Steve prodded the little cup of mayo until it wobbled and fell over; the contents were so congealed that nothing spilled out. “I really like to dip stuff in ranch.”

“Oh, yeah?” Billy smiled. “Me, too.”

“Me, three… man, why couldn’t we have chicken nuggets today?” Phil complained, holding up one of his own fish sticks and frowning at it. “Or pizza.”

“The nuggets are okay, but the pizza sucks,” Steve said, wiping his fingers on a napkin. “It’s always either burnt or soggy… like a greasy old sponge.”

“You’re a greasy old sponge.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense, Phil.”

It was more entertaining than Billy would’ve previously thought possible, watching Steve and his trusty beta ally bicker about cafeteria food and condiments.

“Well, I think all this crap blows,” he declared, suddenly remembering that he had stashed some chips in his bag the previous day.

“Oh, Billy, lemme tell ya something— that was awesome, what you did to Tommy last week.” Phil grinned and talked with his mouth full. “He’s been a lot less shitty since then.”

“You’re welcome,” Billy said with a humble bow of his head as he pulled out a small bag of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos. “Just doing my part to make this lousy world a better place.”

When he noticed Steve looking curiously at the bag of chips, he held it out and offered him some.

Steve hesitantly withdrew one bright-crimson Cheeto. “I never had this kind before… are they really spicy?”

“Oh, yeah,” Billy chuckled. “That’s kinda the whole point.”

Phil looked suspiciously at the red-and-orange plastic bag in Billy’s hand. “I only like the regular kind.”

“Have you ever tried ‘em?” Steve countered as he took a small bite of the Cheeto. “It’s fun to try
new things now and then, don’t you think? Jeez, these really *are* spicy.”

Billy smirked. “Too spicy?”

*These midwestern wimps crack me up... probably never had a jalapeño in their bland little lives.*

“No, they’re... they're actually pretty good,” Steve said slowly, munching on the puffed corn chip and then reaching in the bag for more when Billy held it out again. “Thanks.”

“Aren’t you gonna eat that?” Phil asked, pointing to the little cardboard cup of sherbet on Steve’s lunch tray.

“Nah, help yourself. I don’t like the orange-flavored ones.”

“Really?” Phil looked absurdly excited as he seized the second ‘ice cream’ and set it on his own tray. “Sweet! Thanks, man.”

Billy and Steve discussed junk food preferences for the rest of the lunch period, and when the bag of Hot Cheetos was finished, they were both left with red fingertips. Billy willed himself not to get hard at the sight of Steve absentmindedly licking the spicy chili dust off the end of his thumb and index finger.

*Jesus Christ, does he have any clue what he’s doing to me right now?*

As Phil entertained them by re-enacting the sounds and faces Tommy had made when he was getting dunked in the toilet the previous week, Steve sucked on his middle fingertip and smiled. When his eyes drifted over to meet Billy’s, his cheeks turned pink and he hastily put his hand down.

“Here,” Billy murmured, passing him a paper napkin.

When their fingers brushed together, he felt that tiny flicker of warmth that never failed to make Steve flinch and jerk his hand away.

The sudden movement hadn’t escaped Phil’s notice.

“What’s wrong— got zapped by static electricity?”

“Yeah!” Billy and Steve replied in unison, nodding more than necessary.

“It’s probably ‘cause of the rain,” Phil said sagely. “Lotta electricity in the air on days like this, y’know?”

*Tell me about it.*

................

In addition to being the first time Billy had eaten lunch in the cafeteria with Steve, it was officially his last day of detention, so he felt like celebrating when he sauntered out of the library at five o’clock and headed towards the almost-empty parking lot.

*Freedom... finally!*  

The rain had stopped and the late-afternoon sun was trying valiantly to peek out from behind the clouds before it had to sink past the horizon and shine somewhere else. There were puddles all over the cracked asphalt and Billy stepped over them carefully; he’d parted with almost twenty dollars for his new black Converse and didn’t want to get them soaked.
He put on his aviator sunglasses and stretched his arms overhead. Feeling mischievous and daring, he pulled a joint out of his breast pocket, lit it with his Zippo and stuck his middle finger up in the air, just in case the principal happened to be watching from her office window.

“You run, run, you run away… it’s your heart that you betray… feeding on your hungry eyes, I bet you’re not so civilized…”

“What the hell?” Billy wondered aloud as he walked towards the end of the parking lot.

“Well, isn’t love primitive? A wild gift that you want to give. Break out of captivity…”

He followed the music and slowed down when he saw the dark red BMW parked a few spots down from his. Steve must have been fully reclined in the driver’s seat because the only parts of him that Billy could see were his feet (propped up on the dashboard in blue Puma running shoes) and his left hand, which was dangling out the open window with a cigarette between two fingers.

Billy’s smile spread into a grin as he approached, hoping to catch him unawares. He took a drag on the joint and held it between his lips so his hands would be free to unfasten a few of his shirt buttons — school was out, the weather was nice by midwestern standards, and he knew Steve couldn’t resist stealing glances at his pecs. As Billy drew nearer, he saw that Steve was actually raising his right hand in the air like a pistol to fire ‘shots’ as he belted the lyrics along with Patty Smyth.

“Shooting at the walls of heartache— bang, bang! I am the warrior… I am the warrio— oh, shit!”

Billy had plucked the lit cigarette from Steve’s hand, making him flinch and hurriedly reach out to switch off the radio.

“Don’t stop the sing-along on my account,” Billy teased, tapping off the little column of ash that had accumulated on the end of the cigarette. “That was fuckin’ delightful.”

Steve turned red and cursed under his breath as he fumbled with the lever that would raise his seat back to normal.

“Here,” Billy added, passing him the joint; he could see himself reflected in Steve’s Ray-Ban sunglasses. “I bet you could use somethin’ stronger than a pansy-ass Parliament.”

“Oh, wow… thanks, man.” Steve sucked on the joint and coughed. “Are, uh… are you done with detention?”

“Yup!” Billy replied cheerfully, trying the cigarette he’d swiped; it was nothing like his usual Marlboros, but it wasn’t terrible (besides, it had been in Steve’s mouth and that certainly counted for something).

“My sentence was served in full, and I stand before you a free man,” he added for dramatic flair, blowing a huge plume of smoke into the air and tilting up his chin with mock pride. “I mean, it was ten hours of my life I’ll never get back, but whatever. It’s done.”

“Oh. Jeez, that sucks. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“I dunno…” Steve’s expression was hard to read from behind his dark Ray-Bans. “I guess I feel kinda, like, responsible…”

Billy scowled; he didn’t want to hear Steve blaming himself for anything. “Don’t be a moron. It was
all Tommy’s fault, and he had it coming.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But nothing, Harrington.” Billy paused and raised one of his eyebrows suggestively. “Speaking of butts— how’s your ass?”

Steve must have inhaled too sharply, because he started coughing.

“Uh, f-fine,” he managed to mutter, holding the joint out for Billy. “That was a whole week ago.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. Anyway, what’re you doin’ hanging out in the parking lot?”

“Um…”

Billy licked his lips and tried not to sound too hopeful. ”Were you waitin’ for me?”

“No,” Steve replied quickly. “I was just…”

“Just what?” Billy prompted, bending down to prop his forearms on the window; smoke curled out of his nose and mouth as his mouth curved into a grin.

*Just admit it: you've been here for two whole hours, listening to chick music and waitin' for little old me to show up.*

Steve cleared his throat. “I was just… look, can I have my cigarette back, or should I light a new one?”

Billy chuckled and passed him the joint again, rather than the Parliament. Steve accepted it without comment and took a long drag; he didn’t cough, this time.

“Anyway, I wasn’t *waiting* for anyone, I was just kind of bored and hungry, that’s all. I thought if you weren’t busy we could maybe… oh, I dunno, grab a bite to eat somewhere…?”

Steve trailed off and Billy’s heart drummed in his chest.

*Is he serious?*

“I’d like to, but I’ve gotta work tonight,” he said slowly, desperately wishing that it wasn’t true.

Steve bit his lip and flushed. “Oh, yeah. It’s Friday, right? Probably a busy night at the record store. God, I didn’t even think of that. I—”

“Hey,” Billy interrupted. “Don’t sweat it, alright?”

*Christ, I can't say no to him... he'll be embarrassed and never ask me again.*

Billy glanced down at his watch. “As a matter of fact, I’m pretty damn hungry, myself. There’s a diner across the road from the Emporium— it’s the place I went to get you that soup. I don’t have a *lot* of time, but if you wanted to meet me there in five minutes to grab a bite, that’d be cool.”

“Uh, okay… sure.” Steve took yet another puff on the joint and looked up at him with a sweet, slightly stoned smile.

“You gonna be okay to drive like that?”
“Like what?”

Billy smirked. “You know… baked.”

He could tell by the way Steve’s eyebrows rose above his black sunglasses that he was rolling his eyes.

“Baked? Look, buddy.” Steve began crisply, taking a final drag on the joint before passing it back. “I don’t know where you got the idea that I’m some kind of lame sissy who’s never done anything wild before, but it’s bullshit, okay?”

_He gets so mouthy when he smokes… it's fuckin' adorable._

“You think people called me the ‘Keg King’ because I sat at home reading the Bible and drinking cocoa every night?”

Billy laughed at the mental image; it was easy to picture Steve with a cute little cocoa mustache, but considerably harder to imagine him actually *reading* anything— an issue of GQ or a J.Crew catalog, perhaps, but not the Bible.

“Okay, Señor Keg King. My apologies.”

Billy carefully pinched off the end of the joint and saved it in his pack of Marlboros for later. It didn’t matter that he had barely smoked any of it, because all he really wanted was to get Steve relaxed enough to lower his defenses and say something (or, even better, *do* something) off-script.

“Here,” he said, holding out the Parliament cigarette. “You can have this back, now.”

Steve shook his head and turned his keys in the ignition. “You can keep it… I owe you one.”

Billy remembered the Marlboro he had accidentally taken that day, and wished he could bend down and give Steve another quick kiss— mirroring what had happened in Loch Nora the previous week. They weren’t exactly alone, though; several of the kids who had been in after-school detention with Billy were either retrieving their bicycles or trudging towards the parking lot.

_Someone’s always watching… every goddamn time. How can such a dinky town have so many people?_

“Buckle your seatbelt,” Billy instructed, blowing out a plume of Parliament smoke and taking a few backwards steps towards his Camaro. “I’ll see you in five… drive safe, okay?”

Steve flapped his hand dismissively and revved his own engine. “I can handle a couple puffs of pot, for Christ’s sake.”

………………..

“*My mama told me, she said, ‘Son, please beware… there’s this thing called love and it’s everywhere.’*”

Steve bobbed his head appreciatively as he sauntered into the diner five minutes later— grinning like a Cheshire cat and high as a kite.

“*Man, this place plays the grooviest music,*” he exclaimed, pulling off his Ray-Bans. “Don’t you think?”

“If you say so, Harrington.”
Billy was amused by how stoned Steve had gotten from such a seemingly small amount of weed.

‘I can handle a couple of puffs’, my ass… that stuff must’ve been pretty strong.

The diner on Main Street had been feeding the residents of Hawkins for decades; it still had all its original 1950s booths and decor, and a little imagination was all it took to picture a bygone era when the modest establishment was packed with boys and girls of previous generations—boys who slicked back their hair with pomade and girls who sashayed around in poodle skirts and bobby socks.

“I’m starving!” Steve announced as soon as a waitress showed them to a small table and handed them each a laminated menu.

“Can I fetch some drinks for you fellas?”

Billy ordered a cherry Coke and Steve politely requested a lemonade, which the waitress brought in less than two minutes. He tried not to stare at Steve too much, but that was easier said than done. How could he possibly look anywhere else when Steve was sitting directly across from him, right next to the window with the yellow evening sunlight shining on his dark hair?

Jesus, he’s a work of art…

Steve was still pleasantly stoned—he had a dreamy, guileless smile on his face and he was humming along with the music. Billy didn’t know much about ‘70s R&B, but he had to admit that this particular song was catchy as hell.

“It’s too late to turn back now, I believe, I believe, I believe I’m falling in love…”

Billy wasn’t completely sure if he was falling in love or if he was just desperately craving a pair of warm, mole-flecked thighs to squeeze between, but he knew for a fact that if he sat there watching Steve innocently pursing his lips around the end of his straw for another second, he would scream… or flip the table over… or cream his pants.

Or all of the above, at the same time, Billy thought to himself as he glanced around the crowded diner. That'd give these nosy squares something to talk about.

Billy rose from his seat just as the song ended; he spotted a large, shiny jukebox next to a display case filled with pies and strolled over to it, stoically ignoring the growing discomfort in his jeans. He dug some spare change from his pocket with one hand and used the other to press the buttons that flipped through the dozens of record selections.

He likes ABBA, right? That’d make him turn red… let’s see, what else have they got?

“Oh, here we go,” he muttered under his breath, smirking as he fed a quarter into the machine. “This is perfect…”

The record he’d chosen clicked into place and began playing after a few seconds of mechanical whirring. Bobbing his head in time with the unmistakable bass and guitar riff, Billy grinned at Steve, whose look of bemused curiosity quickly melted into exasperation when he finally recognized the song.

“Billy Ray was a preacher’s son, and when his daddy would visit he’d come along.”

Steve scowled at him as he returned to his seat. “You’re unbelievable, you know that?”

Billy took a long sip of his Coke and batted his eyelashes innocently. “What’s the matter? This is a
terrific song.”

“The only one who could ever reach me was the son of a preacher man. The only boy who could ever teach me, was the son of a preacher man…”

Steve sighed and rolled his eyes. “Well, whatever… it’s pretty old, isn’t it? Like, from the ‘sixties?”

“It’s pretty damn sexy, too, if you ask me.” Billy waggled his eyebrows lewdly. “Hey— since your dad’s a ‘preacher man’, wouldn’t it be a riot if you were, like, conceived to this song?”

Steve looked revolted. “No! I don’t wanna think about my parents— ugh, gag me.”

“Just one of life’s many grody realities.” Billy shrugged and gestured at a family sitting in a nearby booth. “Every single person in this diner— hell, every single person on this shitty planet— wouldn’t be here if their parents hadn’t humped at some point—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Steve interrupted loudly. “Alrighty then… let’s, uh… let’s change the subject, okay?”

“Fine.” Billy suddenly observed that his menu was gone. “Hang on, did the waitress already take our orders?”

Steve nodded as he took a sip of his lemonade. “Well, you were busy over there at the jukebox, looking for ways to piss me off, so I just told her we’d both have cheeseburgers. That’s okay, right? I ordered ‘em well-done, with fries… and two sides of ranch.”

Billy smiled, remembering their dumb lunchtime conversation about condiments. He didn’t like processed cheese and had planned on ordering a BLT, but he couldn’t see any point in making Steve feel bad, so he kept his mouth shut. He tipped his chair back and bobbed his head along to the infectious riff and Dusty Springfield’s breathy crooning.

“Being good isn’t always easy, no matter how hard I try. When he started sweet-talkin’ to me, he’d come and tell me ‘Everything is all right’, he’d kiss me and tell me ‘Everything is all right’, can I get away again tonight?”

Billy and Steve made small-talk for the next ten minutes as they waited for their food, just like they had during lunch in the cafeteria that afternoon. Even though Phil Curtis wasn’t sitting with them this time, they restricted themselves to bland, safe subjects like video games and music. Billy was happy to talk about anything with Steve, but he really wished he could ask him about the Metallica sweatshirt he had “forgotten” in the Harrington’s underground rec room the previous week.

He hasn’t mentioned it or brought it back, so… he must’ve decided to keep it, right?

Billy tried not to get his hopes up; it was very unlikely, he reminded himself, that Steve was sleeping with it under his pillow each night— he might have just left it in the trunk of his BMW, intending to return it but forgetting each day because it was so inconsequential.

He’s got bigger things to worry about than one of my stupid old sweaters. There’s no way he’d hang onto it on purpose… I’m not that lucky.

There was one other thing he knew he couldn’t ask Steve about: the previous Friday morning, when they had run into each other in the main hall bathroom. Billy had been locked in a stall, indulging in his private little ritual of jerking off before gym class; he always did it quickly and quietly, and it seemed to help ward off the unwanted boners he’d inevitably get otherwise. Whether Steve was changing into his jock strap, strolling around in his tight little wrestling singlet, lying beneath Billy
with pink cheeks and sweaty hair, or showering butt-naked after gym, Billy was damn near \textit{guaranteed} to get hard if he didn’t take the necessary precautions.

On that Friday, though, he had noticed a suspiciously familiar pair of Nike sneakers under the stall beside his, and for a minute or two they were pointing \textit{towards} the toilet. He didn’t have to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce that whoever was in the neighboring bathroom stall was doing something other than taking a crap. As with the sweatshirt, Billy didn’t want to get his hopes inflated, but he couldn’t help it— not when there was a very real possibility that Steve was jerking off before gym class for the \textit{exact same reason}.

Billy had returned to the Kennedy Hall bathroom each of the school-day mornings that had followed and was disappointed five days in a row when he never spotted Steve again.

\textit{There are a bunch of bathrooms on campus... he might’ve started going somewhere else to jerk off... assuming that’s what he was doing in there. Maybe it had nothing to do with me and I’m just gettin’ hopeful over noth—}

“Oh my god, that looks \textit{sooooo} good!”

Billy was jolted back to the present by Steve’s vaguely erotic moan of gratitude— their hamburgers had arrived. He watched, amused, as Steve enthusiastically shoved three French fries into his mouth.

“Tasty?”

“Mm-hmm.” Steve nodded and reached out for the little cup of ranch dressing the waitress had brought.

\textit{So cute... I want him so bad. Will there be any time to kiss him later?}

Billy looked down at the cheeseburger on his own plate and began slowly and deliberately removing the pungent slices of raw onion and crinkle-cut pickles.

“Not a fan, huh?” Steve asked, nodding at the small heap of rejected vegetables.

Billy smiled and chuckled to himself; he recognized a golden opportunity when he heard one.

“I like em’ just fine,” he said smoothly. “Grilled onions are better, but raw is okay if they’re sliced real thin. Love a crunchy, cold dill pickle, too.”

\textit{I’m gonna make him turn so red...}

Steve took the bait, just as Billy predicted he would.

“Why’re you taking them off your burger, then?”

Billy licked his lips as he stared pointedly at Steve’s mouth. “I don’t want pickle-breath later, that’s all.”

Steve looked bewildered for a moment or two before his brain finally caught up and he quickly averted his eyes.

\textit{Are his cheeks pink? Yeah, I think they are... God, it's so easy to make him blush.}

Billy thought his face might crack with the effort of not grinning from ear to ear when Steve started plucking the pickles and onions off his own burger. He didn’t think it was overly optimistic to hope that Steve might be interested in kissing him at some point that evening. They’d kissed before, after
and he’d been stealing glances at him all day. Billy’s primary concern was location; where in the world could he take Steve for a quick make-out session before he went to work for the rest of the night—the men’s restroom in the back of the diner? The alley? His car?

*It’s not that dark outside, and it’s gotta be someplace private or we’re both gonna be jumpy as hell.*

They polished off their burgers and fries in five minutes, then argued over who would pay the bill. Steve insisted that he should do the honors since it had been his idea to go out to eat in the first place, but Billy wasn’t about to let the boy of his dreams pay for what they might someday look back on as their first official ‘date’.

“Tell you what,” he proposed after ordering Steve to put his wallet away for the third time. “Whoever she hands the check to—that’s who pays. Sound fair?”

Steve shrugged and scanned the diner for Ethel, their busy waitress. “I guess so.”

They both sat up straighter and smiled confidently at Ethel as she bustled back to their table holding a receipt.

*Give it to me, give it to me, give it to—*

“Here you go, dear,” the middle-aged waitress said pleasantly, handing it directly to Billy. “See you boys next time.”

*YES! Man, I’m gonna leave her such a big tip.*

He didn’t bother trying to contain his triumphant smirk, which only grew when he saw Steve’s mouth curve down in an adorable little pout.

“What the hell?” Steve muttered, shaking his head with disbelief. “I was looking right at her.”

Billy laughed as he pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. “Aw, c’mon, amigo… no need to sulk.”

“Who’s sulking?” Steve grumbled, crossing his arms. “Nobody, that’s who. But just so you know, I’m gonna pay for everything next time… *amigo.*”

Billy paused and quirked an eyebrow. “Next time?”

Steve’s expression rapidly changed from sulky to self-conscious; instead of replying, he pretended to watch passers-by out the window and drained the rest of his lemonade.

*Already thinkin’ about next time, huh? Well, same here, pretty boy… same here.*

Billy decided to do Steve a favor by changing the subject. He spread his lips into a wide, exaggerated grin and asked if he had any food stuck in his teeth.

“Uh…” Steve squinted at his mouth. “Nuh-uh. Now, how about mine?”

*Let’s have some more fun, shall we?*

“Oh, yeah,” Billy said slowly, studying Steve’s bared teeth. “You’ve got a massive chunk of, like, lettuce or somethin’ in there.”

“Shoot! Really?” Steve’s eyes widened with embarrassment and he grabbed the napkin dispenser, holding it up like a mirror to scrutinize his reflection in the smudged metal. “Where?”
Billy snorted. “Uh… it’s wedged between your left canine and lateral incisor.”

“My lateral what? Christ, what a know-it-all… are you a dentist, now?” Steve rubbed the tip of his tongue over his front teeth as he glanced around the diner. “You think they’ve got any toothpicks here?”

Billy pinched his lips closed, but he couldn’t contain his laughter for one more second.

Steve looked confused. “What’s so funny?”

Delighted that his little prank had worked so well, Billy tipped his head back and cackled. “Gotcha.”

“Oh, come on!” Steve dropped the metal napkin dispenser back onto the table. “Seriously? There’s nothing there?”

Still laughing, Billy managed to shake his head as he pulled a ten-dollar bill out of his wallet.

“Asshole,” Steve muttered. “Next time you’ve got something stuck in your teeth I’m not saying a word, okay? Not a goddamn word. I’ll just let you walk around looking gross.”

Billy was over the moon that Steve had said the promising words ‘next time’ again, but he didn’t let it show. Instead, he raised his chin haughtily and fluffed out the ends of his curls.

“I’ve never looked gross a single day in my life, Harrington.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“Just the facts.”

………………..

Billy was bummed when they finished their food and the plates were cleared away. He hated that he had to go to work, and wished he could just blow it off so he could hang out with Steve for the rest of the night, talking about school, food, music, video games, and whatever else popped into their minds. But his job was awesome— by low-paying employment standards, anyway— and he didn’t want to risk pissing off his boss.

_Gotta keep my wallet full of cash if we’re gonna make a habit of going out to eat like this._

Outside, the setting sun had painted the sky in the brilliant orange and pink hues of an Alabama Slammer. It was almost chilly enough to make Billy’s nipples hard, but he stubbornly refused to button up his shirt— it was worth being a little cold if it meant Steve had to keep dragging his eyes away from Billy’s half-exposed chest.

_You enjoying the view, pretty boy?_

They strolled out onto the sidewalk in front of the diner and paused awkwardly, like neither of them knew exactly what to do next. Billy had parked his Camaro across the street in the parking lot behind the Emporium, but Steve’s BMW was right in front of the diner.

“Oh, crap!” Steve exclaimed, checking his watch. “Didn’t you say you were supposed to start work at five-thirty?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’s almost six, man.”
Billy shrugged and stuffed his hands in his jean pockets. “I’ll head over there eventually.”

“Isn’t your boss gonna be pissed? You’re late as hell.”

“She’s pretty laid-back, most of the time. But yeah, I guess I’d better go if I wanna make any money tonight.”

“Why don’t I come with you? Over to the store, I mean.” Steve cleared his throat. “Only ’cause I wanted to look for this one tape, that’s all.”

That’s all, huh?

Billy kept his expression casual, even though his heart was already beating faster with anticipation. “Well, c’mom, then.”

They jay-walked across the moderately busy street, but instead of just going in the front door of the record store, Billy led Steve around the back; his mind was racing with possibilities ranging from relatively tame to downright dirty.

“Where’re we going?” Steve asked curiously, glancing around as he trotted behind him.

“Oh, just somewhere a little more private.”

“Private? W-what the hell for?”

What do you think, genius? So I can French you and shove my hands down those damn corduroys.

Billy kept his lewd thoughts to himself and fished the half-smoked joint from his pack of Marlboros, holding it up for Steve to see.

“I just thought you might be interested in helpin’ me finish this, that’s all.”

Understanding dawned on Steve’s face and he smiled like a mischievous kid about to steal a chocolate bar from Melvald’s.

“I might be a little interested, yeah.”

They selected spots about three feet apart on the red brick wall of the Emporium and leaned against it. The parking lot wasn’t as private as Billy would prefer; there were a few people walking to and from their cars, so he couldn’t exactly grab Steve’s hand or push him against the wall and kiss him.

Oh, well. We’ve still got time.

They spent five minutes passing the joint back and forth as they talked— well, as Steve talked; Billy mostly listened. He knew it had been a good idea to bring that joint— it was worth every penny of the three dollars he had paid his dealer (a stoner named Keith who worked at the arcade) to see Steve loosen up and relax.

He gets so damn chatty when he’s high… let’s see if he gets a little slutty, too.

“So,” Billy began casually as he crushed the spent joint under his heel, “You interested in takin’ a little VIP tour of the place?”

Steve looked unimpressed. “I have been here before, y’know. Like, at least a thousand times.”

“Sure, but have you ever seen…” Billy paused for dramatic effect, “… the storeroom?”
The fine crinkles in Steve’s forehead multiplied. “Uh, no…”

“Well…” Billy consciously lowered his voice to a deep, suggestive murmur. “You want to?”

He hoped Steve was smart enough to catch his drift, and was rewarded a moment later with the triple-whammy of a blush, bitten bottom lip, and bashful nod.

*Yeah, he caught it.*

Without waiting for Steve to blurt out some cowardly excuse, Billy reached over and gave his sleeve a playful tug. “Follow me.”

The back door that led to the stockroom was locked, but Billy wasn’t deterred. He found a loose brick behind the trash cans and tugged it free, revealing a small key.

“Cool,” Steve remarked, standing a few feet behind him with his hands tucked in his pockets. “Doesn’t seem very secure, though… anyone could find that, if they looked long enough.”

“And who the hell would bother?” Billy scoffed as he unlocked the door and replaced both the key and the loose brick. “Hawkins is way too boring to have any criminals.”

“It’s got freaky aliens, though,” Steve pointed out, instinctively rising to the defense of his hometown. “*Lots* of ‘em.”

“Freaky aliens that wanna break into the Emporium and steal cassette tapes?”

“You never know.”

“You never know,” Billy repeated, chuckling as he opened the back door and beckoned Steve inside.

The stock room wasn’t much bigger than the garage at Billy’s house, and had a similar smell— like dust and old cardboard. It was lit only by the evening sunlight shining feebly through the opened door and a small, dirty window. There were several filing cabinets, dozens of boxes, and an old desk loaded with stacks of ancient paperwork and Rolling Stone magazines. Either the walls were too thin or the music playing in the record store was too loud, because they could hear the sounds of drums, guitars and men singing in English accents. Billy didn’t recognize the song, but it sounded like something melancholy and folksy from the ‘60s or early ‘70s.

“*Oooh what a lucky man he was… ooh what a lucky man he was!*”

Steve looked around uncertainly. “Are you *sure* your boss isn’t gonna get mad?”

“June’s not gonna know, and even if she did, I seriously doubt she’d give a shit.” Billy shut the door behind him, plunging the room into semi-darkness. “June can man the fort without me just fine… she only likes having me around ’cause I lug heavy shit around for her and I bring in way more customers.”

Steve snorted skeptically. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Billy didn’t care how arrogant he sounded. “Just a bunch of dumb chicks without anything better to do, y’know?”

Steve wandered over to the desk and poked idly at the buttons on an old 8-track player. “What, so girls actually come to the record store just to, like… *stare* at you?”
Billy smirked coyly, arching an eyebrow. “You jealous ‘cause you’re not the only one starin’ at me all the time?”

“You’ve been smoking too much of that grass, pal,” Steve scoffed. “I’m not jealous and I don’t *stare* at anyone... especially not you.”

“Yeah, you do,” Billy insisted; he ran his fingers through his curls and tilted his head like he was posing for a photo. “Look all you want— it’s cool; I don’t mind.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I guess a flashy, full-of-himself guy like you *wouldn’t* mind, would he?”

_Brat._

“Watch it, Harrington… you’re lucky you’re so damn cute, ‘cause if anyone else said that to me, they’d get decked.”

“Well, thanks for not decking me, but I’m not cute,” Steve muttered, pretending to be interested in the contents of a box full of 8-track tapes that would never be sold. “Babies are cute, kittens are cute... girls are cute, sometimes, but dudes? No way.”

Billy stuck out his bottom lip in an exaggerated pout. “What, not even me?”

"Ha! You wish."

"Not even a _little_ bit?"

“Not even a little bit,” Steve repeated emphatically, still staring down at the box of old tapes. “So you can quit trying to flatter yourself, ‘cause you’re _not_ cute and I _don’t_ look at you.”

Billy stepped closer and stopped just one step shy of Steve, willing him to look up. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

Steve reluctantly raised his big, brown eyes and crinkled his brow. “Huh? What lady?”

_Better cool it with the Bard._

“Never mind.” Billy reached out impatiently, hooked both of his index fingers around Steve’s corduroy belt-loops and tugged. "Get over here."

He smelled incredible— sweet and warm, like a fistful of gummy bears— and since he wasn’t pulling away or resisting, Billy raised one hand to cup his jaw, pressing his thumb into his soft bottom lip.

_God, I want him._

The small room seemed to grow dimmer by the second and what was left of the sunlight glinted in Steve’s wide, dark eyes as he reached up and played with one of Billy’s curls.

“I… I probably should’ve told you this a long time ago,” he said in a faltering voice, “But… I really like your hair.”

“Thanks,” Billy murmured, genuinely touched.

Considering all the time he’d invested in perfecting his shaggy mane of waves and curls, it was just about the nicest thing anyone had ever said to him in his entire life.
“I really like yours, too,” he added, bringing one of his hands up to brush a thick lock of hair off Steve’s forehead—it flopped back stubbornly, and they both smiled.

“Um... what the hell are we doing?” Steve asked softly. “This is... this is...”

Billy licked his lips. “Crazy?”

“Yeah.”

“You wanna stop?”

Steve shook his head slowly and leaned closer, shutting his eyes just before their mouths pressed together.

A jolt of euphoric triumph surged through Billy’s whole body—both of their bodies, perhaps—and for a moment he felt his mind go deliriously, deliciously blank. Billy had missed this; it had been far too long since the maddeningly brief kiss the previous Thursday, and even longer since their spontaneous encounter at Diana’s party.

Steve’s hands drifted clumsily from Billy’s shoulders to his waist and then all the way back up to his hair, touching him with the bashful hesitancy of a virgin.

He’s got no clue where to put his hands, does he?

It was paradoxical as hell, Billy realized—Steve was completely out of his element and probably felt like a fumbling first-timer, yet he had a lot of experience with kissing and other intimacies... but only with girls, and specifically Nancy Wheeler. Billy was the opposite—kissing a boy didn’t scare him in the slightest, but he had pathetically little experience.

Just be cool. You got this.

His body tensed when one of Steve’s hands wandered down and brushed against his half-exposed chest. He kissed Steve harder, silently encouraging him to keep exploring, and a shiver ran down his spine when he felt long, cautious fingers giving his pectoral muscles an experimental squeeze.

They’re not what he’s used to, but they’re still a hell of a lot meatier than those mosquito bites the Wheeler chick calls tits.

Billy banished all petty thoughts of waifish ex-girlfriends and concentrated on what was most important in that moment: making Steve weak in the knees. He had to remind himself to breathe and slow down; there was no need to shove his entire tongue in Steve’s mouth or whip out his cock right away.

When Steve bumped into the old desk, they broke apart to catch their breath, but that only lasted a second or two before Billy’s greedy impatience took over and he drew their faces together again. He had planned on being smooth and taking his sweet time, but now that he was actually here—alone in a dimly lit storage room with the prettiest boy he’d ever seen in his life—he forgot all his plans and just followed his instincts, which meant grabbing Steve’s waist with both hands and shoving him onto the desk.

Billy never knew he could get so turned on by sounds—the old desk groaning beneath Steve’s weight when he sat on it, the stack of magazines that fell to the floor, and their panted breaths intermingling with the eager movement of their lips. He could hear the harmonized words of the song playing out in the store, too, though it was impossible to discern most of the lyrics from the other side of the wall.
“Ooooh, what a lucky man he was…”

With his ass perched on the edge of the old desk, Steve was now a few inches shorter than Billy and his long, slender legs jutted out between them; their knees knocked together and Billy was forced to lean over them awkwardly as they kept kissing. Longing to get as close as humanly possible, Billy kept one hand on the back of Steve's neck and slid the other between his closed thighs, pressing insistently.

C’mon, pretty boy… open sesame.

He felt Steve's inner thigh muscles tensing beneath his palm and for a split second he was concerned that he might be going too fast, but then those long legs slowly spread apart and allowed him to squeeze between them like a bookmark. Billy almost groaned with relief.

God, this feels so right.

He deepened the kiss and dragged his palm along the length of Steve's impressively rock-hard dick; he rubbed it through the velvety fabric of his corduroy pants.

“O-oh my god,” Steve gasped, pulling his face back and pressing both palms against Billy’s chest; there was flustered arousal in his eyes, visible even in the semi-darkness of the storeroom. “Y-you can’t just—”

“Can’t just what?” Billy growled in his ear.

“You… you…”

Steve seemed to forget what he was trying to say; he stopped squirming and let out a soft sigh when Billy bent down and planted a kiss on the warm skin just below his jaw.

Fuck, this is incredible.

Billy knew he would never, ever get used to how exquisite Steve smelled— like expensive shampoo and… candy, somehow.

“I’ve been wondering…” he murmured against his throat, enjoying the way Steve tightened his grip on his rounded pectorals.

I think he likes ‘em... lucky I’ve been doing so many push-ups.

Billy wanted to ask about the sweatshirt, but then he thought of something else that had been bugging him all week. “Why’d you stop going to the Kennedy Hall bathroom to jerk off before gym?”

“I, uh…” Steve cleared his throat and swallowed, wriggling a little when Billy’s breath tickled his neck. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I… why the hell would I jerk off at school? Nobody actually does that, right?”

Nice try.

Billy chuckled. “Who knew so many lies could come outta such a pretty mouth?”

He kept one hand on Steve’s crotch and slid the other into his hair— the most gorgeous, luxuriously thick hair he’d ever seen in his life. Billy would never admit anything so pitiful, but being allowed to run his fingers through it felt like an honor and a privilege.
“I’m not lying,” Steve mumbled. “And don’t say my mouth is pretty… it’s just a normal, boring mouth, okay?”

“See? More lies.” Without warning, Billy seized a fistful of silky brown hair, pulling Steve’s head back just enough to make him inhale sharply and look directly in his eyes. “You just can’t help it, can you?”

Steve swallowed again— even in such dim lighting, Billy could see the subtle movement of his Adam’s apple.

“I’m in the dark, I’d like to read his mind… but I’m frightened of the things I might find…”

The music— now a modern pop song instead of the hippie ballad from a minute earlier— suddenly grew louder and a light was switched on. Billy and Steve both froze instinctively, as though that might save them from being spotted; only their eyelashes moved, blinking in the startling brightness of the bare bulb on the ceiling.

“So, there you are!”

June Clearwater, the middle-aged Native American proprietress of the record store, stood in the stockroom doorway with her hands resting sternly on her ample hips.

“Sorry to interrupt the fun, fellas, but in case you didn’t realize, it’s Friday night and I’m gettin’ absolutely swamped out there… we’ve got empty shelves, for cryin’ out loud!”

Fuck your stupid shelves, June.

Billy had been so swept up in the moment that he had managed to completely forget about work and the fact that he was inexcusably late for his shift. He released his hold on Steve’s hair and backed away from him sheepishly. It was the second time in his life he’d gotten caught embracing a boy— by another authority figure, no less— but his heart wasn’t filled with the same cold terror it was on that distant afternoon when Neil came home early and beat on his door like a battering ram.

June’s not like other grown-ups… she’s gonna be cool about this, right?

“Sorry,” he mumbled, still not completely recovered from the shock of being discovered. “I’m coming.”

Shit… that sounded weird.

“Sorry,” he said again. “I meant I’ll be there in a sec.”

“Uh-huh.” June arched an eyebrow above her large glasses and paused before she left the room again, pointing at the light-switch. “You boys want this on or off?”

“Um… off?” Billy answered meekly. “We’re coming out soon.”

Coming out? Shit, I did it again…

Steve, red-faced and staring down at the floor in abashed silence until that moment, let out a quiet little snort and covered his face with his hands.

“Jesus Christ, stop talking.” His whispered words were muffled by his palms and his shoulders shook with the effort of containing his stoned, self-conscious laughter.

Is he still high? Whoa, that really was some good shit.
“Oh, to be young and foolish again.” June shook her head as she walked away, switching the light off and leaving the door ajar.

They could hear the music playing in the store loud and clear, but Billy had never heard it before and assumed it must be something brand-new.

“Hush hush, keep it down now, voices carry…”

“Oh my god,” Steve groaned weakly, hanging his head and slumping his shoulders as he slid down from the desk. “Did that seriously just happen?”

“Yeah,” Billy chuckled. “Unless we’re dreamin— ow!”

Steve had pinched his arm.

“Nope, not a dream.” Steve took a few uncertain steps towards the back door. “So, uh… should I just leave the way we came, or…?”

“Nah, you might as well go out the front door. Boss-Lady knows you’re here, so there’s no point in sneaking around.”

“Christ, that was nuts. You don’t think she’s gonna…”

“Tell anyone? I doubt it.” Billy stood aside, waiting for Steve to leave the storeroom first. “June’s pretty chilled-out, for an old lady. She won’t say anything to anyone.”

He hoped.

“How’s my hair?” Steve asked fretfully, attempting to flatten his tousled brown mop. “Does it look like I’ve been… y’know…”

“Writhing wantonly in the throes of passion?” Billy quipped as he reached over to mess it up again.

“Sto-op,” Steve whined, swatting his hand away. “Someone’s gonna see us.”

“Do you still have a bone—”

“Shut up!” Steve punched his arm hard enough to hurt. “Don't worry about it.”

Wish I could drag him to the bathroom and take care of it for him…

Billy sighed heavily and looked around the record store, which was as crowded as you might expect on a Friday night. He spotted Phil Curtis in the ‘Film & Television Soundtracks’ section, but the gangly beta didn’t seem to notice that the pair of alphas from his gym class had just emerged from the storeroom with suspiciously rosy cheeks and rumpled hair.

He spotted Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers browsing on opposite ends of the shop in completely different sections— Nancy was looking at tapes under the ‘New Releases’ sign while Jonathan flipped through used rock LPs. Billy couldn’t help staring at Nancy for a few seconds; he found her mildly fascinating because she knew what it was like to be naked in bed with Steve Harrington. She knew what it was like to throw away a guy like that, too.

Unbelievable… did she get bored, or something?

On this cool March evening, Nancy was wearing a purple knit dress with padded shoulders and a belted waist that made her seem impossibly small, like she might shatter like a ceramic figurine if she
was knocked over. Her cheeks were hollow and when she turned around Billy could see her shoulder blades jutting out of her frail back like tiny wings, right through the thin fabric of her dress.

Is she… okay?

It was mind-boggling that anyone in the universe would willingly stop being Steve’s girlfriend. Getting dumped was one thing, but Nancy had actually chosen to give up her exclusive access to kissing him, sleeping in the same bed as him, and touching his dick… for what? So she could be free to do those things with Jonathan Byers, instead?

It doesn’t make any sense, but I’m glad she broke it off with him. Jesus, I’m so fucking glad.

“So, how’s it going, young sir?” June called out cheerfully to Steve as she picked up a heavy box and lugged it towards the front of the store. “Had a chance to get yourself one of these yet?”

“One of what? Oh, here, lemme get that for you,” Steve said, hurrying over to help.

“No, I’ll get it,” Billy scoffed, elbowing his way past Steve and grabbing the box. “I’m the one who works here.”

“In theory,” June added dryly, nodding up at the clock on the wall as she returned to her favorite stool behind the front counter.

Man, it’d be so cool if he worked here… too bad he’s loaded and doesn’t need a job.

“Anyway,” June continued, watching Billy carry the box over to the ‘New Releases’ section. “They’re just a bunch of Howard Jones tapes— we’ve gotta restock, ‘cause they’re selling like hotcakes.”

“God knows why,” Billy muttered under his breath.

“He only likes dark, pissed-off music,” Steve informed the store manager, smirking when Billy glared at him.

*Brat.*

“Yeah, I’ve noticed… hey, that reminds me!” June suddenly bent down to rummage through a drawer, then held up a 7-inch record. “I found this the other day— really rare stuff. Thought I lost it. Anyway, it’s plenty dark and I thought you might like it, Billy.”

As she busied herself with setting it on the store’s record player behind the counter, Steve reached over to select one of the cellophane-wrapped cassettes in the box Billy was holding.

“Can I buy one of these?” Steve asked, flipping it over to read the track listing. “I really like that one song…”

“What, ‘Things Can Only Get Better’?” Billy prompted, rolling his eyes. “We’ve been playing that every fifteen minutes since it came out last month.”

“It’s a cool song,” Steve said defensively. “Catchy, y’know?”

“Yeah, catchy like the clap.”

“Oh, c’mon. That’s a little harsh.”

“I might not hate it so much if I hadn’t heard it, like, five billion times already.”
Steve held up an invisible microphone and tipped his head back, singing the call-and-response line from the song. “Whoa-oh-ohhh-oh-oh-ohhhh!”

_We just got caught ‘in flagrante delicto’ by my boss and he’s still being a giant goof? Yeah, that was definitely some good weed._

A pair of girls browsing nearby started giggling.

“Hey, that’s pretty good, Steve!”

“Yeah, you gonna record a cover version?”

“Maybe I will,” Steve replied with a suave smile. “But only if you ladies promise to buy my demo tape.”

“We promise!”

Billy shook his head. “Real smooth, Casanova.”

_Way to throw ‘em off the scent… what would those chicks say if they knew what we were doing five minutes ago?_

A strangely industrial-sounding song Billy had never heard before started booming from the speakers mounted in each corner of the store.

“Warm… leatherette… warm… leatherette…”

Steve looked like his ears were in pain; he pointed at the ceiling and frowned. "What's leatherette, and why is it warm?"

“See the breaking glass… in the underpass… see the breaking glass… in the underpass…”

Billy didn’t like it— not even a little. The abrasive, repetitive synthesizers and monotonous 'singing' weren’t a problem, but the lyrics made his skin crawl.

“Hear the crushing steel… feel the steering wheel…”

Steve tilted his head and regarded Billy curiously. “Hey… are you okay?”

Billy barely heard him; his whole body suddenly felt cold and clammy.

“Hear the crushing steel… feel the steering wheel…”

“Is it the song?” Steve asked with concern in his dark eyes; he lowered his voice so nobody else could hear. “It’s the song, isn’t it?”

Billy didn’t even realize his own fingers had flown up to touch the medallion around his neck— the same one his mother was wearing on the day of the accident.

“Shit… hey, Ms. Clearwater?” Steve asked anxiously. “Can you put on something else, please?”

June didn’t hear him; the music was too loud and she was busy ringing up a purchase.

“Warm leatherette… melts on your burning flesh…”

“Jesus Christ… June, can you turn this off?” Steve asked, a little louder. “Please?”
“It’s okay,” Billy muttered, forcing himself to take deep, steady breaths through his nostrils. “I’m fine.”

“It’s not okay and you’re not fine,” Steve insisted, reaching out to gently squeeze his arm.

“A tear of petrol is in your eye… the hand brake penetrates your thigh… quick, let’s make love… before you die… on warm leatherette.”

Billy usually liked nothing better than being around Steve, but right now he wished he would go away and take his clueless sympathy with him. The sickening panic that was slowly filling his chest was exactly the same as on that strange night in December, when there was a car crash in the Fair Mart parking lot and all of Billy’s worst memories had returned to haunt him.

I don’t feel so good…

“I gotta go,” Billy mumbled into his fist as he shoved past Steve and hurried towards the store’s small bathroom.

Don’t puke, don’t puke, please don’t puke…

He made sure the door was locked, then braced his hands on the sides of the small sink, drawing quick, ragged breaths and willing his heart to slow down.

Is this what a panic attack is like? ‘Cause this really fucking sucks.

Billy didn’t want to take too long in the bathroom. He hated that several people in the store, including a few from school, had seen his sudden dash to the bathroom; if he could manage to calm himself down in under thirty seconds, everyone would just assume he had to take a piss.

“Get a grip,” he hissed at himself under his breath as he splashed cold water on his face and stared at himself in the mirror. “You want Steve to think you’re some kind of screwed-up head case?”

If he doesn’t already think that…

He longed for a smoke, but there were no windows in the small bathroom and June would throw a fit if he went out for a break a mere five minutes after starting his shift.

Stop being such a goddamn wuss and get back out there. You’ve got work to do.

Billy plastered on a bland expression and walked back into the store like nothing had happened. Mercifully, ‘Warm Leatherette’ was over and another song was playing— something jazzy that he neither recognized nor liked. He wasn’t really surprised to see that Steve was still there, chatting with June at the counter.

“Hey!” Steve called out with a forced smile. “You feelin’ better, man?”

“Fantastic,” Billy replied curtly, returning to his task of restocking the Howard Jones cassette tapes.

Steve said goodbye to June and walked towards the front door, but instead of leaving he paused near the shelving unit where Billy was crouched.

What does he want from me, a kiss goodbye?

He noticed that Steve was holding a white paper bag with the record store logo on it.

“So, you actually bought one of these turds?” Billy grumbled, jerking his chin at the half-empty
cardboard box of Howard Jones cassettes on the floor beside him. “Seems like a colossal waste of seven bucks, if you ask me.”

Seven bucks is nothing for a rich guy like him.

He was torn between wanting Steve to hang out in the record store all night and wishing he would just go away. The strange incident with the song had embarrassed Billy more than he thought possible and he felt like he needed some time to completely regain his composure; he didn't want any pity, and he hated feeling vulnerable and exposed.

Steve took a few steps closer until he was standing right behind him.

“Somethin’ on your mind?” Billy asked while he neatly stacked the tapes on the shelves, keeping his tone light and unaffected.

“Yeah, um…” Steve cleared his throat and lowered his voice like he was about to tell him a secret. “That song, earlier… when your mom passed, was it in a car crash?”

Billy’s hands stilled, each gripping a plastic-wrapped cassette tape.

What the hell?

“I-I’m sorry,” Steve said hastily. “I shouldn’t’ve brought it up.”

“Relax, it’s okay.”

Billy pretended to focus on his cassette-shoving duties. He had never figured out what to say when well-meaning people said they were 'so sorry' in reference to the tragedy that had snuffed out half his family; it always sounded so fake and forced, especially when the condolences were coming from someone who had never even met Donna and Emily. But somehow, the simple words didn’t infuriate him this time— not when they were spoken in Steve’s soft, earnest voice.

He heard the lyrics in that creepy song and put two and two together, that’s all… maybe he’s brighter than I thought.

“It was a year and a half ago,” Billy said quietly without looking up. “The crash, I mean.”

It was hard to believe it had already been so long; mentioning it made his heart ache like it had happened yesterday. He didn't resent Steve for asking, though.

It's kinda nice that he wants to know about Mom, I guess. Like she hasn't been totally forgotten.

“God, I'm so sorry.” Steve's words were genuine, though nobody would say he'd chosen the best time or place to begin such a serious conversation. "And your little sister, too? Jesus, that’s… that’s rough.”

Billy hadn't expected that.

“Wait, what?” He stood up and looked at Steve like he’d just spoken in fluent Cantonese. “The fuck did you just say?”

How could he possibly know about Emily?

He hastily flipped through his mental records of all the conversations they'd ever had; there weren’t many, so it didn’t take long for him to realize that he had never told Steve anything about his dead mother and sister.
“Christ, I’m sorry,” Steve babbled nervously. “Forget I said anything, okay? The weed’s making me weird. I don’t know what I was think—”

Billy grabbed his arm and tugged him aside to the corner by the front door; it was hardly private, but at least they were partially hidden by life-size cardboard cutouts of Hall and Oates.

“What?” Wide-eyed and perplexed, Steve shook his head hard enough to make his crest of hair flop from side to side. “No, n-nothing like that.”

“You sure?” Billy narrowed his eyes suspiciously; the thought of his step-sister divulging private details that weren’t hers to share made him very angry. “Maxine’s got a long history of stickin’ her little nose where it doesn’t belong, y’know.”

Steve stepped back, almost knocking over the cardboard Daryl Hall. “She didn’t say anything about your family, man, I swear to God.”

Billy closed his eyes and took a deep breath, reminding himself to be patient and keep his hot temper under control; biting Steve’s head off wasn’t the way to get answers to the many, many questions he had.

Just listen to him... find out how he knows this stuff.

“Look, here’s the thing…” Steve licked his lips nervously and swept his hair out of his eyes. “While that song was playing, I rememberered this, uh… this weird, scary dream I had a while back.”

Wait, what?

Billy glanced around to confirm that nobody was paying any attention to them; June was still chatting with customers, and all the other people in the store were just wandering up and down the aisles, talking, laughing, or browsing in thoughtful silence.

“It was more like a nightmare, really,” Steve continued, looking down at the small paper bag he was still clutching in his hand. “Totally awful. You ever have one of those shitty nightmares that are, like, freakishly realistic?”

Billy nodded reluctantly; he preferred not to think about or discuss those types of dreams— the ones that toppled all his defenses and made him wake up in a sweaty panic with his heart hammering against his ribcage.

“Right, so… in the dream— God, I feel so stupid, talking about this stuff— I was riding in this car when it got hit, and there was this blonde lady driving who kinda looked like you, and there was this little girl—”

“A… a little girl?” Billy repeated, leaning against the wall because his head had started spinning.

How the hell did he have a dream about the car accident?

“So, you do have a sister?” Steve asked quietly.

“Had,” Billy corrected in a hoarse whisper, feeling the old, persistent ache in his heart return. “I had a sister… but I don’t have her anymore.”

Steve’s brow wrinkled like he was trying to solve a long division problem without a calculator.
“Your sister… her name wasn’t *Emily*, was it?”

Billy was too stunned to do anything but blink; he almost felt like he needed to sit down. It took him a few seconds just to be able to nod.

*How… how… how could he possibly know that?*

“It was just part of the crazy dream I had.” Steve bit his lip uncertainly and glanced up to meet Billy’s eyes. “The lady in the station wagon called her Emily and—”

“Holy shit…” Billy interrupted softly. “Holy fucking shit…”

*Christ, he even knows it was a station wagon?*

It felt unbelievably strange, talking about Emily and their mother, Donna. Aside from Neil, Billy was the only person in Hawkins who had known them. Maxine and Susan knew *about* them, of course, but they had never known them. The thought that Steve would never get to meet them, either, made his heart feel heavy.

*If they had survived, though, we never would’ve come here…*

The thought of living his whole life without knowing Steve existed made him feel even worse.

“Yoo-hoo!” June called from behind the counter, startling them both for the second time that night.

“Jesus,” Billy muttered under his breath, so frustrated that he was tempted to punch John Oates right in his annoying cardboard mustache.

“Sorry, June!” Steve called as he backed towards the door and tugged it open, letting in the sound of cars driving by on Main Street. “I was just about to leave.”

Billy wished he could run after him to continue their conversation; a small part of him was actually *angry* at Steve for bringing up that mind-blowing dream stuff when he knew Billy was expected to work.

*Now he’s leaving and I’m gonna be stuck here, going crazy all night thinking about it.*

“Hey, Harrington!”

Steve paused with his hand on the door. “What?”

Billy had no idea what to say, but he had to say *something*. “Uh… see you on Sunday?”

Steve turned his head and took one last long, lingering look over his shoulder; his pretty brown eyes seemed tired, like the weed had finally worn off. “Yeah, probably.”

When the door jangled shut behind him, June laced her fingers together and rested both elbows on the glass countertop.

“You finally ready to get some work done, oh star employee of mine?”

“Star employee?” Billy snorted as he returned to shelving the Howard Jones cassette tapes. “More like your *only* employee.”

“Ha! Try *former* employee, if you’re gonna make a habit of showing up late, working for two minutes, then taking a long break to gab in the corner with your boyfriend.”
Jesus Christ.

Billy’s eyes widened and he swung his head around to see if anyone had heard— Nancy Wheeler was standing nearby, browsing the newly released pop cassettes, but otherwise nobody could have possibly heard June over the loud music.

Billy hurried over to the counter and cleared his throat, leaning close enough to his boss so that nobody else could possibly hear him. “Can you, uh… keep it down about that kinda thing, please? Harrington’s not my boyfriend.”

_I wish he was, but there's no way I'm that lucky... right?_

“Yes,” June replied with a knowing little smile. “If you say so, hon.”

...........................

It was just as well that Billy’s job was relatively simple, because he spent the rest of his shift thinking and connecting dots in his mind. As he finished restocking the shelves, he thought of the Metallica sweatshirt Steve still hadn’t returned; it had been a whole week, so Steve had either completely forgotten about it— which was definitely a possibility— or he simply didn’t want to return it. Billy desperately hoped it was the latter.

As he rang up purchases and charmed the female customers without even trying, he thought about the haunting memories the ‘Warm Leatherette’ song had dredged up— it was the night of the middle school Snow Ball in December, when Billy and Steve had run into each other at the Fair Mart and ended up having their first civil conversation.

_Did I have a nightmare about Mom and Emily that night, after the crash in the parking lot? I can’t really remember…_

During his conversation with Grandpa Ron a week earlier, they hadn’t gotten a chance to talk about dream-sharing; if it wasn’t several hours past the old man’s bedtime, Billy might have sprinted to the nearest telephone to call him and ask for advice— without revealing Steve’s identity, of course.

_What the hell would I ask, though?_

Billy knew he didn’t really need to ask his grandfather anything, because he could put two and two together all on his own. If Steve had truly managed to tap into one of Billy's nightmares— to the extent of gleaning details that he couldn’t possibly otherwise know— that could only mean one thing.

_Oh my God._

“What’s the matter?” June asked, peering at him over the top of her magazine. “You look like you just saw a ghost or something.”

Billy hadn’t seen a ghost, of course, despite the recently unburied memories of his mother and little sister— but he was starting to think he might have caught a glimpse of his future.
-Recommended listening: ‘Crazy Train’ by Ozzy Osbourne

-There’s a lot of music in this chapter, which I will list below. One of my dear readers, MrsBong, has volunteered to make a Spotify playlist for this fic, which can be viewed if you copy and paste the following: https://spoti.fi/2KVpgrS

‘The Warrior’ by Scandal feat. Patty Smyth
‘Too Late to Turn Back Now’ by Cornelius Bros. & Sister Rose*
‘Son of a Preacher Man’ by Dusty Springfield
‘Lucky Man’ by Emerson, Lake & Palmer*
‘Voices Carry’ by ’Til Tuesday (released on 3/28/85)
‘Warm Leatherette’ by The Normal

(*Yes, there are TWO songs from BlacKkKlansman in this chapter; I just saw that movie and it had some great music)
Chapter Notes

"I'm taking a ride with my best friend
I hope he never lets me down again
He knows where he's taking me
Taking me where I want to be,
I'm taking a ride with my best friend."
- 'Never Let Me Down Again' by Depeche Mode

Saturday, March 30th, 1985

Steve still had a Marlboro tucked in his pack of Parliaments from two Thursdays ago when he accidentally stole it from Billy. Every time he flipped open the pack and saw its distinctive orange tip sticking out amongst the neat rows of white recessed filters, he remembered what had happened outside his house, when he had summoned every scrap of courage he possessed and kissed Billy. 

Jesus, did that really happen?

He hadn’t realized he was still holding the cigarette until he had jogged all the way upstairs to his room and locked himself inside, as though he half-expected Billy to come charging after him like a demogorgon with blue balls. Steve didn’t even like Marlboros— they made him cough— but he kept it in his pack of Parliaments, anyway, because… well, he wasn’t sure why.

It was hard to make sense of what was going on in his head lately. Who the hell was Billy Hargrove, and how had he managed to morph from the kind of guy who’d beat Steve into oblivion to the kind who shared his Hot Cheetos with him at lunch and kept trying to touch his dick?

I’m not gay, he told himself for the millionth time. I’ve always liked girls. I’ve liked ‘em for as long as I can remember. I’ve had plenty of girlfriends, and I’ve had plenty of sex— really good sex, too.

Steve had been smoking more than usual during the past twenty-four hours; he had a lot on his mind, and he hadn't gotten much sleep the previous night. He couldn’t stop thinking about what had happened at the record store, when that creepy ‘Warm Leatherette’ song had dragged one of his old nightmares back to the surface. Impulsively blurting out the details of his dream to Billy was bad enough, but having those details confirmed as fact made Steve feel like he was living in the Twilight Zone. How in the world did he know that Billy used to have a little sister named Emily?

Steve had heard mentions of dream-sharing before— his whole family was filled with alphas and omegas, after all, and some of his cousins were old enough to have found soulmates of their own— but he didn’t know how any of it worked. It all sounded like a crazy crock of shit, if he was being perfectly honest.

Living in Hawkins had gotten Steve accustomed to ‘crazy’, though. He had seen towering monsters and dog-like creatures from another dimension. He had heard second-hand accounts of what Chief Hopper’s adopted daughter, El, could do with her mind. If all that was possible, why not something as far-out as two people accessing each other’s dreams?
There’s no way that’s what’s going on with me and Billy, though… that would just be WAY too crazy.

After loafing around all afternoon— watching TV, playing video games, and chain-smoking Parliaments in his backyard— Steve gave up on pretending he wasn’t unbearably bored and lonely. He hopped in his BMW and spent over an hour just driving around town in a desperate attempt to clear his cluttered head. For some reason, he couldn’t stop listening to his Journey cassette tape, especially the song ‘Faithfully’. He knew it was corny and probably not something a straight (until very recently, anyway) eighteen-year-old guy should be quite so obsessed with, but he couldn’t help it.

“They say that the road ain’t no place to start a family,” he sang along loudly, grateful that nobody could hear him as he sped down a long country road on the outskirts of town. “Right down the line it’s been you and me.”

Even when he managed to shove all the insane dream-sharing possibilities to the back of his mind, Steve’s head was still filled to the brim with Billy. During his long hour of cruising aimlessly around Hawkins, he had driven past the record store no less than three times without stopping to park and go inside.

Pathetic coward. Go find something to do and quit being a creep.

Bored and hungry, he ended up going to the diner across the street from the Emporium— the same place where Billy bought chicken noodle soup that one time when he thought Steve was sick, and also the location of their first… date? It made Steve cringe with embarrassment to think about it that way, but what else could he possibly call it? Billy had even paid the bill and kissed him afterwards, for Christ’s sake.

He sat in a booth towards the back, because he didn’t want anyone he recognized— least of all Billy — to see him sitting by the window, munching on his cheeseburger and fries in friendless solitude like the town’s biggest loser. It was Saturday night and there was almost nobody he particularly wanted to hang out with; the only non-Billy possibilities were Dustin Henderson, whose idea of a great night was to watch Ghostbusters and eat junk food until he felt like puking, and Phil Curtis, who was Steve’s age, at least, but… pretty damn boring, if he had to be brutally honest.

He picked at the cold fries scattered across his plate— the cook had given him enough for about three people— and thought about Billy. Specifically, he wondered why he was finding it so impossible to get him out of his head.

I know he’s sort of the new guy in town, and he’s different from everyone else, but… damn.

He wasn’t anything like Nancy Wheeler, that was for sure. Nancy was sweet and polite, whereas Billy was brashly assertive. Nancy was five-foot-three and ninety pounds, whereas Billy was… massive. He was no taller than Steve, but with those broad shoulders and muscles he seemed bigger, somehow— like he could lift Steve over his head and snap him in half like a branch.

Does he have weights and stuff at home, or does he just do push-ups?

Steve chewed on his bottom lip and spaced out for a minute or two while he remembered how nice those bulging pecs had felt under his hands. He would never admit it out loud, but he thought they were sexier than any breasts he’d ever touched, regardless of cup size.

When someone put ‘Unchained Melody’ on the jukebox for the second time in an hour, Steve knew it was time to go; it was almost ten o’clock and the restaurant would be closing soon, anyway. He
paid for his cheeseburger, left a generous tip, and strolled back to his car. He ejected his Journey tape and shoved it in the glove compartment; 'Faithfully' was still stuck in his head and starting to annoy the hell out of him—just like a certain someone.

He drove back to Loch Nora, since it was getting late and he didn’t have any better ideas. There was a mountain of homework and studying that awaited him at home, as well as the same old TV shows, magazines, and video games.

Oh, boy… lucky me.

He was almost home when he felt a sudden, shooting pain in his ribs.

“Ow, shit! What the hell?”

He decided it must have been some random muscle cramp, but then he heard a very familiar voice in his ear.

“I’m gonna kill this son of a bitch.”

Steve panicked and swerved over to the side of the road; a car behind him tooted its horn as it drove past. The voice was so distinct that for a few crazed seconds he thought Billy might have snuck into the backseat of his car while he was eating at the diner. When Steve confirmed that he was, indeed, the only person in his car he was a little dismayed, because that meant the voice had to be coming from inside his own head.

“It hurts.”

He felt another sharp twinge, this time on his jaw.

“Jesus, what the hell?” Steve whispered, burying his face in his hands and rubbing his temples.

“What’s going on?”

He had no idea. All he knew in that moment was that Billy was in trouble and he had to go back to the record store immediately. He cranked his steering wheel as far as it would go and did a U-turn in the middle of the street, speeding back towards the center of town.

“I’m gonna kill ‘em. They’re dead.”

“Who’s he talking about?” Steve asked aloud, feeling like he may have finally gone completely insane; he was glad nobody was there to witness him talking to himself.

I think Mom sees a therapist… maybe I need to see one, too.

He winced when he felt yet another pain; his whole body was starting to ache, and his hands were shaking on the steering wheel.

Who’s hurting him?

Steve pressed his foot down harder on the gas pedal, racing through a yellow light; he was angrier than he’d felt in a long time.

“Whoever they are, their ass is grass when I find ‘em,” he growled under his breath as he pulled into the driveway next to the record store.

The bright headlights of his BMW illuminated the dark parking lot, which had only three cars in it: June Clearwater’s classic Volkswagon Beetle, some boring old Toyota, and an unmistakable blue
Camaro. Steve slowed to a halt and narrowed his eyes with confusion, trying to see what was going on; someone was crouched on the hood of the Camaro, writing something on the windshield.

“Who the hell…?” Steve wondered aloud, parking his car and hopping out.

*He’s here.*

He spotted Billy a moment later, standing ten feet from his car with his arms pinned tightly behind his back by a large man Steve didn’t recognize.

*Wait a sec… I think I know who he is.*

It was Gus Hagan, Tommy’s older brother. His first name was really Augustus, but only substitute teachers and his mother could call him that without getting punched; most people in Hawkins knew him simply as Gus. Steve hadn’t seen him in years, but he hadn’t changed much since he got expelled from Hawkins High halfway through his senior year and left town— basically just a taller, beefier version of Tommy.

“Shit,” Steve muttered as he parked his car and rushed to his trunk; he pulled out the baseball bat that Jonathan Byers had hammered nails into a year earlier— the one that had saved him from certain death on more than one occasion.

“Who the hell is that?” he heard Gus ask, followed by the sound of a smack. “Shut up and quit squirming, you little queer.”

Steve winced like he was the one who’d been hit. He tightened his grip on the bat and jogged over to the edge of the parking lot.

When Tommy spotted him approaching, he cackled with malicious glee. “Hey, look who’s here! Come to rescue your boyfriend?”

Steve opened his mouth to retort that Billy was absolutely *not* his boyfriend, but the only words that came out were “Go to hell, asshole!”

“God, is that *you*, Stevie?” Gus taunted in a voice that was surprisingly nasal for someone built like a football player. “It’s been awhile— I haven’t seen you since you had zits and braces. And what’s up with that hairdo, buddy? It’s ginormous! From a distance I coulda sworn you were wearing one of those Davy Crockett hats.”

Steve ignored the insults and eyed both brothers warily; he knew he had to stay sharp and keep them both in sight, or Tommy might hop down from the car and sneak up behind him. He knew he had to put an end to this soon; it was horrible to see Billy with his arms twisted painfully behind his back, being forced to watch whatever Tommy was doing to his car.

*Is that blood on his mouth? Jesus Christ.*

“Why don’t you let him go so we can hash this out like adults, huh?” Steve suggested, forming a hasty battle plan in his head. “You’re gonna dislocate his shoulder if you keep that up.”

Gus shrugged and tightened his grip on Billy, who was wriggling and looked *murderous,* like a caged wolf being poked with a stick. “I’d be pretty okay with that… how ‘bout you, Tommy?”

“Oh, I’d be super okay with that!” Tommy laughed from where he was still squatting on the hood of the Camaro.
What the hell is he doing over there— is he drawing on Billy’s windshield? God, that'd better not be a permanent marker...

Steve was reminded of the time his former best friend had climbed up to the top of the movie theater marquee to scrawl ‘Nancy the Slut Wheeler’ and how they had both snickered cruelly afterwards; they were both guilty on that occasion, but now Steve’s conscience was clear.

“You know you’re gonna get in serious trouble for that, right? That’s, like, vandalism.”

“That’s, like, vandalism!” Tommy mimicked in an obnoxious falsetto as he continued to write on the window. “Oh, no! Gus, we’re vandals!”

His brother guffawed along with him, but their laughter tapered off when Billy managed to wrench one of his arms free and jab his elbow into Gus’ burly chest.

“Hey! Knock it off, you little cocksucker.”

Steve inhaled sharply when Gus backhanded Billy across the face and kicked his knees out from under him, making him collapse on the ground.

Why are they doing this? Just ‘cause of Billy’s stupid little toilet punishment in gym?

“Okay, I’m gonna need both of you shitheads to clear out!” Steve shouted, holding his bat up to show them he meant business. “Now!”

It wasn’t that dark in the parking lot, given the bright moonlight and the flickering glow of an old security lamp above the back door of the record shop, but Gus still squinted at the nail-studded baseball bat like it was hard to see.

“Ha! Is that a Little League bat?”

It used to be Mike Wheeler’s, so yeah.

“It’s got nails in it,” Tommy observed as he hopped down from the Camaro and tossed his permanent marker over his shoulder. “Don’t let him near you with that thing, Gus. You could get tinnitus.”

Billy rolled over and chuckled as he spat some blood on the asphalt; his blue button-down shirt was dirty and torn. “It’s tetanus, you brain-dead neantherthal.”

“What the hell did you call my brother?” Gus roared down at him, balling his enormous fists.

“Are you deaf?” Steve felt light-headed and foolhardy, like he was taunting an enraged bulldog. “He called him a brain-dead neanderthal.”

Gus tipped his head back and laughed. “You’ve got some big balls, talkin’ to us like that. Listen, boy — why don’t you put your spiky little Wiffle bat down and fight me like a man?”

Tommy hastened to his brother’s side and shoved Billy down again when he tried to rise to his feet.

“I’ll hold this fucker down for ya, Gus— get him!”

Steve tightened his grip on the bat as Tommy’s brother lurched towards him; he was fully aware that his weapon was the only thing that might keep those ham-sized fists from pounding his face into pudding.

“Get the hell outta here, Harrington!” Billy yelled from the ground, struggling beneath Tommy’s
weight; he had a bad cut on his lip and a thin line of blood down to his chin. “Just go, man!”

Yeah, right. And leave you here to get killed by these goons? I don’t think so.

“I don’t wanna see you get hurt,” a familiar voice hissed in the back of his mind. “If you make a run for the Beemer you could probably get away in time…”

“This isn’t my first rodeo,” Steve muttered under his breath, briefly meeting Billy’s wide, frenzied eyes and attempting a confident smile before returning his focus to his massive opponent.

“Sock his lights out, Gus!” Tommy goaded, grunting with the effort of keeping Billy on the ground. “Don’t worry, he doesn’t have the guts to use that thing on you.”

“Wanna bet, asshole?” Steve raised the bat higher and twisted the ball of his foot on the ground like a major league power hitter.

I’ve kicked a demogorgon’s ass and a few demodogs, too… I’m not scared of you.

Gus seemed unsure how to best approach Steve. They circled each other for a while before Gus got impatient and lunged at him with both hands. Steve hopped aside nimbly while swinging the bat in a perfect, low arc— even though he was so furious he was seeing red, he knew a poorly-aimed blow to Gus’ head, chest, stomach, or spinal column could potentially land him behind bars for second-degree murder.

“You’re way too pretty for jail,” the slightly annoying voice said in the back of his mind.

“I know, shut up!” Steve yelled as his bat connected with Gus Hagan’s rather large, bulky posterior.

When Gus dropped to the ground and clutched his hindquarters, bellowing like a wounded bear, Tommy released his tight grip on Billy’s shirt and looked over at his brother with concern.

“Are you okay? What the hell did that piece of shit do? Lemme see.”

“Fuck off!” Gus sobbed, curling up into a ball on the ground; it was too dark to tell for certain, but he seemed to have blood on his hands. “Do somethin’ useful for once and shove that bat all the way up his preppy ass, will ya?”

Good luck with that… there’s no way Tommy can take both of us.

Billy chose that moment to spit on his freckled captor—a big, nasty glob of pink spit right between his eyes. “Lay a finger on him and I’ll snap it right off your hand, asswipe.”

Tommy made a disgusted noise and slapped Billy across the face; the sharp sound echoed in the almost-empty parking lot and sent another jolt of rage surging through Steve’s body.

Get the hell off him… NOW.

“You want a piece of this, Tommy Boy?” Steve taunted, giving his bat a cocky little twirl. “Step right up.”

For the first time that night, Tommy actually seemed worried; he gave Billy a final kick before running over to his groaning brother.

“Screw you, Harrington— you’re gonna pay for this, big-time.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m really scared.” Steve rolled his eyes like he was bored, then pointed the bat at
Tommy, savoring the way he flinched. “Why don’t you two just go home, huh? Your big brother’s gonna need someone to kiss his ouchies and stick Band-Aids on ‘em, so you’d better— whoa!”

He stumbled a little as Billy practically shoved past him and tackled Tommy. They both landed on the rough asphalt with pained grunts, but Billy had the advantage; he seemed to have gotten a second wind and pinned Tommy like they were wrestling in gym class.

“Fuck you!” Billy shouted down at him as he proceeded to pummel him with both fists. “Fuck! You!”

“Stop!” Gus crawled slowly towards the struggling boys in a pitiful attempt to shield his brother. “Fucking quit it, you psycho!”

Steve just stood there for a few moments, watching them punching and clawing at each other on the ground like a trio of fighting tomcats. He hadn’t seen Billy like this— with wild eyes, bared teeth, and flying fists— since the night in November when that rage had been directed at his own baffled face. Even when Billy had punched Tommy in the locker room the previous week, that had just been one quick smack in the mouth, not this uncontrolled barrage.

“Hey,” he finally said, bending down to put a hand on Billy’s shoulder. “It’s okay, man… you can stop, okay?”

Billy ignored him and kept hitting Tommy— he paused only to punch Gus when he got too close.

Steve hated the sickening sounds the blows made; he didn’t even like to watch boxing matches on TV and this was a hundred times worse because it was happening right in front of him.

“Hey! We won, okay? There’s no need to beat him to an early grave.”

If I’m too pretty for jail, so are you… so stop. STOP!

Billy gradually slowed his fists and looked up at Steve, almost as though he had actually heard him; he was panting like he’d just finished running a race.

“Stop, okay?” Steve repeated quietly, reaching down to grip one of Billy’s hands and pull him up.

It was tempting to ignore the Hagan brothers on the ground next to them, but Steve forced himself to keep an eye on them as they staggered to their feet; he wouldn’t put a last-minute sucker punch past either of them. He was pleased to see that they both looked like hell: Gus had several tiny, red perforations on the seat of his khakis, while Tommy’s face was splotched with bruises and blood.

“Get out,” Steve snarled. “Now. And you’d better forget about any delusional revenge fantasies, ’cause if either of you losers come near us again, you’re dead.”

The brothers glared miserably at Billy and Steve as they limped over to their car. Gus couldn’t sit down because of his severely injured bottom, so he flopped face-down into the backseat and let Tommy drive.

“Good riddance, shitheads!” Steve yelled at the old Toyota as it sped out of the parking lot.

It took him a few moments to realize that he was still clutching Billy’s hand; he hastily let go and wiped his clammy palm on his pants.

“Are… are you okay?”
Billy didn’t answer; he just stood there with slightly slumped shoulders, staring at his car.

*Man, look what Tommy did to it.*

Steve had always thought Billy’s Camaro was extremely cool, but now it just looked sad— all four tires appeared deflated (in the dark, it was hard to tell if they had been punctured or if it was just the little valve caps that had been taken off) and there was something scrawled across the windshield in black marker. He narrowed his eyes and read aloud slowly.

“I heart… oh, I love… what’s that supposed to be, an upside-down snail?”

“Don’t be fuckin’ dense,” Billy snapped irritably. “It’s a cock, Harrington. A cock and balls.”

“Oh.”

Steve had enough sense to not read the rest aloud: *HONK IF UR A FAG.*

*Oh my god…*

“Jesus,” he said weakly, searching for the right words. “Look, it’s… it can be fixed, okay? It’s just a car, and—”

“No, it’s not just a car!” Billy shouted. “You don’t get it! My mom got it for me. I mean, my old man paid for it and all, but he never would’ve bought it if Mom hadn’t convinced him.”

The way his voice cracked just a tiny bit each time he mentioned his mother made Steve’s heart hurt.

“Oh,” he mumbled again, wishing he could think of something better to say— something helpful, or comforting— something that wouldn’t throw gasoline on Billy’s anger— something better than ‘oh’.

The tense silence only lasted a few moments before they heard a police siren approaching in the distance.

“Great,” Billy grumbled, crossing his arms across his chest. “Who ran off?”

“Your boss, probably… and Hopper’s not a pig.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, thanks. And I’d definitely put that bat somewhere out of sight— you don’t want those killjoys to confiscate it, do you?”

Steve felt stupid for not thinking of that; he’d almost completely forgotten about the nail-studded baseball bat he was still holding. Hopper had seen it before, of course, but they weren’t battling monsters from another dimension this time, and there was no reason to assume Hopper would even be the officer to arrive at the scene; if any other cop saw him holding a bat that had blood on it, he would be in deep shit.

*Christ, what if they call my parents?*

Steve sprinted over to his car, flung open the door to the backseat and tossed the bat inside just before a tan Chevy Blazer rolled into the parking lot, red and blue police lights flashing.

“Everything okay, boys?” Officer Powell asked as he hopped out of the passenger side. “Ms. Clearwater gave us a call and said there were three of you out here, so… who ran off?”

Chief Hopper slammed the driver-side door and clicked on a large flashlight. “What’s going on?”
“Nothing,” Billy muttered, looking down at his shoes and kicking a small chunk of asphalt.

“Doesn’t look like ‘nothing’ to me, kid.” Chief Hopper walked right up to Billy and aimed his flashlight at his face, which made the bruises and bloodied lip look even worse than they had in the dark.

Billy shielded his eyes with one hand and scowled. “You mind pointing that thing somewhere else, Chief?”

Jim Hopper chuckled humorlessly, though he did lower the beam to Billy’s chest—the tiny golden pendant glinted against the triangle of exposed skin. “Lemme guess— you got in a fight over something stupid… over a girl, right?”

Steve had to suppress a snort of laughter at the suggestion of Billy getting in a fight with anyone over a girl—unless, perhaps, it involved someone being mean to Maxine.

“Uh… Chief?” Officer Powell spoke up suddenly, shining his own flashlight at the blue Camaro parked nearby. “I’m not sure that’s what they were fightin’ about tonight…”

They all stared silently for a few seconds at the sad, deflated tires and the ugly message scrawled on the windshield.

Steve would never have been able to explain how, but in that moment he could actually feel Billy’s carefully contained rage and the stinging humiliation of watching two cops (and a boy he liked) read those god-awful words.

*Jesus, what a mess. Why the hell did you have to take things so far, Tommy?*

“H-he didn’t start the fight or anything,” Steve explained hastily, stepping closer to Billy and reaching over to put his hand on his forearm. “Tommy and his crazy big brother jumped him after work, and they beat him up and did that to his car… can you believe it?”

Chief Hopper raised his bristly eyebrows. “Tommy’s big brother— oh, you mean Gus Hagan? Yeah, I believe it. I haven’t seen that punk in years… he used to be a regular at the station when he was in high school.”

“We gave him community service and made him clean up the park, once, and when he was done he dropped a big bag of doggie-doo on the station doorstep and set it on fire,” Officer Powell recalled, wrinkling his nose. “To this day, I can still remember the stink.”

“Well, Gus is back and he’s a freakin’ menace to society,” Steve declared impatiently, pointing at Billy’s bruised face in case there was any remaining doubt. “He did that for no reason, Chief. No good reason whatsoever.”

*It’s cool if I don’t mention how Billy punched Tommy and shoved his head in the crapper, right?*

“Hey,” Billy mumbled self-consciously under his breath, “It’s okay, dude, you really don’t have to—”

“Since when are you two friends, anyway?” Hopper interrupted gruffly, eyeing Billy with suspicion. “I heard Mike Wheeler tell my daughter something about how you beat the living hell out of Steve, here… it’s Hargraves, isn’t it?”

Steve wasn’t sure why he felt compelled to keep speaking up for a guy who had, indeed, beaten ‘the living hell’ out of him, but he couldn’t help it— the words just spilled out.

“That was just a one-time thing,” he clarified, keeping his eyes on Hopper and refusing to let himself look in Billy’s direction. “It was a long time ago and it’s never gonna happen again.”

The police chief looked at them both for a few moments before sighing heavily and turning to his partner. “Cal, see if you can get us a tow truck, wouldja? Look, Billy, I’ll do what I can abut your vehicle. We can’t just leave it here, in case those idiots come back to do something else to it, so we’ll get ’er towed to an auto body shop down the road and see what they can do about the tires. Hopefully they’ll be able to scrub that crap off the windshield, too.”

Steve glanced over at Billy and couldn’t stand the look on his face— cool, calculated indifference barely masking embarrassment and shame. He was pretty sure he could guess what was on his mind.

*He’s too proud to ask, huh? Well, I’m not.*

Steve cleared his throat. “He’s not gonna have to pay anything for that, right? You’re gonna send the bill for all that auto stuff to Tommy and Gus?”

“Oh, don’t worry. Their folks’ll hear about this, and they’ll have to pay for the damages… unless they wanna dispute it in court, which I seriously doubt. And in the meantime, you boys had better stay away from them— I don’t wanna hear about any more fights, got that?”

The chief strolled back to his truck to join Officer Powell, who was talking to somebody on a police walkie-talkie.

*So… can we go, now?*

Steve noticed that Billy seemed exhausted; he poked his arm and nodded towards his BMW. “C’mon, man… I’ll drive you home.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Well, how else are you gonna get home— you gonna ask Hopper for a ride?”

“No,” Billy said stubbornly. “Thaks for worrying about me, but I can take care of myself. It’s not *that* far; I could just walk.”

“Don’t be a moron,” Steve scoffed, reaching out to grab his sleeve. “You look like you’re about five seconds from falling over. Now, quit arguing and come on. It’s late and cold and you don’t even have a jacket.”

As they walked past the police car, he called out to Chief Hopper, “Is it cool if we go home? This guy needs to get patched up.”

Jim Hopper waved him away. “Sure, yeah. Go on home and stay out of trouble, boys. We’ll take it from here, and we’ll be in touch about the car.”

Billy followed Steve silently and climbed into the passenger seat. Neither of them said anything until Steve had pulled out of the record store parking lot, when it suddenly occurred to him that he didn’t know where Billy lived; he had a vague idea, but he didn’t want to embarrass himself by getting lost.

*He’s been to my place, but I’ve never been to his.*
“Uh… you wanna go back to your house, right?”

“Not especially, no,” Billy said flatly, which puzzled Steve.

“Oh.”

*Is he serious, or is he kidding? Why wouldn’t he want to go home?*

Steve bit his lip, hesitating for half a moment before blurting, “You wanna come over to my place, instead?”

“Your place?” Billy was looking down at his lap and picking at a rip in his jeans. “Like, to spend the night?”

Something in his low voice made Steve’s cheeks feel warm.

“Y-yeah. Why not?”

*It’s not like he’ll be in my room or anything. He can crash in one of the guest bedrooms.*

He paused at a stop sign at the end of Main Street; a right turn would take them to Loch Nora, and a left would take them to the not-so-great part of town where the Hargroves lived.

Billy cleared his throat. “Will your parents mind?”

Steve shrugged. “I doubt it. If anything, they’ll be happy to see you. They like you.”

“Well… only if you’re sure they won’t care.”

“They won’t. It’s no big deal.”

“Okay.”

Steve took a deep breath and made a right turn. It was almost eleven o’clock and the roads were mostly empty; even on a Saturday, Hawkins didn’t have much of a night-life scene. They sat in slightly awkward silence for a minute or two, during which Steve internally debated whether or not to switch on the radio. The last time they had been in a car together (the Camaro, on that occasion) every song on the radio only amplified the already sky-high tension between them— songs like ‘Do You Really Want to Hurt Me’. He didn’t want to risk tuning into a station that was playing a sexy love song and he *definitely* wasn’t going to turn on his Journey tape.

“Hey, do you mind if I bum a smoke?” Billy asked. “Mine are still in my car— I forgot to grab ‘em before we left.”

“Sure.” Steve gestured at the grey Members Only jacket he had tossed in the backseat. “I think they’re in the pocket… help yourself.”

He heard the leather seat creak as Billy twisted around to retrieve the cigarettes and lighter, but when he didn’t hear anything else for what felt like an unusually long time, he glanced over to see what was wrong.

Billy was staring down at the pack of cigarettes.

“You still have it,” he murmured softly.

Steve’s forehead crinkled with confusion. “I still have what?”
Billy slowly withdrew a cigarette from the pack and held it up for him to see: it was the orangetipped Marlboro.

“Oh, that?” Steve chuckled, his cheeks warming as the memory returned for the second time that evening. “Yeah, well, I don’t smoke those and it seemed like a waste to just toss it. Go ahead—you have it.”

He heard the lighter click and the mechanical whirr of the passenger-side window being lowered; the strong smell of tobacco smoke filled his car, thinned by the cool breeze rushing through the open window.

Billy took a few long, pensive drags and cleared his throat again. “How’d you know where to find me tonight?”

Steve’s eyes widened, but he kept them on the road. “W-what do you mean? It’s the place where you work.”

“Yeah, and it was closed. Were you swinging by to say ‘hi’ after my shift?”

“Something like that,” Steve mumbled evasively.

“So, it was nothing but a coincidence that you came to the parking lot right when I needed some backup?”

It wasn’t a coincidence, but there was no way Steve was going to admit that he heard Billy’s voice in his head, telling him he was in trouble, and that he was guided to the record store parking lot by forces he couldn’t begin to comprehend. It was too crazy to even think about, never mind say out loud.

“Uh… yeah. It was just a coincidence,” he chuckled nervously. “Pretty lucky, right? I mean, who knows what else those low-lifes would’ve done to you and your car if I hadn’t stopped by.”

Billy tapped the ash off the end of his cigarette and tsked irritably. “You know I can tell when you’re lying, right?”

Shit.

“And while we’re on the subject, we never did get to finish talking about that dream you had… the freaky one where you saw my mom’s car accident.”

Double shit.

“Did your parents tell you much about dream-sharing?”


“Why do you think?”

“That’s, uh… you don’t actually think that’s what’s going on here, do you?

“Why not?” Billy fired back.

“Because, that would be…” Steve paused, trying to gather his thoughts into something coherent. “That would be nuts. And impossible.”

“It’s not impossible—people like us really can do rad shit like that.”
“People like us?” Steve repeated quietly. “You mean alphas?”

“Yeah.”

“But that’s, like, a… that’s a soulmate thing.” Steve almost struggled to say the word and once he had, it seemed to hover in the air between them. “Alphas can’t connect with each other like that, obviously.”

“How do you know?”

“Because that would be totally crazy and it wouldn’t make any sense, like… biologically. It’s just a cool trick alphas and omegas can do with each other, like my mom and dad.”

Steve thought of his parents but came up short when he tried to picture them tuning into one another’s dreams and being able to communicate mentally, or whatever it was soulmates could do—his parents had never bothered to fill him in on the details.

“Okay… so, if nothing’s going on here, explain what happened back there in that damn parking lot. Explain to me how you knew about my mom and Em—” Billy cut himself off mid-sentence, like he was swallowing a lump in his throat. “Emily.”

Steve thought he could feel a twinge of his pain.

“I don’t… I don’t know, okay? I don’t know anything.”

“Exactly— you don’t know anything, and neither do I. Nobody really knows anything about this kind of stuff— you really think there are, like, textbooks about people like us? You think there are libraries where we can find books about sharing dreams and soulma—”

“No!” Steve surprised himself by suddenly smacking the steering wheel. “This is not happening, okay? So drop it.”

The awkward, heavy silence that followed made him squirm uncomfortably and wonder if he had overreacted.

“It’s been through a lot tonight. He got his ass kicked and his car’s screwed up… I didn’t know his mom got him the Camaro.”

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry.” Billy gazed out the open window, puffing on his Marlboro. “Wouldn’t have brought it up if I knew you’d get your panties in a twist about it.”

“He’s been through a lot tonight. He got his ass kicked and his car’s screwed up… I didn’t know his mom got him the Camaro.”

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry.” Billy gazed out the open window, puffing on his Marlboro. “Wouldn’t have brought it up if I knew you’d get your panties in a twist about it.”

“Oh, that’s a real nice way to say sorry.”

Steve took a deep breath through his nose. “I don’t wear panties, and I wasn’t saying we could never, ever talk about it again as long as we live— just not tonight, okay? My brain feels like it’s broken and I seriously can’t deal with this shit right now. It’s been a really crazy night already. I mean, last night was crazy, too, but tonight really took the cake. Can we please just talk about something else? Something normal, that isn’t gonna give me a migraine?”

Billy shrugged like he didn’t care, but there was a visible tightness in his jaw. “Sure. Whatever you want.”
“Uh… well, shit.”

“Nice full moon tonight,” Steve remarked suddenly, pointing at the windshield and inwardly cringing at how boring he sounded; mentioning the moon was even worse than saying “So, how ’bout those Pacers?” or commenting on the weather.

Billy tilted his head and peered out the windshield for a few moments. To Steve’s relief, he didn’t appear especially annoyed anymore.

*He could just be pretending, though. He’s good at playing it cool.*

“Pretty sure it’s a waxing gibbous moon, if you wanna get technical.”

*It’s a what, now?*

Steve hadn’t expected an actual response to his dumb moon remark; he could feel his forehead creasing. “A waxed gibbon?”

Billy burst out laughing. “Oh, man… ow, fuck. It hurts to smile.”

“Then quit laughing at me, you jerk— what the hell’s so funny, anyway?”

Billy stared at him for a second, then started cracking up all over again; he pressed his free hand up to the corner of his mouth, touching the place where Gus Hagan’s knuckles had torn the delicate skin of his lip.

“How the hell do you know so much about everything? It’s annoying.”

And… really cool.

Billy looked thoughtful. “I dunno… have you tried reading books and the newspaper and shit like that?”
“Occasionally,” Steve muttered defensively—it was technically true, though he usually only read the books assigned in English class and skimmed the funnies and sports pages in The Hawkins Post. “I can read, y’know.”

“Well, bravo for you, bud. Reading is fundamental.”

“Ha-ha,” Steve grumbled, rolling his eyes.

Billy took another drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke out the window. “I guess I’ve always had a knack for remembering stuff. Like, I probably saw something about gibbons on a lame nature show once upon a time, and I think we learned about moon phases in sixth grade. I just have a million useless little bits of information stuck in my brain forever, and every once in a while I get a chance to actually use ‘em.”

Steve was envious—as someone who had trouble remembering things he had studied a mere ten minutes earlier, that sounded almost like a super power.

“It’s okay, just go ahead and say it,” he sighed with exaggerated weariness. “You think I’m dumber than a box of rocks.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You’re just being nice.”

"Who, moi?" Billy snorted. “Since when am I nice?”

“Since you decided you wanna French me all the time and get in my pants,” Steve retorted without thinking.

*Whoops… said too much.*

Billy laughed, wincing again at the pain in his lip. “Guess I can’t argue with that. But seriously, you’re not that dumb. You probably know plenty of shit I don’t.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?

Billy paused to think for a while, which didn’t do much to strengthen his argument. “Uh, let’s see… you taught me everything I know about Mario Brothers.”

Steve snorted. “That’s, like, one thing. And it’s a stupid thing, too— I bet there are six-year-olds in Japan who could kick my ass at Mario Brothers.”

“Well, give me a minute and I’ll think of some other stuff.”

“If you have to think *that* much about it, you know I’m pretty hopeless.”

"Nah." Billy turned his head and gave him a coy little wink. “Hopelessly pretty.”

Steve pursed his lips tightly, fighting off a smile. “Shut up and finish your smoke, wise guy. We’re almost there.”

…………………..

The house was quiet when Steve unlocked the door and led Billy inside. There were a few lights on,
so he guessed one or both of his parents were home; they both had such busy work schedules that he never knew when either of them would be around, though there was a good chance his father was cooped up in his study, making last-minute edits to his sermon.

“There’s a phone over here, if you wanna call home so your parents won’t worry.”

“Worry about me?” Billy snorted derisively. “As if.”

“They really won’t care? Not even Susan?”

“Nobody over there gives a shit what I’m up to, unless they need me to babysit Max for free or whatever.”

“Oh.” Steve couldn’t imagine his parents not caring if he stayed out the whole night without telling them in advance; his mother would probably call the police, worried that her son had guzzled too many beers at a party and wrapped his car around a tree. “Well, c’mon. I think we’ve got a first aid kit in the guest bathroom.”

Billy followed closely behind him as they walked upstairs. “Guest bathroom, huh? Man, imagine having so many bathrooms that you’ve got, like, extra ones just in case someone happens to come over.”

“Yeah,” Steve chuckled uneasily. He never knew what to say when Billy made cold little comments about how big his house was or how he didn’t need a job to be able to afford things like fast food, cassette tapes, new clothes, and gas for his BMW.

“Okay, here we go.” He stopped outside the bathroom at the end of the second-floor hallway and flicked on the light. “Let’s try patching you up a little.”

Billy trudged over to the toilet, closed the lid with a hollow thud and sat down. “Alright, Nurse Harrington… I’m all yours.”

Steve willed himself not to turn red as he pulled the first aid kit from a cabinet. He dropped to his knees on the little peach-colored rug directly in front of the toilet and sat on the heels of his sneakers.

“Just a sec,” he mumbled, uncapping a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and soaking a cotton ball with the clear liquid.

He tried to avoid eye contact as he dabbed at the cut on Billy’s bottom lip, but focusing on the lower half of that handsome face wasn’t much easier. In the bright light of the bathroom, sitting barely a foot away apart, Steve pretended not to notice the pretty bow of Billy’s upper lip and the dark stubble peppering his chiseled jawline.

*Jesus, he looks good, even when he’s gotten smacked a few times. That lip’s gotta hurt.*

The only sounds in the bathroom were their breathing and the faint ticking of Steve’s wristwatch. He needed to say something to break the silence, which felt too intimate for comfort.

“When did you start shaving?”

Billy shrugged. “When I was fourteen or fifteen, I think. First it was just the mustache, then everything else started growing around the time I started high school.”

Steve tossed the cotton ball in the little wicker waste basket and unscrewed a tube of antibiotic ointment; as he carefully dabbed some on the corner of Billy’s lip, he could feel the stubble
“So, if you quit shaving for a while, do you think you’d actually grow, like, a full beard?”
“Why, do you think I should?”
Steve snorted. “Uh, no.”
"How about you? Can you grow a beard yet?"
"Just a mustache," Steve admitted, "And I honestly don't think mustaches look that good."
"I'll jot that down for future reference." Billy suddenly reached out and put his hand on Steve's jaw and slowly dragged his thumb up and down his cheek.
Steve inhaled slowly until his lungs were full. "What, um... what're you doing?"
“There's a little stubble, but not much,” Billy remarked in a low murmur, meeting his eyes. "When's the last time you shaved?"
"Uh... Thursday? W-wednesday?” Steve stammered uncertainly; he couldn't think with Billy staring at him like that.
“Must be nice to not need to shave every morning.”

Must be nice to have eyes like goddamn gemstones.

Steve could feel his heart beating faster. He knew that if he really wanted to, he could simply tilt up his chin and close the six-inch gap between them; it would be the easiest thing in the world, and it was definitely tempting— even with frizzy, rumpled hair, a five-o’clock shadow and bruises on his face, Billy was the most attractive person Steve had ever seen... mesmerizing, almost.

Jesus, those eyelashes are really something.

When Billy bent down for a kiss, though, Steve pressed his hands against his shoulders and pushed him back a few inches.
“Your lip is busted,” he pointed out reluctantly. “It’s gonna hurt.”
“I don’t care,” Billy said with a stubborn pout.
“Well, I do,” Steve retorted, trying not to laugh. “And even if I didn’t, you’re gonna taste nasty after all the stuff I just put on your lip. Now, keep still and gimme your hand.”

Billy obediently held out both of his hands for Steve to inspect— his dominant hand was his left, and it looked much worse than the right. Steve soaked another cotton ball in disinfectant and dabbed it on the angry-looking red spots on each of the four knuckles Billy had repeatedly driven into Tommy’s face.
I guess I could give him a real quick kiss on the cheek or something... he looks like a puppy that didn’t get a treat.

Steve resisted the impulse because he was fairly certain that neither of them— Billy, in particular— would be able to leave it at that, and he wasn’t about to initiate a make-out session in the guest bathroom, of all places.
“Besides, even if your lip wasn’t all messed up and covered in antiseptic goop,” he added with a smile as he screwed the cap back on the brown bottle, “You’re sittin’ on a toilet and I’m on the bathroom floor. That’s not exactly, uh…”

“Sexy?”

“iwas gonna say romantic, but yeah.”

“Fair point.” Billy smirked. “You want romance, huh?”

“What? No, I was just—”

“Steven, honey? Are you down here?”

Shit, it’s Mom. I thought she was asleep.

“Uh… yeah, I’m in here!”

“Well, what in the world are you doing in the guest bathroom, sweetheart?” Steve’s mother appeared in the doorway, still dressed in the pantsuit and patent leather flats she had worn to work; she looked surprised when she saw Billy sitting on the toilet with Steve crouched between his knees. “Oh, I didn’t know you were having a friend over tonight— Lord have mercy, what happened to you, Billy? You boys didn’t get in another fight, did you?”

The idea of fighting Billy seemed almost laughable, after everything that had happened in the long months since November.

“I did, yeah… but don’t worry, Mrs. Harrington— it wasn’t a fight with your son,” Billy explained, nodding towards Steve and rising to his feet. “I got jumped by this kid from school and his brother after work, that’s all. He’s actually the one who came by to help get ‘em off my back.”

Steve’s mother tsked and shook her head as she stepped closer to Billy and peered at his face with clinical concern— she was a doctor, after all.

“Well, it doesn’t look like you need any stitches. Disinfecting that lip twice a day should be fine—just be careful with it, okay? Were you planning on spending the night here?”

“Only if it’s okay with you, Mrs. Harrington.”

“Of course it’s okay, dear. But do your parents know where you are tonight?”

“Yeah,” Billy lied without missing a beat. “They’re cool with me stayin’ over.”

“Well, alright, then. We have two guest bedrooms, and—”

“Oh, I really don’t wanna be any trouble, ma’am. I’d rather just crash on the couch or something.”

“We have some sleeping bags, if you’d like to spend the night in Steven’s bedroom—”

“The couch is fine!” Steve interjected loudly, feeling a blush rise to his cheeks and desperately thinking of something to say when his mother and Billy both stared at him curiously. “I, uh… I snore a lot. Like a chainsaw.”

I love you, Mom, but if you could please stop talking and go away, that’d be fantastic.

“You snore? I didn’t know that. Well, however you boys want to arrange it is just fine with me. I’m
going to go get changed for bed, now… it’s been a long day.”

Billy twisted his head and watched her leave, waiting a few seconds until her footsteps faded from earshot before turning back to Steve.

“Like a chainsaw, huh?”

“That’s right,” Steve fibbed emphatically. “Loud as hell, all night long. You wouldn’t get a wink of sleep.”

“Yeah, I bet I wouldn’t,” Billy murmured as he stepped closer, backing Steve against the wall beside the bathroom door. “I bet you’d slip into my sleeping bag and keep me up ’til sunrise.”

*I’d never have the balls.*

Steve swallowed and willed himself not to get hard.

“In… in your dreams,” he stammered. “God, you’re such a perv.”

“Better a perv than a prude.”

“I am not a prude.”

“Yeah, I know.” Billy glanced at Steve’s mouth. “I haven’t forgotten about yesterday, pretty boy.”

An image of the two of them, clutching at each other as they kissed in the record store stockroom, swam to the front of Steve’s mind.

*Don’t get hard, don’t get hard…*

For a few moments they just stood there staring at each other. When the silence was punctuated by an odd little high-pitched gurgle, though, they both smiled.

“Was that me, or you?” Steve chuckled.

“Me, I think,” Billy admitted, rubbing his flat, toned stomach through the fabric of his dingy blue shirt. “I haven’t eaten anything since lunch.”

“Well, let’s do something to fix that… c’mon.”

………………

Steve led the way downstairs to the kitchen, where he pulled out a loaf of bread and jars of peanut butter and strawberry jam. As he slapped some quick sandwiches together, Billy wandered idly around the room and looked at the magnets on the fridge and the pictures on the wall.

“Is this you?”

“What? Oh.”

Steve sighed when he glanced over his shoulder and saw the framed photograph that had caught Billy’s attention—it was a picture of him blowing out five candles on a chocolate birthday cake.

“Yeah, that’s me. Kinda cute, right?”

“Kinda? Jesus, you were adorable as hell. Your mom could’ve gotten you a gig doing Osh-Kosh
commercials or some shit. Your hair was pretty big then, too.”

Steve shrugged modestly, aware that his uncommonly thick hair was one of his best features. “That’s just the way it grows. Always has been.”

“Well, you’re lucky. I’ve gotta use a shit-ton of Aqua Net or it goes flat.”

Steve smiled at the mental image of Billy scrutinizing his reflection in a mirror and snarling curses at his unruly curls as he doused them in hairspray.

“Oh, and this should probably go without saying, but if you tell anyone I said that, you’re dead, Harrington— got that?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Steve rolled his eyes and held out a napkin with a peanut butter sandwich on it. “Anyway, here you go. I know it’s not exactly gourmet cooking, but it’s all—”

Billy snatched the sandwich and took an enormous bite, then another, then another, and then it was gone.

*Jeez, he was hungry.*

Steve bit off the corner of his own sandwich and glanced over at the kitchen clock; it was getting late, but he wasn’t ready to go to bed yet. “You, uh… you wanna play some Mario Brothers?”

Billy nodded and followed him downstairs to the rec room, where he flopped down on the couch and watched Steve switch on the TV and set up the video game. Neither of them spoke very much as they played; the only sounds in the basement were the digital *blips* and *bloops* from the game and the clicking of handheld controls.

Steve opened his mouth to say something a few times during the next half hour, but kept closing it again when he saw how intensely Billy was staring at the TV screen.

*It’s helping him mellow out, I think…*

They both flinched when they heard the top steps creaking and the gentle voice of Steve’s mother calling down to them.

“Boys? It’s almost midnight. You two have to wake up early tomorrow, don’t forget.”

*Oh, right… church.*

“Just a sec, Mom,” he called back to her, narrowing his eyes at the screen and frantically mashing the buttons on his controller; when a Fighter Fly came out of nowhere and killed him, he sank back into his beanbag chair and sighed. “Damn it, I died again.”

His mother appeared at the bottom of the stairs, dressed in pale green satin pajamas and holding something in her arms.

“Here, Billy— these are for you.”

She carefully set the things on the couch next to him: a towel with a matching washcloth, neatly-folded pajamas, a travel-sized tube of Crest, and a still-boxed toothbrush and bar of soap.

“Wow, thanks,” Billy murmured, looking a little self-conscious. “You really didn’t have to go to all that trouble…”
“Don’t be silly, dear. It was no trouble at all.”

Steve frowned when he recognized the plaid L.L. Bean pants and coordinating long-sleeved top. “Mom, are those my PJs?”

“Of course, honey,” she said with a smile. “Your father’s would be much too big for Billy.”

“Yeah, but… you went through my dresser?”

“Why on earth shouldn’t I?” Mrs. Harrington rested her hands on her hips. “Is there something in there you don’t want me to see?”

Steve thought of the black Metallica sweatshirt he’d stashed in one of the drawers and glanced over at Billy.

“No, I just—”

“Steven Gabriel Harrington, you’d better not have any drugs in your room.”

“What?”

“Or dirty magazines,” his mother added sternly.

He couldn’t believe she would humiliate him like this in front of Billy, who looked like he was trying not to laugh.

“Mo-om,” Steve whined. “I don’t do drugs and I don’t have any magazines like that, okay? I just don’t want you going through my stuff, that’s all.”

“Well, if you’ve got nothing to hide, then there shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“Yeah, Mom.”

"Get some sleep, boys."

*I’ve gotta get my own place,* Steve thought as he watched his mother walk back upstairs. He turned to follow her, but then he heard “Hey, Harrington!” and halted in his tracks.

“What do you want?”

“Oh, I dunno…” Billy stepped closer and lowered his voice so that there was no chance of his words drifting upstairs. “A goodnight kiss, maybe?”

*Jeez, he really is relentless.*

“Okay, fine.” Steve leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “There. You want me to tuck you in and read you a story, too?”

Billy grinned. “Well, sure— since you offered.”

“What? No! Jesus, you’re so… so…”

*Annoying. Irritating. Cocky.*

“So… what?” Billy leaned closer, like he was hoping to get another kiss. “Irresistible?”

“Impossible.” Steve turned on his heel and hastened back towards the stairs. “Night!”
He had to stop when he felt a warm, callused hand wrap tightly around his wrist.

*Crap. What’s he trying to do?*

“It’s getting kinda late,” he mumbled, averting his eyes as Billy pulled him closer. “And that scab on your lip hasn’t gone away in the last two hours…”

Billy looked down pointedly at Steve’s pants, which—*goddamnit!*—had started pitching a tent. He put his right hand on Steve’s waist and raised his other in front of his face, wiggling each of his fingers theatrically.

“I’ve got hands.”

*Sweet, holy Jesus, I’m in trouble…*

“But my mom’s right upstairs,” Steve protested weakly, glancing at the ceiling as though he was worried his mother had suddenly developed x-ray vision. “We can’t…”

Billy groaned with exasperation. “Will you quit it with all the lame excuses, already?”

Steve inhaled sharply when he felt a hand sliding down to touch his dick.

“You’ve been takin’ care of me all night,” Billy continued in a low, husky murmur, “And I just wanna return the favor… is that so criminal?”


*It oughtta be against the law to turn people on this much.*

Billy licked his lips the way he always did, but this time it didn’t have the same seductive effect; he winced when his tongue irritated the angry red cut on his bottom lip and tasted the antibiotic ointment.

“See? Hurts, right?” Steve shoved him away and tried to disguise the situation in his jeans; he couldn’t go upstairs with a boner. “You gotta leave it alone, or it’s gonna take forever to get better.”

*Christ, he’s like an animal.*

Steve tucked his hard dick down one pant leg and smoothed both hands over the front, uncomfortable but satisfied with the result. The awkward way Billy was standing made him strongly suspect he had a stiff situation of his own in those dirty Wranglers.

“I just wanted to say thanks,” Billy muttered, reaching up to run his fingers through his shaggy curls. “Y’know, for saving my ass earlier. Sorry if I overdid it.”

*Shit… I’m not trying to let him down, but Mom and Dad really are upstairs, and they could come down here whenever they want…*

Steve felt sort of guilty for rejecting Billy’s offer, especially considering how tempting it was to stick around and let him do whatever the hell he wanted. He hesitated at the foot of the stairs, considering his words carefully before he let himself say them.

“When my parents aren’t around and your lip is better, you can, uh… ‘thank’ me all you want, okay?”

Billy’s cocky smirk returned swiftly. “Is that a promise?”
“Don’t push your luck, perv. Now, good night.”

He could hear Billy’s raspy laughter following him all the way up the stairs, which he climbed two at a time, hurrying to the first floor before he could change his mind and do something crazy.

Tonight’s already been crazy enough.

……………………

It took Steve over an hour of tossing and turning to fall asleep and when he finally did, he dreamed that he was exactly as he was: snoring softly in his bedroom and lying on his back beneath a thick, warm blanket. The details were strange, though— ‘Faithfully’ was playing on a record player sitting right next to him, even though he had never kept a record player by his bed.

“Highway run into the midnight sun, wheels go ‘round and ‘round, you’re on my mind…”

An even stranger detail was that his dick felt absolutely amazing— it was rock-hard, standing straight up, and buried halfway to the hilt in someone’s mouth.

“Restless hearts sleep alone tonight, sendin’ all my love along the wire…”

Steve reached down with both hands and felt curls— soft corkscrews with just a hint of frizzy stiffness from hairspray. He swallowed hard and opened his eyes slowly, squinting in the darkness; his bedroom was lit only by faint slivers of moonlight shining through the curtains, but it was enough to see that someone was under the covers with him— someone with a head of curly hair peeking out from the edge of the blanket.

Holy shit!

Even though Steve knew it couldn’t possibly be his former girlfriend— who had never seemed to enjoy giving him oral (“It tastes gross” and “My mouth won’t open that much” were the usual excuses)— he still stammered out her name, because he was too afraid to say the one that was really on his mind.

“N-Nancy?”

The Journey record scratched to an abrupt halt even though nobody had touched it. Steve shivered when the strange, hot mouth slid off his dick and he instantly regretted saying anything; it had felt so good. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of a silver earring and a pair of bright eyes glinting in the darkness— Billy Hargrove was glaring up at him from under the blanket like a monster in a cave.

“Do I look like Nancy fuckin’ Wheeler to you?”

Steve bit his bottom lip and shook his head.

“Jesus,” Billy grumbled as he wrapped his palm around Steve’s dick. “And you said I was the one who got dropped too much as a child…”

Steve’s whole body tensed and he gasped in awe when his cock was once again sheathed in slippery warmth. “Oh my god, oh my god…”

He dropped his head back onto his pillow and covered his mouth with both hands to shut himself up, but it was hard to keep quiet when he could feel an orgasm galloping around the corner.
“I’m… I’m gonna come soon.”

Billy didn’t give any indication that he’d heard him; he just kept sucking until Steve reached down to seize two greedy fistfuls of his curls, shuddering and groaning as he came.

“Jesus,” Steve whispered hoarsely, feeling his entire body go limp with satisfied relief; his hands dropped to his sides. “Sorry about that.”

“About what?”

As Billy crawled closer, Steve squinted at his face and saw that the cut on his lip had miraculously healed.

See? Just a crazy dream. None of this is really happening.

The reassuring thought made him bolder.

“Sorry for coming in your mouth,” he said softly, reaching up to twist a corkscrew around his finger; he couldn’t stop touching those curls. “You didn’t actually swallow it, did you?”

Billy licked his lips like he’d just polished off a dish of vanilla ice cream. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re the craziest person I’ve ever met. Probably the horniest, too.”

He let Billy lunge forward and kiss him— what harm could it do, especially after all the boundaries they’d already crossed together? He knew, in a distant way, that he was dreaming and nobody could see him, with the possible exception of God.

And God’s got better things to do than tune into some guy’s weird, pervy dream… I hope.

Steve could taste himself on Billy’s tongue— how was that possible, when he wasn’t even awake? — and tried not to groan aloud when he felt one of those strong, callused hands slide all the way down to give his butt a hard squeeze.

There wasn’t any reason to be quiet, though.

Nobody can hear me.

Billy shifted down and began kissing his neck— just like he had in the record store supply room— and Steve ended up letting out a moan loud enough to actually startle himself back to consciousness.

“Huh?”

Still breathing hard, Steve blinked in disappointed confusion for a few moments; his flannel pajama pants had been pulled all the way down to his ankles.

I must’ve done that in my sleep, somehow. Pathetic.

His embarrassment surged when he finally noticed the tell-tale stickiness on his right hand.

“Oh, crap…”

He reached down to tentatively touch the tip of his dick beneath the covers— sure enough, it was sticky, too.

Oh my god, I had a wet dream about a dude. That means I must want Billy to… to… holy shit, I
According to the clock radio glowing by his bed, it was almost six in the morning. Steve spent the next ten or fifteen minutes lying perfectly still, staring blankly up at the ceiling and trying unsuccessfully to switch off his brain.

“Okay, that’s it— get up,” he commanded himself sternly.

He dragged his sticky, sleepy body out from under his warm blankets and stumbled into his bathroom to wash himself off. He knew a shower would be ideal, but he was too tired and wanted to crash back into bed for another hour or two, which meant taking care of the messy problem at the sink. As he splashed cold water on his dick, he couldn’t help remembering the night of his cousin’s party, when he’d given his penis the same cold water treatment, but for a slightly different reason: to tame the unwelcome boner he’d gotten as a result of Billy’s impromptu ‘Do Ya Think I’m Sexy?’ performance.

“I’ve gotta quit letting that cocky bastard get under my skin,” he muttered under his breath as he dried himself off with a soft towel. “This can’t keep happening. This… just… god, this is insane.”

He needed to go to the bathroom, but as soon as he sat down he noticed there wasn’t any toilet paper left— just a bare cardboard roll with one shredded square clinging to it.

“Goddamnit!” Steve cursed, standing up and jerking his pajama pants back up.

He stormed purposefully out into the hallway and paused, glancing around when he suddenly remembered that there was something different about his silent house today— Billy Hargrove was downstairs, probably snoring on the rec room couch.

And he's wearing my PJs... shit, don't think about that.

Steve knew his mother kept a stash of toilet paper in the guest bathroom, so that's where he headed; his mouth stretched into a yawn as he padded down the hall in his socks and pulled open the door.

Wait, hang on...

Instead of being cold and dark, the guest bathroom was brightly lit and filled with shampoo-scented steam. Steve swallowed when he saw Billy standing beside the sink— dripping wet, thickly muscled, and wearing only a blue towel, which was wrapped snugly around his bruised hips… very, very low on his hips.

Uh-oh...

“Mornin’, sleepyhead.” Billy’s mouth twisted into a sly grin despite the dark cut on his lip. “You want something?”

Chapter End Notes

-This chapter is the "darkest" this fic is probably gonna get, as far as Billy getting hurt and his car getting messed up (the Camaro will be fine, of course). I don't want anyone to worry about Tommy and his brother coming back for revenge later, bc I seriously
doubt I'll pursue anything like that (also, fight scenes are REALLY hard to write... even harder than sex scenes, imo). Expect mostly smut & fluff (smuff?) henceforth.

Recommended listening: 'Never Let Me Down Again’, of course. I like both the Depeche Mode original (one of my top-ten favorite ‘80s songs) and the Smashing Pumpkins cover. Neither could be used in the actual fic, alas, since they are from 1987 and 1993, respectively.
Sunday, March 31st, 1985: Part 1

Billy woke up sore and confused, lying under a blanket on a squishy leather sofa that would have been comfortable if he didn’t feel like he’d just fallen face-first down a flight of stairs.

“Ow, shit,” he groaned, wincing as he sat up. “Where the hell am I?”

Memories of the previous night slowly returned to him: an ambush in the parking lot after work, fists in his face, kicks to his stomach, Tommy’s sneering taunts, and Steve’s surprise appearance at the end of it all. Since his Camaro had four flat tires, Billy had hitched a ride in the maroon BMW; he still couldn’t believe that Steve had actually invited him to spend the night at his mansion in the fancy-pants part of town.

‘Loch Nora’— what a stupid name. There’s no lake here and even even if there was, we’re not in fuckin’ Scotland.

He reached up to massage his aching temples and squeezed his eyes shut, even though everything was already pitch-black, like there weren’t any windows in the room.

Oh, right… I’m in the basement. Christ, my head hurts— hang on, what am I wearing?

He patted himself under the blanket and felt thick, high-quality flannel— Steve’s pajamas. Billy tensed when he realized how hard his cock was beneath the warm blanket and soft pajamas; suddenly he was wide awake and recalling every vivid detail about the dream he had been having.

God, that was so sexy… why’d I have to wake up?

It had been such a realistic dream; he still remembered the way his heart had pounded as he crept up the two flights of stairs, walking slowly and hugging the walls so the floor wouldn’t creak. He remembered finding the right bedroom and crawling into the soft bed, slipping under the covers and hesitating for only a moment before tugging Steve’s pants down. Fortunately, in his dream the bad cut on his lip had vanished, so it didn’t hurt to open his mouth wide enough to fit Steve’s long, smooth dick inside.

He’s got such a nice cock… when’s he gonna let me suck him off for real?

It had felt so good when Steve “woke up” and reached down to touch Billy’s hair, even though the moment was sort of ruined when Steve asked in an aroused croak if it was Nancy under the covers—
as if a boring, buttoned-up girl like Nancy Wheeler could possibly have better oral skills than Billy.

_That shit was insulting and if it was anyone else I would’ve decked him._

The thought of Steve grabbing his curls and coming in his mouth wasn’t doing anything to calm down the increasingly uncomfortable situation in his borrowed pajama pants, so Billy stood up from the couch and fumbled in the darkness for the towel Mrs. Harrington had left for him. He needed to jerk off, and he needed to do it _soon_— preferably in the comfort of a hot shower, the way he liked to get himself off at home. The small, tidy bathroom in the basement was only equipped with a toilet and sink, so he would have to go all the way to the second floor.

Thankfully, nobody else seemed to be awake yet. He felt like an intruder, creeping through the Harrington’s vast, silent house at the crack of dawn; the early morning sun peeking through the curtains provided just enough light for him to make the journey upstairs without tripping or knocking anything over. It wasn’t too different from what he had done in his dream, except now every muscle in his body ached and he was carrying a soft, Tide-scented towel. Billy quieted his breathing when he reached the second floor and slowed when he approached Steve’s room, trying to ignore the powerful urge to open the door and sneak inside.

_Wonder if he’s still asleep… I bet he looks prettier than a goddamn Disney princess when he sleeps._

Billy forced himself to keep walking past Steve’s bedroom; it wasn’t the exciting or risqué thing to do, but he wasn’t dreaming anymore— this was _real_. Not to mention that his lip stung whenever he moved his mouth too much, his whole body was sore, and he probably smelled like sweat.

_Plus, his folks are around here somewhere, and I bet they’re the type to wake up early on Sunday mornings._

Billy wasn’t sure which bedroom belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Harrington; there were _so_ many doors on either side of the long hallway. He didn’t know how many rooms or thousands of square feet a house needed in order to qualify as a mansion, but Steve’s house definitely felt like one.

_Why would three people need all this fucking space? Rich people are nuts._

At least it wasn’t creepy— it couldn’t be more different than the last time Billy had woken up in an unfamiliar house, when there were strange drawings taped everywhere, a busted phone and a dead… _thing_ wedged in the fridge. This time, he didn’t feel that cold panic trickling down his spine; he knew exactly where Max was and why his Camaro wasn’t parked outside. It wasn’t creepy in Steve’s big house… just very still and quiet.

_Peaceful, almost. Like nothing bad’s ever happened here._

He returned to the same guest bathroom they had sat in last night, and smiled at the memory of Steve kneeling on the floor, looking up at him with those impossibly kind brown eyes as he cleaned Billy’s wounds. When Billy glanced at his reflection in the large mirror, his smile turned into wry laughter: his face was bruised, there was an ugly scab on his lip, and his hair was frizzy and flattened where it had been pressed against the sofa all night. The matching plaid pajamas were the most comically jarring element of all; at home, he usually slept in some old sweatpants and a t-shirt, or just boxer shorts if it was an especially hot night. He hadn’t worn an actual pajama set since he was a kid, when his mother bought all his clothes. His hand flew unconsciously to the thin chain around his neck, just to confirm that her pendant was still there— it was, but…

_Where’s my earring?_
“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath as he stared at the vacant little dot on his earlobe, where he had thrust a pin through the skin a year and a half earlier— the same day as the funeral. “It must’ve fallen out somewhere.”

Billy decided not to get too bent out of shape over it; the earring wasn’t really worth anything and its disappearance wasn’t half as annoying as his sudden lack of a car or Steve’s stubborn refusal to kiss him until his stupid lip got better.

*He’s driving me up the wall…*

His dick twitched beneath his pajama pants, demanding immediate attention. There was a little pink basket on the back of the toilet filled with tiny bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and individually wrapped bars of soap from various fancy hotels. Billy helped himself to one of each, turned on the faucet and stepped into the shower.

The hot water felt amazing— it soothed his sore muscles and washed away the mess Billy made when he finished jerking off. He scrubbed himself clean, washed his hair, jerked off a second time, then stepped out of the shower and into the steamy bathroom. It probably wasn’t necessary to rush, but he was accustomed to hurrying this part of his morning; at home, Max would be there sooner or later, thumping on the door and whining about how she needed to pee. At home, Billy had to worry about not using up all the hot water— his dad had yelled at him more than once about that.

*Steve doesn’t know how good he’s got it… all these damn bathrooms and probably as much hot water as he wants.*

As he stood dripping on the plush bath mat, he hummed the same tune that had been stuck in the back of his head ever since he heard Steve listening to it in his dream; normally, he would despise a corny song like ‘Faithfully’, but now it just made him think of Steve.

*I know it was just a dumb dream, but I bet fifty bucks he actually likes Journey.*

Billy had just finished wrapping the towel around his waist when the bathroom door clicked open and Steve stepped in, yawning with his mouth wide open and eyes half-closed.

*What the—*

Billy was startled, but recovered quickly. He stood up straighter, rested his hands on his hips and flexed his abs.

“Mornin’, sleepyhead. You want something?”

Steve flinched in shock. “Oh, sorry! I didn’t mean to… shit, there’s usually nobody in here…”

“No big deal,” Billy said with an easygoing shrug. “You see me almost every day in the locker room showers, right?”

*He looks so cute in his PJs… I wanna rip ‘em off.*

Steve shook his head slowly, his eyes drifting down to the towel around Billy’s hips. “Not, uh… not like this.”

“Not like what?” Billy asked, even though he knew exactly what Steve meant; he tilted his head coyly and lowered his voice. “Not on our own, away from school?”

Steve chuckled nervously and started backing out the way he came, but he only got the door partway
closed before Billy reached out and grabbed it.

“Not so fast, Harrington… you came wandering in here for a reason, right? Or were you
sleepwalking?”

*I thought he had his own private bathroom or something.*

“No, I…” Steve took his hand off the door and rubbed the back of his neck. “I just ran out of TP,
that’s all.”

Billy smirked. “Oh, yeah?”

There were several neatly-stacked rolls of toilet paper on a shelf near the sink; he picked one up and
tossed it high in the air, catching it easily. When Steve reached out for it, Billy stepped aside lightly
and switched it to his other hand.


“Hate to disagree with you, amigo, but it totally is.”

It got even funnier a moment later, when Billy twisted away from Steve’s grasp and felt the damp
towel slip off his hips.

“Oopsy-daisy,” he quipped without bothering to pick it up from the floor.

Steve’s eyes were as round as dinner plates; he opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again, like
he had forgotten how to speak.

Billy started laughing and tossed him the roll of toilet paper. “Alright, alright. Here ya go, dude.
Enjoy.”

It was an easy toss but Steve dropped it, anyway; turning pink, he bent down quickly to pick it up,
averting his eyes to avoid glimpsing what was directly in front of him.

“Asshole,” he mumbled, hurrying out of the bathroom and shutting the door loudly behind him.

Still smirking, Billy paused when he heard voices in the hallway— it sounded like Steve was talking
to his mother.

“Why are you slamming doors and carrying toilet paper around the hall, honey?”

“I was just grabbing some from the guest bathroom ‘cause I ran out.”

“Oh, okay. Is Billy in there?”

“Um… yeah.”

“Does he have everything he needs?”

“Yeah, I guess so…”

“Oh, shoot!” Mrs. Harrington exclaimed suddenly. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of it before…
what’s he going to wear today?”

“I dunno… same thing he had on last night?”
“He can’t wear dirty, torn clothes to church. I think I saw blood on his shirt, for heaven’s sake.”

Behind the bathroom door, Billy tensed self-consciously; he hadn’t given it much thought, either, but Steve’s mother was right—he didn’t have anything to wear besides the outfit he’d left down in the basement and the pajamas lying in a rumpled heap on the bathroom floor.

Shit.

“Why don’t you just loan Billy some of your clothes?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s not gonna want to wear anything of mine, Mom.”

Damn right I’m not.

It was embarrassing to be discussed like he was a problem that required a solution; Billy was tempted to open the bathroom door and stick his head out into the hallway to inform them both that there was no need to fuss over him—but that would mean admitting that he was eavesdropping.

“I could drive him back to his place to grab some clean clothes,” Steve suggested.

“Doesn’t he live all the way over on the other side of town, though? Just lend him some pants and a nice shirt, Steve; you’ve got dozens of things that ought to fit him. Oh, and make sure you give him some clean socks and underwear, too.”

“Underwear?!”

Billy snorted when he heard the shrill mortification in Steve’s voice.

“Yes, underwear, Steven. What on earth is the big deal?”

“He doesn’t need to borrow mine—he just goes commando half the time, anyway.”

Shut up, dude… Jesus Christ.

“I’m not even going to ask what that means,” Mrs. Harrington said primly. “Now, are you going to fetch those things for him, or should I go in your room and get them myself—”

“No, no, I’ll do it,” Steve interrupted hastily. “I’ll get ‘em.”

Wonder what he’s got in his closet or dresser or whatever that he doesn’t want his mom to see?

Billy wrapped the towel around his waist again and began combing his fingers through his hair, twisting a few locks in an attempt to tease them into curls.

Shit, he thought as he scrutinized his reflection in the mirror. I look like a drowned rat… how long’s it gonna take to dry?

When Billy heard a quiet knock on the bathroom door a few minutes later, he didn’t open it quickly enough to catch Steve; he stuck his head out into the long hallway and found it deserted, with just a pile of folded clothes on the floor, plus a plastic comb, a can of hairspray and a hand-held hair dryer.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he murmured, bending down to pick it all up. “Guess he thought of everything, huh?”

Well, not everything—there wasn’t any deodorant or dental floss, and he would have appreciated a disposable razor so he could shave off the dark, prickly stubble sprouting on his upper lip and jaw.
Oh, well. It makes me look older, at least. Maybe Steve thinks it’s sexy.

Billy shut the door again and tossed aside his damp towel, eager to see what outfit Steve had personally selected for him. There was a pair of boring white tube socks, an undershirt, briefs, a royal blue long-sleeved polo shirt, and some beige Brooks Brothers pants.

God, Max is gonna laugh her ass off when she sees me in this getup.

Everything fit better than Billy expected, though the shirt and pants were much more snug on him than they would be on Steve’s slender frame. The long-sleeved shirt, in particular, was very tight on his upper arms and chest, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing— when he studied his reflection in the mirror, he was pleased with how massive his biceps and pecs looked.

Not too shabby, baby. Not too shabby at all.

He ran the comb through his wet tangles and switched on the noisy hair-dryer, stopping when his locks were still a little damp.

“Beautiful hair deserves the care and goodness of Farrah Fawcett aerosol hair spray,” he read aloud from the can Steve had loaned him. “With vitamins and minerals.”

Billy had never used anything fancier than Aqua Net and he wondered if the can of Farrah Fawcett spray was something Steve had just swiped from his mother’s vanity or if it was something he actually used— the latter would be absolutely hilarious.

“Whatever,” he said with a shrug, holding the can up and aiming it at his head. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

………………

Billy whistled as he strolled down the hallway ten minutes later, with only the borrowed socks on his feet since he’d left his sneakers in the basement. He was pleased with how well his hair had turned out— that Farrah Fawcett stuff really did the trick— and how impressive his arms looked in Steve’s preppy blue Lacoste shirt. Even the expensive chinos weren’t so terrible; he could feel the muscles of his upper thighs filling out the good-quality material as he descended the carpeted stairs to the ground floor.

The welcoming smell of coffee wafted from the kitchen and he could hear classical music playing softly on the radio. The sound of Steve talking to Mrs. Harrington sent a sudden twinge of melancholic nostalgia straight to Billy’s heart as he remembered the long-gone mornings when he used to chat with his own mother while she prepared coffee and breakfast.

God, I miss her.

“Oh, hello!” Mrs. Harrington greeted brightly when Billy walked into the kitchen; she was wearing a floral-print apron over her blouse and slim skirt. “Have a seat, dear. Would you like some coffee?”

“I’d love some, thanks.”

Steve was seated at the kitchen table, still wearing his navy-blue pajamas; his dark hair was sticking up chaotically, like he had been hanging his head out the window of a speeding car. He glanced up from the colorful page of Sunday comics to eye Billy up and down, pursing his lips like he was trying to hold in laughter.

“You see something funny, pal?” Billy smirked as he sat down across from him. “Go ahead and
“And you look very handsome in them,” Mrs. Harrington concluded diplomatically as she set a steaming mug of coffee down on the table. “Did you have everything you needed, Billy?”

“I did, yeah… thanks a million for everything, ma’am.”

“Please, dear, call me Lillian. Do you take cream and sugar?”

“No thanks.” Billy returned her warm smile; he thought Steve’s mom seemed pretty cool (for a middle-aged pastor’s wife) but he doubted he would ever feel comfortable calling her by her first name. “I’m sweet enough.”

“He takes his coffee black and bitter, like his soul,” Steve chimed in, holding up both hands in the sign of the horns and sticking out his tongue in a ridiculous imitation of Gene Simmons.

Billy snickered and Mrs. Harrington told her son to stop goofing off at the breakfast table.

“Oh?” Billy’s jaw tightened at the reminder of the unpleasant events of the previous evening; spending so much time in the Harrington’s peaceful, sanctuary-like house had almost made him forget.

“Chief Hopper said it’s gonna take a couple days to fix your car… he left the phone number of the auto shop, if you want to call them to see what’s up. Oh, and get this: Tommy’s big brother was on probation for something, so he could be in seriously deep shit if—”

“Language, Steven,” his mother chided as she pulled a carton of eggs from the fridge.

“Sorry, Mom. Anyway, Gus would get in huge trouble with the law if Hopper reported what he did, so basically he’s gotta be on his best behavior from now on, or he’s going to the pen-century.”

Billy cocked his head curiously. “He’s going where?”

“I think he meant to say ‘penitentiary’,” Mrs. Harrington suggested. “Is that what you meant, sweetie?”

“Yeah,” Steve admitted. “Anyway, I bet his parents are super pissed.”

“Angry, Steven,” his mother sighed and shook her head as she cracked eggs expertly into a glass mixing bowl. “The Hagans are angry, or furious, or livid… please don’t say ‘pissed’— it’s vulgar and low-class.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Steve repeated, smiling sheepishly when he caught Billy’s eye.

“It’s weird, the things you miss when people die… I’d give anything to hear my mom get on my case for swearing at the table.

“I think ‘pissed’ means drunk in the U.K.,” Billy said conversationally as he sipped his coffee— it was really good, and almost too hot.

“Oh, yeah?” Steve laughed. “And ‘mad’ means crazy, right? That could get pretty confusing.”

“Speaking of England…” Mrs. Harrington gestured to the gleaming metal toaster on the kitchen
counter. “Why don’t you do something useful and fix us some English muffins, Steve… would you like one, Billy?”

“Uh… sure, I guess. They’re not actually muffins, right?”

Steve rose from the table and pulled a plastic bag from a cupboard, holding it out for Billy to see.

“You’ve never had an English muffin before, man? Seriously?”

Billy shrugged. “I don’t think so… my mom used to say they were too expensive. She just bought regular bread.”

“Oh.”

Steve looked like he regretted asking, and Billy bit his lip, wincing when his teeth dug into the little scab he kept forgetting about. He had answered without thinking and managed to bring up both his dead mother and the undeniable wealth disparity between his family and the Harringtons.

*Everything was cool, and then you had to go and make things awkward. Nice job.*

Steve and his mom were both quiet for a minute, and Billy scowled down at his reflection in his mug of black coffee. The only sounds in the kitchen were the rustling of the English muffin bag, Mrs. Harrington’s whisk clicking rhythmically against the mixing bowl, and the classical music on the radio.

“I, uh… I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without an earring,” Steve remarked as he carefully pried a ‘muffin’ in half, obviously searching for a change of subject.

"What're you talking about? I always have to take it out for gym."

"Oh, right."

“Anyway, I lost it. I dunno where it fell out, so I’ll probably never see it again.”

“That’s too bad,” Mrs. Harrington clucked sympathetically. “Was it valuable?”

Billy snorted. “No, no, definitely not. It wasn’t real silver or anything like that. No big deal.”

“You know, I’ve got an earring in my jewelry box that lost its mate years ago,” she mused. “I held onto it just in case I ever found the other one, but it never—”

“He’s not gonna want your old jewelry, Mom,” Steve protested. “It’s too girly.”

“Don’t be silly, Stevie.” Mrs. Harrington walked purposefully out of the kitchen, her high heels clicking on the hard floor. “I wouldn’t have brought it up if I didn’t think it would suit a young man… back in a jiffy.”

Steve hopped up onto the edge of the counter and shook his head slowly. “God, I’m really sorry about her… you don’t have to take whatever she’s offering, y’know.”

“I don’t mind. Your mom’s an A-plus lady… she kinda reminds me of my mom, in a weird way.”

Steve looked bewildered for a moment— he had rarely heard Billy mention his late mother— then offered a crooked, uncertain smile, like he wasn’t sure what reaction was appropriate.

“It’s fine,” Billy muttered, instinctively touching the little pendant through the soft, unfamiliar fabric
of his borrowed shirt.

*Quit talking about her… nobody wants to hear about dead people. Keep it light.*

The toaster popped, startling them both; Steve twisted around without getting off the counter, pulled one of the English muffin halves out, and blew on it before taking a bite.

“Want one?” he asked with his mouth full.

“Sure, I guess… you got any butter?” Billy asked, rising from his seat.

"Yeah, but it's in the fridge so it'll be kinda hard."

"Kinda hard, huh?"

"Oh, don't start."

Billy ambled over to him, suddenly reminded of the party on his birthday when Steve was sitting on his cousin Diana’s kitchen counter; he had stood between Steve’s long, dangling legs and looked up at him with stoned, barely-restrained want.

*Don’t try anything… his mom’s gonna come back soon.*

He had already forgotten all about getting butter from the fridge; the crumbs on Steve’s chin were too distracting. Billy reached up to brush them off, smiling at the familiar little prick of electricity.

“Y-you’re doing it again,” Steve stammered, dropping his toasted muffin on the counter and grabbing Billy’s wrist.

“Doing what?”

Steve’s eyes moved down to Billy’s teasing grin, then back up to meet his eyes. “You’re… being impossible.”

Billy wasn’t sure what that meant; he knew he was being stupid, probably, standing so close to Steve in the brightly-lit kitchen where either one of the senior Harringtons could see them, but he wanted to kiss him so badly.

“My lip feels better already,” he said softly, hoping he didn’t sound too desperate.

“It doesn’t *look* any better,” Steve whispered back. “Looks like hell.”

*Brat.*

“Then shut your eyes and don’t look at it.” Billy suggested as he raised himself up on the balls of his feet, encouraged when he felt the warm grip on his wrist loosen.

“Yeah, right.” Steve’s wide brown eyes darted towards the kitchen doorway, then back to meet Billy’s relentless stare. “I’ve gotta keep you in my sights at all times, or you’ll do something totally cra—”

Billy proved Steve’s point with a quick, impulsive press of his lips; it stung a little, but he didn’t care — kisses stolen from Steve were *always* worth it. He had to pull away just a moment later, though, when he heard footsteps approaching.

*Shit. Every fuckin’ time.*
Steve’s mother breezed back into the kitchen and set a tiny earring on the table, a few inches from Billy’s coffee mug; she didn’t seem to notice that the two young men in her kitchen were both a little flushed.

“What do you think, dear? It’s yours, if you like it.”

Whoa…

Billy hastened back to the table and picked up the earring, holding it gingerly on his palm and admiring the way it caught the light—it was a simple diamond stud, round and no bigger than his favorite mole on Steve’s neck.

“It’s not actually a real diamond, right?”

“Well, sure it is, dear,” Mrs. Harrington corrected casually, like Billy had asked if the butter was real or just margarine. “It’s only a half-carat, though… maybe less.”

God, I’m making myself sound broke again. As if a lady like her would be caught dead wearing fake jewels.

“Wow,” Billy breathed reverently; he had never even seen a real diamond before, much less held one in his hand.

“You don’t have to keep it if you don’t want to.” Mrs. Harrington returned to her mixing bowl and started whisking the eggs again. “But I honestly don’t need it. Tell you what—if it doesn’t suit you, why don’t you take it to one of those pawn shops… might as well make a little money for some new clothes or cassette tapes or whatever the kids are buying these days.”

“Wow, thanks,” Billy mumbled, hoping he wasn’t turning red; he couldn’t remember the last time he’d gotten a present.

Steve’s mom is giving me a diamond? This has gotta be the weirdest morning I’ve ever had in my life.

“Try it on,” Steve suggested with a smirk, thumping his heels against the wooden cabinets beneath the countertop. “It’s clean, right, Mom?”

Mrs. Harrington shot her son an exasperated look. “Of course it’s clean, Steven. I haven’t worn it in years, and I just gave it a quick dip in some rubbing alcohol. Now get down from the counter and sit at the table like a gentleman—you too, Billy.”

They both sat down obediently, and Billy put on the earring.

“It looks… nice,” Steve remarked quietly. His simple comment sounded genuine, with no trace of sarcasm.

That settled the matter—Billy didn’t even need to go check his reflection in a mirror to know that the little earring was a keeper.

“Billy, are you sure you don’t want anything to eat? You can’t just start the day with black coffee.” Mrs. Harrington gestured to the fruit bowl on the center of the kitchen table. “If you aren’t very hungry, at least have a pear or a banana or something.”

She sounded so much like his mom that Billy had to smile. It was nice to feel like someone truly cared about whether or not he’d gotten a good breakfast in his belly; Susan only ever fussed over
Max, and Neil couldn’t care less what his son ate (though that would probably change if Billy ever started getting fat again).

He wasn’t usually very hungry in the morning, but he couldn’t ignore Steve’s mom (she had just given him a diamond, for God’s sake), so he reached across the table to select a banana from the fruit bowl.

*Oh man, I’ve got such a killer idea.*

It was impossible to resist an opportunity to make Steve turn pink—even when Mrs. Harrington was standing right behind them, humming along with the radio as she poured the whisked eggs into a hot skillet. Billy peeled the banana halfway and glanced over his shoulder to make sure he wasn’t being watched before catching Steve’s gaze from across the table.

*Check this out, babe.*

Keeping their eyes locked together, Billy slowly slid the top inch of the banana into his mouth. He was trying to be intensely seductive, but Steve looked so adorably flustered that he couldn’t keep a grin from pulling at the left corner of his lip; a twinge of pain reminded him of the fresh little scab growing there.

“That’s it!” he heard in his mind, almost as clearly as if Steve had said it aloud.

Billy swallowed the mouthful of fruit and widened his eyes innocently.

*What? I’m just eatin’ breakfast. It’s not my fault you’ve got such a filthy mind, pretty boy.*

“That’s it!”

*Can you really hear me right now? ’Cause it seems like you can hear me.*

The connection was severed abruptly when they all heard cheerful whistling and footsteps in the hallway.

“Good morning, good morning!” Mr. Harrington greeted as he trotted into the kitchen, wearing his usual expensive suit and broad smile.

“Morning,” Mrs. Harrington murmured pleasantly without turning away from the stove. “There’s coffee, if you want, and there’ll be scrambled eggs in a minute.”

“Fantastic, hon—smells great.”

Steve’s father went back to whistling as he busied himself with pouring a steaming mug of coffee. When he turned around to choose a seat at the table, he finally seemed to notice that there was an additional person in the room.

“Oh, hello, Billy! I didn’t know you and Steven had a sleepover last night.”

“It wasn’t a sleepover, Dad,” Steve clarified hastily, his cheeks still rosy after Billy’s banana stunt. “He just, uh… needed someplace to crash for the night, that’s all.”

“Oh, well excusez-moi,” Mr. Harrington chuckled as he helped himself to the business section of the newspaper. “I hope you boys didn’t stay up too late last night playing video games and watching TV… did you sleep well, Billy?”

“Yeah, the couch downstairs was nice and comfy.” Billy glanced over at Steve and raised his
eyebrow suggestively. “As a matter of fact, I had a pretty nice dream.”

Even though he wasn’t currently eating or drinking anything, Steve made a choking sound and started coughing; his father reached over to clap him on the back, and Billy tried not to laugh.

*Man, it’s way too easy to screw with him.*

Mr. Harrington set down his newspaper and stared at Billy like he had suddenly realized that something wasn’t right; the furrows in his brow deepened with concern.

“Lord almighty, what happened to you?”

“I’m alright, sir,” Billy mumbled self-consciously, covering his mouth with his hand. “You should see the other guys.”

“Guys? Plural?” The pastor shook his head and tsked. “Reminds me of my days as a youngster… always getting into scuffles and scrapes with the other alpha boys. Hey, Lill, did you get a chance to take a look at this cut—”

“Yes,” she reassured him. “It’s not bad enough to need stitches; as long as he leaves it alone it should heal nicely on its own.”

Billy sometimes forgot that Mrs. Harrington was actually *Doctor* Harrington; in her expensive clothes and floral apron (rather than a long white doctor’s coat and stethoscope) she looked like any other rich housewife.

“You don’t have to force yourself to play piano at church today, Billy,” Pastor Harrington said kindly, pausing to take a long sip of his coffee. “It’s not the end of the world if you aren’t feeling up to it—we can manage for one day without the piano.”

*What kind of lame wimp does he think I am? I’m no quitter.*

“I’m fine, sir,” he insisted, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. “Besides—I wouldn’t wanna miss my last Sunday jammin’ for Jesus, right?”

Even though Billy was being a smartass, a wide grin spread across Mr. Harrington’s face, crinkling the corners of his hazel eyes.

“Jammin’ for Jesus, huh? I love that! We’re all glad, of course, that our Julian is finally getting that darn cast taken off this week—praise the Lord!— but your talents and contributions will certainly be missed. I hope you know that you’re more than welcome to keep coming to worship with us.”

“Oh, uh…” Billy hadn’t really given the matter much thought—was he going to stop driving to church every Sunday, now that his so-called ‘talents and contributions’ were no longer needed?

Mrs. Harrington set a plate of scrambled eggs down on the table and frowned at her husband. “Don’t pressure the poor boy, Mark.”

“Pressure? No, no… no pressure at all.” Pastor Harrington reached out and patted Billy on the shoulder. “Hey, if Julian ever goes on vacation or gets sick and we need a substitute pianist again, you’ll be the first guy I call. How’s that sound, buddy?”

“Sounds good,” Billy mumbled.

It felt strange to be called ‘buddy’ and get patted on the back by Steve’s dad—the last time his
Steve’s father had touched him had been to shove him into some shelves and punch him in the face.

"Steve’s got it so good… I bet his old man has never smacked him, not even once."

Pastor Harrington checked his Rolex. “You’d better hop upstairs and get dressed, Steve, unless you were planning on going to church in your jammies.”

“Please don’t say ‘jammies’, Dad,” Steve groaned. “Nobody says ‘jammies’ and I’m not six.”

“Six or sixty, you’ll always be my boy… and I’m sure plenty of people say ‘jammies’. Now, run upstairs and get dressed, or you’ll be late... I know how long you like to spend on that hairdo of yours.”

"Da-aaad!"

"Yes, son?"

"You and Mom are both being, like, super embarrassing today."

"A little embarrassment never killed anyone," Mr. Harrington declared as he helped himself to some scrambled eggs.

"Not yet," Steve added petulantly. He stood up from the table and yawned, stretching both arms above his head. The hem of his pajama shirt lifted just enough to reveal a glimpse of his pale stomach, with a line of dark hair trailing from his belly button to the drawstring waistband of his pants.

"Oh my god…"

Mrs. Harrington noticed the half-eaten English muffin her son had abandoned on the countertop. “You barely had any breakfast, sweetheart.”

“I guess I’m not that hungry.”

She tried to feel his forehead. “Hmm… are you sure you’re feeling okay? It’s not like you to have no appetite in the morning, and you seem awfully warm. Can’t you have a banana like Billy, at least?”

Steve twisted his head to escape her reach. “Will you quit it? I don’t want a banana and I’m fine, Mom.”

“Don’t raise your voice at your mother,” Pastor Harrington scolded mildly from behind his newspaper. “Let her fuss, if she wants to; it’s what all mothers do, y’know.”

Mrs. Harrington pursed her lips. “I’m not fussing, for heaven’s sake, I just want to be sure he isn’t coming down with something. Can you try a few bites of egg, honey? You’ll get a headache if you don’t eat any—”

“I’m fine, Mom,” Steve repeated on his way out of the kitchen. “Absolutely, one-hundred percent fine!”

Billy watched him leave and wondered if there actually might be anything wrong with him—he seemed a little paler than usual, which only emphasized his flushed cheeks and large eyes. But Billy had been teasing and tormenting him all morning, so he decided that was probably the reason.

"Maybe I should cool it a little and take it easy on him… he makes it so much fun, though."
Billy glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall and saw that there would be almost an hour before he and Steve had to leave for church. He had no idea what he was supposed to do until it was time to go — if he was killing time at his own house, he would just shut himself in his room and have a smoke while listening to some loud music, but he couldn’t do either of those things here.

Well, I’m sure as shit not gonna sit around making chit-chat with Steve’s folks.

“Thanks for breakfast, Mrs. Harrington,” he said politely as he rose from the table and rinsed his mug in the sink. “That coffee was the best I ever had.”

“Gosh, really? Thank you, dear.”

Billy felt a prickle of guilt. He left the kitchen and headed towards the living room, thinking of the generic-brand coffee his mother used to make in her old percolator — the one she’d received as a wedding gift in the ‘60s. Donna Hargrove’s coffee was always weak and watery, unlike the dark, rich brew Mrs. Harrington had served (complete with a tiny crystal pitcher of real cream rather than a plastic canister of powdered Coffee-Mate).

Sorry, Mom… it’s not your fault. You did what you could with what you had.

He wandered into the Harrington’s vast living room and estimated that at least half of his entire house back on Old Cherry Road would fit inside. There was a large fireplace, several couches and chairs, and one of the nicest television sets he had ever seen. When he spotted Steve’s backpack lying on the carpet in a corner, an idea popped into his head.

I bet that airhead is way behind on his homework again…

Billy sat down on the couch and unzipped the backpack slowly. He spent the next several minutes flipping through the pages in Steve’s notebooks and binder, shaking his head when he saw how disorganized everything was — the notes were sloppy and half-assed, there were old tests and assignments that should’ve been thrown away months ago, and Steve’s history syllabus looked like it had gotten soda spilled on it at some point.

“Jesus, what a mess… hey, what’s this?”

He had found the beginning of an essay for history class — it wasn’t due for another week, and Steve had only written a few redundant sentences that barely made any sense.

Wonder how long it would take me to finish this for him?

Billy checked his watch; he had never written an entire essay in less than an hour, but he was bored enough to give it a try.

“Besides,” he muttered under his breath as he pulled out some clean sheets of paper and found a pen in Steve’s backpack, “I owe him one, after all the shit he’s done for me lately.”

The dull ache of his bruises reminded him that if Steve hadn’t showed up in the record store parking lot, Billy might have ended up lying on the ground all night, bleeding and unconscious. The thought summoned unwelcome memories of that night in November, when Steve was the one getting clobbered into oblivion… by Billy.

I was no better than Tommy and his brother back then — just a mean piece of shit, really.

He hated to think about how badly things could have gone if Max hadn’t intervened just in time, armed with a loaded syringe and Steve’s awesome, deadly baseball bat.
I could have killed him, or turned him into a drooling vegetable.

And that was how Billy ended up spending the next forty-five minutes sitting cross-legged on a couch in a massive Loch Nora living room, intently writing an essay about the New Deal for Steve Harrington.

“The things I do for that guy… Christ, when did I become such a goddamn sap?”

……………………

“Truth is: I love you, more than I wanted to, there’s no point in trying to pretend. There’s been no one who makes me feel like you do, say we’ll be together ’til the end.”

Billy barely recognized himself that morning: dressed like he was going to a tennis match, sitting in the passenger seat of a car that probably cost more than what his father made in three years, and listening to the nasal crooning of Phil Collins.

“I could leave but I won’t go, it’d be easier I know, I can’t feel anything from my head down to my toes. But why does it always seem to be, me looking at you, you looking at me? It’s always the same, it’s just a shame, that’s all.”

He was making a conscious effort to not stare at Steve too much, but that was easier said than done when he looked so good— his thick, glossy hair moved as he bobbed his head in time to the beat and his long fingers tapped along on the steering wheel.

It felt strange to be driven around in someone else’s car; Billy had been transporting himself everywhere he needed to go in his beloved Camaro for two years, and he didn’t like the helpless, childish feeling of needing rides from others.

When he admitted as much, Steve nodded.

“Don’t worry about it, man. I was, like, the first kid in our class to get a car way back in sophomore year, so I’m used to driving people around— Tommy, Carol, Dustin, and uh… y’know. Lots of people.”

Billy knew exactly what Steve had stopped himself from saying: Nancy. And, presumably, several other young ladies who had come and gone before her. He didn’t like thinking about those girls sitting in the exact same seat as him, flirting and giggling as they were driven home from school or to the movie theater for a date.

Wonder how many chicks have seen the backseat of this car? How many different pussies has he fingered, how many— shit, don’t think about that. I wish I had a fuckin’ cigarette…

“Want one?” Steve asked suddenly, holding out his blue-and-white box of Parliaments.

Wow, it’s like he read my mind.

“Thanks,” Billy mumbled as he slid a cigarette from the pack and tucked it between his lips. “You got a—”

Steve wordlessly held out a lighter and they both flinched when their fingers brushed together.

Billy glanced ruefully at his outfit as he lit his cigarette. “Guess I’d better be careful not to drop any ash on these fancy clothes of yours.”
“They’re not fancy, jeez.”

“No?” Billy used his free hand to pluck at the soft fabric of his long-sleeved Lacoste shirt. “How much was this— forty bucks?”

“Oh, I dunno… maybe thirty. My mom bought it, not me.”

Billy snorted. “Does she still buy all your clothes?”

“No all of them, no.”

Billy gestured at Steve’s green sweater vest and snickered. “Did she buy that?”

“What’s wrong with it?” Steve asked defensively, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Nothing, if you don’t mind looking like a Mormon… Jesus, look at me.” Billy glared down at his Brooks Brothers chinos like their very existence offended him. “People are gonna think we actually planned this!”

Steve rolled his eyes and put on his sunglasses. “Thought you were too cool to give a shit what other people think.”

He’s got me, there.

“I don’t give a shit,” Billy muttered, reaching up to flip down the visor and double-check his reflection. “Thanks for loaning me that hairspray, by the way… did you get it from your mom?”

Steve hesitated for a moment before shaking his head. “It’s mine, actually.”

“Really?”

Billy wanted to tease him about it, but the thought of his own cans of Aqua Net and numerous other hair products at home kept him quiet; if there was one thing he hated, it was hypocrisy.

“Yeah. I’ve been usin’ that stuff for a few years, now… it’s pretty easy— you just get your hair a little damp and use four puffs.”

Billy snorted. “Puffs?”

“Fine, uh… spritzes?” Steve smiled self-consciously and took one hand off the steering wheel to run his fingers through his hair. “I, uh… I know it’s supposed to be for ladies, but it works really good and hair is hair, so who gives a shit?”

“Fair point.” Billy patted the ends of his curls and nodded with satisfaction. “Where’d you buy it?”

Maybe it’s from, like, Bloomingdale’s and costs ten bucks a can.

“It’s been discontinued.”

“Well, that sucks.”

Steve sighed dramatically. “Tell me about it! I stocked up, but my stash won’t last forever. You think I should write a letter to Farrah Fawcett herself? Everybody says I stink at writing letters, and it probably wouldn’t even make a difference, but I dunno…”

Billy was barely listening; he liked watching Steve talk, even if it was just idle chatter about
hairspray. His mouth was so sexy, and the way his Adam’s apple moved up and down on his long, mole-flecked throat filled Billy’s mind with sinful thoughts.

Wish I could tell him how much I wanna see that pretty mouth of his on my cock.

He wondered if Steve might be able to hear what he was thinking, and decided there was no harm in trying a crazy experiment.

Maybe if I think harder… like, REALLY concentrated on just that one thing…

Billy looked directly at Steve, keeping his expression casual but watching intently for a reaction as he painted a vivid picture in his mind. He imagined himself reaching over to grab the steering wheel, forcing Steve to pull over onto the side of the road, under the trees.

It seemed like it might be working— Steve’s expression had gone blank and he didn’t seem to notice or care that the radio was playing a commercial for Sears. Billy doubled his focus and concentrated on the thought of his own fingers unzipping Steve’s fly and reaching inside his underwear.

You know you want to, Harrington… c’mon, don’t let me down…

Steve squirmed in his seat and cleared his throat; his cheeks were definitely flushed and he was biting his lip the way he always did when he was trying not to get turned on. Emboldened, Billy rested his cigarette in the BMW’s little ashtray and casually reached over to rest his left hand on Steve’s knee. Steve flinched a little, but didn’t tell him to stop, so Billy slowly slid his hand up his thigh, savoring the way his muscles tensed beneath the fabric of his neatly-pressed trousers.

“Cut it out,” Steve mumbled, his expression hidden behind his black Ray-Bans.

Billy ignored him and continued towards Steve’s crotch.

Is he gettin’ hard? Yeah, I think he is…

Billy moved his entire hand over to cover the stiff outline of Steve’s dick and smirked when he squirmed again.

“Jesus,” he hissed through gritted teeth, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Oh, nothing,” Billy lied coyly.

What the hell does it look like I’m doing, genius?

Billy’s body was reacting, too. He wanted to touch Steve’s dick— his actual dick, not just the suggestion of it from behind a frustrating barrier of pants and underwear. Excited and extremely turned on, he felt for the little metal zipper and began tugging it down, licking his lips.

I could start with a hand job, then maybe go down on him…

Steve surprised them both by letting out an aroused little moan; when he reflexively clapped both hands over his mouth to smother the sound, the BMW drifted onto the other side of the road.

“Holy shit!” Billy yelled just as Steve regained his senses and snatched the steering wheel again, swerving the car back into the right lane.

When the stomach-churning moment had passed— thankfully, no other cars were on the road with them— Billy started laughing.
“Whoo!” he whooped loudly. “That was wild!”

“Wild? What the— are you trying to kill us?” Steve demanded in a voice shrill with residual panic; his entire face was pink. “You want us to die? I told you to cut it out!”

Billy hadn’t realized his left hand was still resting on Steve’s crotch; before he could decide whether to keep going or give up, Steve decided for him— he shoved his hand away and fumbled with his zipper, trying to yank it back up while keeping one hand safely on the steering wheel.

_Fine, party pooper._

Even though it stung his pride to be swatted aside like a bug or some gross creep copping a feel on the bus, Billy feigned indifference and took a long drag on his cigarette, staring out the window at the nice houses whizzing by.

*He likes it, though… right? Guess I just picked the wrong time. It’s never the right time, with him.*

The seconds of awkward silence that followed felt more like minutes.

“Sorry,” Steve said at last. “I just don’t want to, uh…”

“What?”

“You know.”

_Oh._

Somewhat mollified, Billy turned his head towards him again and arched his eyebrows. “What, cream your pants?”

Steve tightened his lips and nodded reluctantly.

“You can’t… I mean, we can’t do that kinda stuff right now,” he mumbled as he raked his fingers through his long, dark hair. “We just can’t, okay?”

Billy exhaled a plume of smoke; the cool wind whipped it out of the open window. “Why the hell not? You’re such a Boy Scout.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“Look, we’re supposed to be going to church, okay? You can’t do crazy shit like that— not when I’m driving and definitely not on a Sunday morning.”

“Oh, was that in the Bible, somewhere?” Billy asked with mock curiosity. “In Leviticus, maybe? I always used to ditch Sunday school.”

“Well, it does say to keep the Sabbath holy,” Steve countered. “It’s right there in the Ten Commandments, isn’t it?”

_Jesus, what a goody two-shoes. I can’t wait to corrupt him._

“Alright, alright… I should’ve known better than to try debating scripture with a preacher’s son.” Billy tilted up his chin imperiously and affected the dry tone of a droning clergyman. “Thus sayeth the Lord, thy redeemer, the holy one of Israel: thou shalt not polish thy staff on the Sabbath.”
Steve pursed his lips like he was fighting off a smile. “You’re going to hell, you know that?”

Billy shrugged and tapped his cigarette ash out the window. “Probably, yeah… but not today.”

The rehearsal before the service was uneventful, and church was… church. Slow, boring, and predictable, for the most part. The sanctuary was decorated with palm fronds because it was Palm Sunday; the kids were all twisting the long, skinny leaves into little green crosses— Max was so bored that she had made seven of them by the time the service was halfway finished.

Billy sat behind the electric keyboard, keeping his eyes cast downward more than usual to avoid making eye contact with all the nosy people in the congregation staring at his cuts and bruises. He played all the usual boring praise songs and a few hymns for Palm Sunday. The only thing that kept it all from being mind-numbingly dull was Steve, who stood just a few feet away, singing sweetly into his microphone and playing his guitar.

Damn, he sounds so good.

After willing him to glance his way all morning, Billy finally succeeded and tried not to crack up when Steve became flustered and messed up the lyrics to ‘All Glory, Laud, and Honor’. He tried to communicate with him mentally, but he could only hear his own voice in his head; their connection, whatever it was, wasn’t something that could be forced.

Is he resisting it? He could be shutting me out without even realizing...

Three-quarters of the way through the service, Billy sat down at the large, glossy Steinway to play whatever he wanted during the offering. Since it was his last Sunday as substitute pianist, he went with a song he’d been working on for the past few weeks, whenever he had spare time at work. It was a cover of a Scorpions track that he had slowed down and harmonized beyond recognition, even in the extremely unlikely event that anyone at church had heard it before.

“Loving you Sunday morning, you were on my mind, love, every day…”

Steve definitely didn’t seem to recognize it; he sat next to his father in the first pew, staring into space with a dazed, sleepy expression.

Look at me, Billy urged in his head, trying to meet his gaze without hitting any wrong notes. Look. At. Me.

Steve’s dark eyes drifted towards his and he actually smiled— one of those small, shy smiles that made Billy feel warm and gooey inside.

Fuck, I wasn’t supposed to fall this hard for him. Or was I? Christ, I don’t know.

Steve looked down at his lap again and fiddled with the long palm leaf he was turning into a cross—or trying to, anyway (it looked more like a lopsided plus-sign).

The remainder of the service passed uneventfully. Billy returned to the electric keyboard to play a few more songs with the praise band and after they had finally finished the last hymn, Pastor Harrington dismissed everyone for the usual spread of coffee and doughnuts that the church ladies always presented in the parlor.

Well, shit… guess that’s it, then.
Billy wasn’t expecting to feel so melancholy about the end of his little church gig— the music was stodgy and bland, after all, just like most of the people. He stood up from the electric keyboard and walked back over to the Steinway, trailing his fingers lightly over the dark, glossy wood.

*Hate to admit it, but I’m actually gonna miss getting to play this fancy-ass piano.*

Everyone in the praise band was putting away their instruments and microphones (well, everyone except for the two sopranos who always snuck away to get coffee in the parlor without lifting a finger to help). Julian Bunderson, the middle-aged Minnesotan dork with the cast on his arm, looked over at Billy and smiled like he understood.

“Go ahead and play something, if you want,” he offered as he wound up a long black cord. “It’s your last day, so play whatever you like— within reason.”

Billy smirked. “What, no ‘Filth Hounds of Hades’?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Rats. Shouldn’t I be helping, though?” Billy pointed at a pile of sheet music waiting to be sorted into neat stacks.

“No, no, go ahead— serenade us with something, why don’tcha. Doesn’t need to be liturgical, but none of that ‘Filthy Hounds’ business, please.”

Billy sat down, cracked his knuckles and and rested his fingertips on the perfect black and white keys, thinking for a few seconds.

*I could play ‘Save a Prayer’, for old time’s sake... Harrington liked that one.*

He glanced over at Steve, who was crouching down on the carpet with his back to him, putting his electric guitar back in its case. Suddenly, Billy remembered the music from his crazy dream the previous night— Steve had been listening to that cheesy, piano-heavy Journey song.

*Should be simple enough.*

It wasn’t a difficult riff, but he had never played it before in his life and he didn’t want to screw it up. As it turned out, there was no need to worry; Billy’s fingers seemed to seek out the correct keys effortlessly, without even looking. He had only played about five bars when he noticed Steve stiffen and turn around slowly, staring at him with wide brown eyes.

*What’s he thinking? He likes this song, right? There’s no way in hell he doesn’t like this song...*

Billy was disappointed when Steve abruptly turned around again and resumed shoving his electric guitar into its case— his movements were careless and quick, like he couldn’t get out of the church fast enough.

*Shit, is he about to walk out on me again?*

Without bothering to play any more of the song, Billy rose from the piano bench and hurried over to where Steve was crouched.

“Hey,” he said casually, tucking his hands in his pockets. “You okay, man?”

“Fine,” Steve mumbled without looking up— he cursed quietly at the zipper on his nylon guitar case, which seemed to have gotten stuck.
Is he pissed off at me? What’d I do this time? Try saying something nice.

“You, uh… you sounded good today.” Billy stepped closer and inhaled deeply, glancing around to make sure nobody could hear him. “You smell really good, too.”

It was an undeniably weird thing to say to another guy (especially in church) but it was so true—Steve had never smelled more like freshly-baked cookies than he did at this moment.

I wanna devour him…

“Don’t say stuff like that in church,” Steve hissed as he freed the zipper; most of the people remaining in the sanctuary were engrossed with their own conversations, but Steve still looked slightly panicked. “What the hell did you play that song?”

“How not?” Billy asked defensively; he didn’t like feeling like he’d made a wrong choice. “I thought you liked cheesy top-forty crap.”

Steve stood up straight and shouldered his guitar by its long strap. “Yeah, but why that song?”

Something about his intensely bothered expression made Billy understand.

He must’ve dreamed about it, too… wow.

Determined to confirm his suspicions, he stepped a little closer. “I had a dream last night… did you?”

Steve’s eyebrows scrunched together and he backed away slowly, refusing to answer.

“You had a record player next to your bed,” Billy continued softly, “and that’s the song you were listening to while we were… you know.”

While that gorgeous dick of yours was in my mouth… fuck, I wish that was real.

Steve squirmed visibly and bit his lip, shifting his guitar to his other shoulder, then back again.

“Wanna go get some lunch?” Billy asked impulsively, checking his watch; it felt sort of weird to ask someone out when he wasn’t going to be the one driving, but life had to go on, with or without his Camaro. “We could talk about this bonkers dream shit some more, if you want.”

Steve shook his head as his eyes wandered down from Billy’s eyes to his mouth.

See something you like, pretty boy?

Billy smirked suggestively and leaned closer, lowering his voice to a husky murmur. “If you don’t wanna do that, we could just go someplace private and, you know, not talk about anything at all…”

Steve took another step backwards and tripped over a power cord connected to an amp. Billy reflexively grabbed both his arms and kept him from falling.

“Careful, ya big klutz,” he chuckled, but his smile faded when Steve wrenched away from him.

What’s his problem?

Billy had never seen him quite so flushed before—maybe during one of their more intensely competitive wrestling matches or on the sunniest days when they had to run laps on the track, but never at church. There was a fine sheen of sweat on Steve’s forehead and he was breathing heavily, like there wasn’t enough air in the room.
Is he okay?

When Steve turned around and started walking away, Billy called after him without caring about who was listening.

“Hey, where’re you going, dude?”

Steve rushed down the center aisle and didn’t reply.

No, he’s not okay.

Billy followed but was stopped almost immediately by Steve’s father, tall and regal in his three-piece suit and embroidered silk pastor’s stole.

“Glad I caught you you before you left!”

Unbelievable… this is exactly what happened at church a couple weeks ago.

Billy swallowed his impatience as he shook Pastor Harrington’s outstretched hand and tried to mirror his friendly smile; he could see the sanctuary doors swinging shut behind Steve.

Shit!

“Look, sir, I’d love to stick around and chat, but I’ve gotta—”

Billy stopped mid-sentence and looked down when he felt something being pressed into his palm: six crisp fifty-dollar bills. He had never held so much cash in his hands before, and this was much more than he was usually given at the end of the church service.

“Holy sh—” Billy caught himself before letting the rest of the word slip out. “I mean… are you sure this isn’t too much?”

Mr. Harrington laughed. “Sure, I’m sure. You’ve more than earned yourself a little bonus.”

“I… wow. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it, son.” Pastor Harrington gave him another warm smile. “I’ll let you catch up with Steve, now. Take care.”

Son.

Billy didn’t have time to process how he felt about Steve’s father calling him ‘son’; he ran outside just in time to see the dark-red BMW zooming towards the exit.

Goddamnit, is he serious? This really is like that other day when he just fucked off, but this time he was supposed to be my ride!

He cupped his hands around his mouth like a megaphone and shouted “Pussy!” as Steve’s sedan sped out of the church driveway and disappeared around the bend. A few parking spaces down from where Billy was standing, an elderly couple unlocking their Cadillac looked over at him with horrified shock.

Mind your own fuckin’ business, geezers.

“Hi,” a young voice spoke behind him. “Found ya.”
He whirled around and saw Max standing there in a purple corduroy dress, ankle socks and slightly scuffed white Keds.

“What the hell do you want?”

Max didn’t answer; instead, she squinted up at his face with mingled concern and fascination. “Jeez, what happened to you?”

“It’s a long story,” he responded flatly. “You oughtta see the other guys.”

“What guys?”

“Just some stupid douche from gym class and his older brother,” Billy replied, overindulging his step-sister’s curiosity in the hope that she might leave him alone; he wanted to sulk in private. “There’s no way you would know ‘em.”

Max put her hands on her hips. “Why’d you call Steve Harrington a pussy just now?”

Billy shot her a withering look. “It’s none of your goddamn business what I call that preppy wuss.”

“SOR-ry… didn’t realize it was such a touchy subject.” Max rolled her blue eyes, then seemed to think of something; she scanned the parking lot and frowned. “Hang on… where the heck is your car?”

_Oh, great… here we go._

“Jesus, have you _always_ been such a snoop? I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“You crashed it, didn’t you?”

Billy was offended by the suggestion; he’d always considered himself a good driver. “Hell, no… the Camaro’s gonna be fine.”

“Then where—”

“Are you deaf, shitbird? I said I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Did Steve drive you here in his Beemer?” Max’s eyes widened. “Oh my god— did you have a _sleepover_?”

Billy snorted. “A sleepover? Yeah, right.”

_MAN,_ _she’d laugh until she choked if she heard about how I wore Steve’s pajamas last night... or how I’m currently wearing his underwear._

“So _that’s_ why you you didn’t come home after work and you’re dressed like that!”

Billy ground his teeth together as he looked down at his borrowed Brooks Brothers pants.

“Where’d you get that earring?” Max continued relentlessly. “It’s pretty. It’s not a _real_ diamond, is it?”

“Jesus, I need a smoke,” Billy grumbled, instinctively patting his pockets even though he knew perfectly well that he’d left his Marlboros in his Camaro.

_Perfect. I gotta go buy some more, ‘cause I don’t know when the hell I’m getting my car back._
“Well…” Max paused to clear her throat. “My mom’s getting some coffee in the parlor, but we’re probably gonna leave soon. If you want, you can come home with us.”

Billy spotted Susan’s car parked in the shade of a nearby tree—a ’75 Dodge Colt that Neil had purchased second-hand and gifted her for Valentine’s Day. Billy wasn’t crazy about his step-mother, obviously, but that hadn’t stopped him from cringing with embarrassment the night his father presented Susan with the key (it even had a pink ribbon tied on it in a pathetic, limp bow).

_I know my old man’s not loaded, but the cheap bastard could’ve tried a little harder than that…_

He was tempted to tell Max that he wouldn’t be caught dead riding in such a shitty jalopy, but Hawkins Presbyterian Church was on the other side of town from their house and it would take forever to find his way to Old Cherry Road on foot.

“Fine,” he muttered sullenly. “But only ‘cause I don’t feel like walking.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Max rolled her eyes again and flapped her hand a few times, beckoning him to follow her. “C’mon, Mister Grumpy-butt. If there are any custard doughnuts left, maybe I’ll let you split one with me.”

“Oh, _maybe_ you’ll let me?”

But Max hadn’t heard him; she was already trotting purposefully towards the church’s old-fashioned parlor, her quick footsteps echoing in the covered walkway. Billy sighed and followed; this wasn’t remotely what he had planned to do with his Sunday afternoon, but if he couldn’t spend it making Steve Harrington cream his pants, he might as well spend it eating cream-filled doughnuts with his step-sister.

_I’ll let him off the hook just this once… maybe I’ll get a chance to see him tonight, if he’s feeling better. Jesus, he’s driving me fucking crazy._

Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: ‘So Close’ by Lazerhawk
Fever Dream

Chapter Notes

“Sun lights up the daytime
Moon lights up the night
I light up when you call my name
‘Cause I know you’re gonna treat me right.”
—‘Fever’ by Eddie Cooley & Otis Blackwell (1956)

“All up against your will
Through the thick and thin
He will wait until
You give yourself to him.”
—‘The Killing Moon’ by Echo & the Bunnymen (1984)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday, March 31st, 1985: Part 2

Steve felt a lot worse than he thought he would about ditching Billy at church; he had only driven half a mile when he screeched to a halt, made a U-turn in the middle of the road, drove back to Hawkins Presbyterian, then chickened out and sped right past the large brick building.

“I can’t do this… not right now,” he muttered under his breath as he drove homeward again. “He can just hitch a ride with Max and Mrs. Hargrove. He’ll be fine.”

Billy hadn’t looked angry when Steve made his impulsive getaway in the church parking lot a few minutes earlier— just confused and maybe even a little hurt, with those thick, dark eyebrows scrunched together and his hands cupped around his mouth to amplify whatever he was shouting.

“Pussy”, probably… and he’s not wrong.

All Steve could think about in those panicked moments was getting away, even though it was oddly painful to see Billy getting smaller and smaller in his rearview mirror.

He’s a big boy, he can handle himself.

Steve still felt guilty, though. They hadn’t exactly discussed it, but there must have been some expectation that he would be driving Billy home after the church service.

Why the hell did he have to go and play ‘Faithfully’, huh? Out of all the songs in the world… Jesus, we’re not seriously having the same dreams, are we?

It was too crazy to believe, but… what if Billy was right? He was so damned smart about practically everything else, so what if alphas really could bond with other alphas?

“Even if they can, I’m not a freakin’ queer!” he insisted out loud, smacking his steering wheel in frustration.

Yeah, but straight guys don’t go around kissing each other, right?
Steve switched on the radio and turned up the volume to drown out his thoughts.

“I will have you, yes I will have you, I will find a way and I will have you…”

Steve had been feeling strange all morning— disoriented and a little feverish, like he might be getting sick. He wasn’t nauseous, but he didn’t have much appetite and his whole body felt uncomfortably sticky with perspiration, even though it wasn’t an especially warm day. He used his free hand to wipe the sweat off his upper lip and turned on the A/C, adjusting the vents so the cool air would blow directly onto his face.

“My fantasy has turned to madness and all my goodness has turned to badness, my need to possess you has consumed my soul, my life is trembling, I have no control…”

“Oh, gimme a break,” Steve snapped, switching off the radio. “Doesn’t anyone know how to write a song about something besides sex or love or whatever?”

He glanced over at the empty passenger seat beside him and felt another twinge of guilt, followed by a surge of longing at the memory of Billy’s warm hand sliding up his thigh.

*You’ve gotta quit thinking about him… get a grip and cool it, man.*

Less than ten minutes later, he was parking his BMW in the garage. Despite the breeze and the dark grey rainclouds that were gathering in the sky, Steve was sweating like it was a hot summer day. When he opened the back door of his car to retrieve his guitar, a whiff of something pleasantly familiar made him pause.

*I know he was just in here with me this morning, but it shouldn’t still smell like— oh, crap!*

There was a lumpy, crumpled paper grocery bag on the floor of the back seat, right next to his nail-studded baseball bat. Steve knew exactly what was in it— the dirty clothes Billy was wearing the night before, when he got beaten up in the record store parking lot.

“Christ, I forgot all about giving him his stuff back.”

Steve picked up the bag and stood there indecisively in his driveway for a few moments, wondering if he should take the clothes inside and throw them in the washing machine. He peeked inside the bag and felt his eyes widen; there was *no way* that an unlaundered shirt and pair of Wranglers should smell so good— like they had been recently aired out on a clothesline at the beach in the bright, warm sunshine.

*It doesn’t make any sense.*

The nagging feeling in his groin that had been bothering him all morning returned in full force, prompting Steve to fling the bag back in his car and slam the door. He was sure his face was turning redder than a tomato.

*What am I doing, gettin’ a hard-on and sniffing a dude’s dirty laundry like some kind of creep?*

“Jesus,” he muttered angrily, shouldering his guitar case and hurrying to unlock the front door.

“What the hell is wrong with me?”

After letting himself in the house and propping his guitar up against the stairwell, he went to the first-floor bathroom to take a piss— easier said than done, given that his dick was sticking up like a
“Goddamnit,” he grunted in frustration as he bent over awkwardly and aimed into the toilet.

He tried to resist the urge to jerk off, but that was exactly what ended up happening—twice. The first time, he didn’t think about anything (or anyone) in particular and he was so painfully pent-up that he came in a humiliating twenty seconds. The second time went a little differently; thoughts of a wicked smile and impossibly nice lips kept creeping into the corners of his mind, and within three minutes he had come again.

*Crap! What’s going on with me today?*

Steve washed up and trudged to the living room. He knew he needed to sleep, but he was worried about having dreams about… off-limits subjects. He kicked his loafers off, flopped down on the couch and switched on the TV, even though there was hardly ever anything worth watching in the afternoon. Channel six was halfway through a promotion for its Sunday night movie:

*“Be sure to tune in at eight for Conan the Destroyer, a swashbuckling fantasy filled with adventure, edge-of-your-seat excitement, and romance!”*

There was something about the actor, Arnold Something (Steve could never remember his ridiculously long last name) in that crazy little getup that reminded him of someone else with tanned muscles and a cocky, danger-loving smirk.

*“Holy shit,”* he mumbled to himself, pointing the remote at the TV to turn it off and banishing thoughts of Billy wearing nothing but leather and fur.

Steve’s backpack was on the opposite end of the couch; he dragged it towards him and pulled out his binder.

*Here we go—I can do some homework. It blows, but I’m way behind and it'll help me take my mind off, uh… stuff.*

He flipped through the binder to the divider labeled ‘History’ and frowned when he saw writing that wasn’t his own.

*“Wait a sec, is this…?”*

It was. Steve had an essay about the New Deal due in a week, but it looked like he might not need to worry about it anymore because there were four sheets of notebook paper filled with neat, blocky handwriting on the mind-numbingly dull subject. As he skimmed through the essay, half a sheet of torn paper escaped from between the third and fourth pages and fluttered onto his lap.

*Harrington—*

*Thanks for everything*

—B

Steve sat there staring at the note for a solid minute, reading it over and over and absently tracing the letter ‘B’ with his index finger.
“Y-you’re… welcome?” he said aloud, shaking his head incredulously. “I didn’t really do anything, though.”

“Who are you talking to?”

“Nobody!” Steve answered automatically, louder than necessary.

He hadn’t heard the front door open or close, but obviously his father must have gotten home at some point because there he was: standing in the living room doorway in his three-piece suit, regarding his son with polite curiosity.

“What’re you doing there, bud? Homework?”

“Oh, this?” Steve stuffed the note and the essay that Billy wrote back in his binder, careful not to wrinkle them. “I was just, uh… looking at some stuff for history class, that’s all.”

“It’s great to see you tackling your schoolwork,” his father said approvingly, but then his smile faded and the creases on his forehead deepened. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay? You look kind of… sweaty.”

Right on cue, a droplet made its way down from Steve’s temple to his jaw; he wiped it away irritably and fanned himself with his binder.

“I’m fine, Dad,” he insisted for what felt like the hundredth time that day. “Totally fine.”

Sometimes I wish I had brothers and sisters, just so Mom and Dad would get off my back for five minutes.

“Well, that’s good to hear.” Mr. Harrington loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar. “Anyway, I’m about to change into something more comfortable, do a little packing, then head over to the Club for a late lunch… thought I might play a round of golf, but I don’t like the looks of those rainclouds that’ve been rolling in, so maybe I’ll practice some raquetball, instead. I’ve gotten pretty darn rusty.”

Steve was barely listening. “Cool. Have fun.”

“Good luck with the homework, son— you’re doing a great job!”

Yeah, right… you’ve got no clue what you’re talking about.

After his father left the room, Steve sat there staring blankly at the three-ring binder on his lap. He still hadn’t recovered from the surprise of finding Billy’s strange gift.

Does something like that even count as a gift? What else could you call it?

It wasn’t the first time Billy had done something like that, but Steve still felt overwhelmed; he had been dreading that stupid essay ever since it was assigned, and now it was… done. Finished, just like that.

I bet he added a few dumb mistakes to keep the teacher from catching on, just like he did with my math homework.

Steve tossed his binder onto the couch and wandered out to the kitchen to stare inside the fridge for a while; he still wasn’t hungry, but the cool air felt heavenly on his sweaty skin.
“What if I am sick?” he wondered aloud, pressing his palm against his forehead.

His parents might be right to worry about him; he wasn’t a doctor like his mother, but he knew it wasn’t normal to feel so feverish and to have zero appetite.

Shit, I’d better not be coming down with something; that’s the last thing I need.

Steve headed back to the first-floor bathroom and found some Tylenol in the medicine cabinet; he squinted at the tiny print on the pill bottle, searching for any mention of fevers.

“Temporarily relieves minor aches and pains due to headache, the common cold, backache, arthritis, toothache, menstrual cramps— Jesus, I don’t have any of these problems— and… oh, here we go! Temporarily reduces fever.”

He took two tablets, then a third for good measure, washing them down with a few cupped handfuls of water.

Wish these pills could do something about my stupid wiener…

Despite jerking off twice in that same bathroom just ten minutes earlier, he was still half-hard.

“What the hell?” he muttered as he hurried upstairs to his room and locked the door.

Steve took off his church clothes and flopped down on his bed wearing nothing but an undershirt and briefs. He stayed there for almost half an hour, just staring up at the ceiling and waiting for the medicine to take effect. He hadn’t gotten enough rest the night before and he was exhausted, but between the situation in his Hanes and the confusing thoughts cluttered in his head, sleep probably wasn’t in the cards for him.

Taking off his clothes had helped a little, but his whole body still felt overheated and clammy with sweat; he sat up and pulled his thin undershirt over his head, as though that could possibly make a difference. He was tempted to go turn on the air conditioner, but his mother had a strict don’t-touch-the-thermostat policy and he didn’t completely understand how it worked, anyway— the dial had so many numbers and tiny symbols.

Jesus, it’s so hot. That useless Tylenol hasn’t kicked in yet… I must be getting the flu or something. Fevers go with having the flu, right?

His mind immediately drifted to the day Billy brought over a container of chicken noodle soup because he thought Steve was sick.

I asked him if he wanted to come in for a minute and he said… what did he say? “Sure, why not.”

It was hard to believe that it hadn’t even been a full two weeks since that fateful afternoon; it felt like months. Steve might have said “for a minute” when he invited Billy inside, but they ended up playing video games for almost two hours. He squirmed a little when he remembered how he had jogged back to the Camaro to give Billy a rushed, impulsive kiss.

It was the second time that happened, I think… or was it the third? No, the third time was in the record store.

He squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to go there, but organizing the chronology of their kisses had led his mind all the way back to the first one— the kiss at his cousin Diana’s party.

What if Sophie had never come into the kitchen for another wine cooler? If she hadn’t interrupted us,
how far would Billy have tried to go?

Steve licked his lips at the thought of that night, when they were pressed together in the pantry; it had been three weeks, but he could still remember how intoxicating Billy smelled.

And tasted. God, is it normal for people to taste so good?

Billy had touched his dick that night, too— just the outline and only for a second, but still… nobody had touched Steve down there in ages.

“I knew you had a thing for me, Harrington… I fuckin’ knew it.”

Steve’s eyes snapped open— he knew it was just a memory, but it really sounded like Billy was there in the room with him, growling in his ear.

“Oh, come on,” he groaned in disgust when he glanced down and saw that his dick was stretching the cotton fabric of his underwear into a tall, skinny teepee. “Not again!”

He pulled one of his pillows onto his face and yelled into it, as though that could possibly improve matters.

I can’t jerk off while I’m thinking about a guy. I just can’t.

“Why the hell not? I do it all the time.”

“Nobody asked you, perv,” he mumbled into his pillow, which he tossed aside angrily because it was making his face too hot.

Great, now I’m hallucinating. That’s really great.

His back was slick with sweat and sticking to his sheet; when he rolled onto his side, his eyes landed on a poster that had been tacked to his bedroom wall for the last five years. It was a larger version of a photo that Christie Brinkley took in a 1980 issue of Sports Illustrated; she was posing seductively on a beach in front of a palm tree, darkly tanned and wearing a skimpy white bikini. Even though Steve hadn’t used the poster as wank material since tenth grade, he still kept it on his wall— partly out of nostalgia but mostly out of laziness (those tacks weren’t easy to pull out).

Christie Brinkley didn’t do much for him now, of course, but in the days before he started getting action in high school, Steve used to jerk off to her picture all the time— ’80 and ’81 were probably his peak jerking-off years, in terms of sheer frequency. Oddly enough, he even had a favorite position that he had discovered through trial and error, and it was way more satisfying than just lying on his back (the missionary position of masturbation).

It’s worth a shot, ‘cause if I don’t blow my load soon I’m gonna lose it.

He tugged off his briefs and rolled over so that his hard dick was pinned between the bedsheets and his sweaty stomach. With his knees spread far apart and digging into the mattress, he propped himself up with one hand and slid the other beneath his belly. Steve had discovered, as only an insatiably horny thirteen-year-old could, that screwing his own hand felt surprisingly good if he rolled his hips right and used his imagination.

“Yeah, there you go… that’s it…”

Steve closed his eyes as he tried to focus on getting himself off. He imagined Christie Brinkley lying beneath him with her long, tanned legs spread wide apart— wrapped around his waist, maybe— and
rolling her eyes back in ecstasy as Steve pushed inside her.

“God, that’s good,” he panted, moving faster and trying to focus on Christie’s sun-kissed tan and shoulder-length dirty blonde hair. “Good… yeah…”

For a minute, it seemed to be working. Steve breathed deeply through his nostrils as he rutted against the mattress, transporting himself to that sunny beach on the poster. In his mind, they were stretched out together under the shade of a palm tree, kissing and moaning; he could almost feel the hot sand beneath his knees and elbows, hear the rush of the waves, taste the salt on his skin—

Shit, I mean her! HER skin!

“No, no, no,” he groaned, jumping up from the bed and stumbling across his room towards the picture of Christie Brinkley. “This is not okay.”

He didn’t care that the corners tore when he ripped the poster from the wall; his dick was painfully hard and he needed to come— the sooner, the better. He flopped back down onto his stomach and held the poster tightly in one hand as he gripped his cock with the other and started moving his hips again.

“Quit being a queer and focus,” he snarled at himself, staring intently at the supermodel’s beautiful body. “Don’t let that asshole distract you, goddamnit!”

Think about Christie… think about those pretty blue eyes.

And those gorgeous lips.

And that tan.

Check out those thighs.

Really cute nose, with lots of little freckles you can only see if you get real close.

Perfect eyebrows.

Great jawline.

How are those muscles even real… oh, shit.

Steve wasn’t thinking about Christie Brinkley— not even a little bit. A completely different tanned beach babe had crept into his fantasy, crawled onto the warm sand with him, and refused to leave. Stubborn bastard.

He tossed the poster aside and groaned wearily.

Nobody can see me… just keep going. Just finish and be done with it.

Steve knew he should stop, but it felt incredible and the climax gathering at the base of his dick spurred him to keep rolling his hips into the bed.

“You know what you look like right now?”

Jesus.

“No, not Jesus.”
Don’t you ever shut up?

“You look like you’re gettin’ pounded, pretty boy.”

W-what?

Steve slowed his movements and felt burning heat creep up his neck. He hated to admit it, but the husky, taunting voice in his head was right: the way he was lying on the bed and grinding into the mattress did seem unnervingly similar to the way he might move his body if somebody was kneeling behind him, hoisting up his hips and…

Oh, shit.

“I really, really hate you, you know that?” he panted into his pillow, imagining those perfect lips curled into an ‘I-told-you-so’ smirk. “L-look at what you made me do.”

There was no answer, this time. That deep, sensual voice in the back of his head was like a TV signal on a stormy night—flickering and unpredictable.

Steve could almost feel Billy’s hot breath on the back of his neck and that little pendant dragging lightly up the length of his sweaty spine, tickling him and making him shiver.

I’m gonna… oh Jesus, I’m… I’m…

Steve buried his face into his pillow just in time to muffle an extremely loud groan.

“God,” he choked out as he came, the word sounding almost like a sob.

He stayed there for a minute longer, until he felt both light-headed from trying to breathe with his face in a pillow and disgusted by the patch of sticky wetness slowly spreading beneath his belly.

Oh, gross.

Steve staggered to the bathroom, where he took a long piss followed by an even longer look in the mirror. His thick, brown hair was hilariously messy, his eyes were wild and there were beads of sweat clinging to his forehead and upper lip; he looked like he had just finished running a mile in gym class or playing a long game of basketball.

Or having really good sex…

Embarrassed and ashamed, he turned on the shower faucet and stepped under the cold spray—warm showers, he told himself, were for guys who knew how to control their perverted urges. After barely two minutes, he couldn’t stand it any longer and stepped out of the punishing water, covered with goosebumps and shivering uncontrollably.

Did the trick, though, he thought with grim satisfaction, looking down at his pitifully shrunken dick. It’s not hard anymore.

Steve wrapped himself in a towel and left damp footprints behind him as he padded across his bedroom carpet to get some clean underwear. He put on a t-shirt but skipped pants because the feverish heat was already creeping back, slowly warming him up again after the cold shower; he wished he didn’t have to wear any clothes at all.

Man, I’ve definitely got the flu or something.

He collapsed in bed and cursed when he remembered the sticky spot on the sheet.
“So nasty,” Steve muttered as he yanked the sheet off the bed and tossed it on the floor. “What am I, thirteen?”

The white polyester mattress cover felt itchy and uncomfortable against his hot skin, but he was too tired to care; he spread out on the bed like a starfish and stared up blankly at the ceiling, unable to fully process everything that had just happened. It felt like a favor from God himself when Steve’s eyelids started to droop, his vision blurred and his mind finally, mercifully went dark.

………………

“Harrington… psst! Hey, Harrington!”

“Huh?”

Steve sat up in bed, blinking in the darkness and looking around for any signs of life. He felt a humiliating stab of disappointment when it became clear that he was completely alone in his room; Billy’s voice was only in his head.

Of course it is… don’t be an idiot.

According to the digital clock by his bed, it was past eight o’clock; he had been napping for hours.

“It’s eight? Seriously? Why didn’t anyone wake me up?”

It was obvious from the soft but rapid tapping on the roof that it had started raining at some point while Steve was asleep. He was dismayed (but not very surprised) to see that there was a telling damp spot on his underwear and he was hard again.

“This has gotta stop,” he groaned as he rubbed his eyes and forced himself to get out of bed.

After a few frustrating minutes of trying to take a piss with a boner (for the second time that day!) Steve put on a clean pair of boxers, went over to the window by his desk and stared out through the rain-spattered glass. He was really craving a cigarette, but didn’t look forward to getting soaked.

A little rain might feel good on a crappy night like this, though… I still feel like I’m running a fever.

His need to distract himself and clear his head outweighed his desire to hide in his room indefinitely and keep dry. He grabbed a spare pack of Parliaments and a lighter from his desk drawer and headed downstairs without bothering to put any more clothes on. Normally, he wouldn’t just walk around his house in his underwear, but he was too hot and uncomfortable to care. Additionally, neither of his parents seemed to be around; he assumed his mother was still working at the hospital and he wasn’t sure if his father had returned from the country club or not— he didn’t care enough to check the garage for his ’83 Rolls-Royce.

The house was dark and silent except for the moonlight shining dimly through the windows and the rain pattering on the roof. After finding an umbrella near the front door and a pair of knee-high Wellington boots in the hall closet, Steve walked out the back door, feeling like some kind of escaped mental patient in his outfit of boxers, a t-shirt and rubber gardening boots.

Steve liked his house, but whoever had designed it hadn’t included any covered porches; the teak deck was drenched and slippery underfoot as Steve opened his umbrella to shield himself from the rain. He stepped down onto the concrete expanse that surrounded the pool and just stood there for a minute, watching thousands of raindrops dimple the surface of the dark water; it was strangely hypnotic, and for a moment he forgot why he had come outside in the first place.
Steve pulled out the pack of Parliaments that he’d tucked into the pocket of his t-shirt; his movements were clumsy and one-handed because he had to keep holding the umbrella steady.

“This is so dumb,” he mumbled as he pinched the cigarette between his lips and used his free hand to flick the lighter. “So, so dumb. It’d serve me right if I came down with a case of pneumonia on top of whatever else I’ve got.”

The cool air felt fantastic against his bare legs and arms. Steve looked at the sky, tilting his umbrella back as much as he dared without getting his cigarette wet so he could gaze up at the full moon, which was so bright that it was visible even in the downpour; it glowed like a lantern behind the thick grey rainclouds and cast enough light that Steve barely needed to squint when he raised his wrist to read his watch— 8:22 p.m.

“Past your bedtime, pretty boy?”

Steve flinched and nearly dropped his cigarette on the wet pavement—it sounded like Billy was standing right behind him, leaning over to murmur in his ear.

“He’s not here… get a grip,” he told himself as he glanced around the dark yard, scanning the trees. “You’re just being stupid.”

Steve tried not to think about Billy, but it was like trying not to breathe—easy for the first few seconds, then increasingly difficult, until he felt like his chest might cave in. The idea of Billy suddenly showing up at his house, soaked to the bone and staring at him with ravenous hunger in his eyes made Steve squirm; despite the chill in the night air, his palms and forehead were still clammy.

Get a grip, get a grip…

Steve wondered if Billy was at work at the Emporium that night, or if he was in the little house on Old Cherry Road. Was he in his bedroom, reading or studying? Was he doing push-ups and getting sweaty?

Jesus, don’t think of that!

It was too late, though. Steve was already picturing Billy in a nondescript teenage boy’s bedroom, wearing nothing but his green Hawkins High gym shorts and doing push-ups on the floor… his arms were huge and glistening… he was breathing rhythmically… up, down, up, down, up…

It would only take, like, ten minutes to drive over there and— wait, what? No, no, no, no, that is definitely NOT happening.

His hand shook slightly as he raised his cigarette to take another drag; he wished it was something stronger than a Parliament Light.

I bet Billy’s got weed… he’s always got weed, somehow.

Steve bit his lip when he considered what might happen if he drove over to the Hargrove’s house on the other side of town. The thought of tapping on Billy’s bedroom window on a rainy night was insane enough to make him laugh out loud.

Even if I had some way of knowing which room was his, what the hell would I say?

“Hey, man,” he joked as he strolled around the pool, grateful that the rain pattering on his umbrella
was drowning out his rambling. “Sorry I ditched you at church—I might’ve panicked a little ‘cause of that nutty dream stuff, y’know? Anyway, I can’t sleep or stop jerking off and I was wondering if you had any grass.”

*Where would we go to smoke?*

Steve’s stiffening dick twitched under his boxer shorts and he knew Billy would pounce on it the second they were alone together.

*We’d be in my car, obviously, since his is getting fixed. Shit, I really shouldn't be thinking about this.*

It was impossible to stop himself, though; once he started letting the forbidden scenarios trickle into his mind, the walls crashed down and everything flooded in all at once.

*We can’t kiss, though— his lip is still screwed up, remember? And if he can’t use his mouth for kissing, he definitely wouldn’t be able to use it for… for…*

Steve’s cheeks were getting hot again. There was no use ignoring his boner—it was getting harder by the second and the thought of Billy touching it was driving him crazy.

“Goddamnit!” he yelled into the rain, flinging his half-finished cigarette into his mother’s rosebushes and dropping his umbrella on the pavement.

Steve tipped his head back and blinked up at the moon through wet eyelashes; the cold rain felt delicious on his hot skin.

*I wanna see him.*

His rainboots squeaked and squelched on the kitchen linoleum when he stomped back inside to grab his car keys from where he’d left them on the counter. There was a rapid-fire argument being waged in his head; both voices were his own and it felt like a scene in a cartoon where someone had a little angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other.

*What the hell am I doing?*

*Following your instincts. No shame in that.*

*What if my instincts are stupid? I can’t go to his house!*

*Why not?*

*For about five hundred reasons.*

*You know how he feels about you, right?*

*Not my problem.*

Steve opened the kitchen door that led to the garage and slammed it behind him. The devil on his shoulder was sounding less like his own voice and more like Billy’s by the second.

*He wants you so bad… admit it, you want him, too—*

“Shut up!” Steve snapped, his voice booming in the mostly-empty garage. “Just shut the hell up!”

He unlocked his BMW and thought of that morning, when Billy had reached over and tried to unzip his pants but Steve was too shy and scared to pull over.
If I had just parked under a tree where nobody could see us, he probably would’ve given me a hand job… what if he tried to go further, though?

As Steve tried not to think about what “further” might involve, his whole body tensed and he looked up sharply when he heard the low rumble of a car engine outside, barely audible over the sound of the rain.

He knows where I live, right? If he happened to stop by tonight, anything could happen…

Steve imagined hearing the Camaro right outside his house, followed by knuckles rapping insistently against the big garage door; he pictured himself pressing the button that made the door open with a loud, mechanical groan. He imagined what Billy Hargrove might look like, standing on the driveway in the pouring rain. Would he look at him the way he usually did— like Steve was a three-course meal? Would they be able to make it upstairs before starting to tear off each other’s clothes?

Oh my god.

Steve squeezed his thighs together reflexively and opened his car door; he was certain he’d never felt so aroused in his entire life.

“Don’t be stupid,” he commanded himself angrily. “There’s no way it’s him.”

He was right, of course. It was probably just one of his neighbors— some aging lawyer or surgeon speeding down the streets in his midlife-crisis Ferrari. Steve pursed his lips with embarrassment; he knew the Camaro was still being repaired and he felt pathetic for thinking— no, hoping— that it could be Billy.

With the door of his BMW half-opened, he caught a whiff of a familiar, maddening smell and recalled the paper bag of Billy’s clothes in the backseat.

Uh-oh…

An alarm bell was ringing inside his head, warning him against venturing past the point of no return.

Don’t do it. Please don’t be creepy and weird and gross.

Steve left his keys dangling in the car door and pressed both palms against his temples like he was trying to squeeze all the crazy thoughts out of his head, like juice from a lemon— it didn’t work.

“Fuck!”

Steve didn’t say the f-word very often and it was amplified in the large, cavernous garage. His father’s Rolls-Royce and his mother’s Mercedes-Benz were both gone; he was all alone.

“Fuck,” he said again, this time in a hoarse, panicked whisper.

Nobody else was there to see whatever he was about to do next. Steve wished he didn’t have to be there to witness it, either, but how was he supposed to escape himself? He kicked the front tire of his BMW as hard as he could, desperate to release some of his frustration.

“Quit fighting it, babe,” a deep voice murmured in the dark recesses of his mind. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Something inside Steve snapped.

Screw it.
He seized the bag of clothes from the backseat and ran out of the garage, slamming the door behind him.

*Screw it.*

He sprinted upstairs, two steps at a time, and headed for the guest bathroom Billy had used that morning.

*Screw it.*

His heart hammered like he was committing a crime as he pulled the crumpled set of matching pajamas from the laundry basket, which smelled just as good as the bag of clothes tucked under his arm.

*Screw it.*

He even grabbed the towel— the same soft, blue towel that had slipped off Billy’s hips when Steve accidentally walked in on him.

“Oopsy-daisy, my ass,” he muttered to himself. “That bastard did it on purpose, just to screw with me.”

“Did it work?”

Steve let out a slightly manic hoot of laughter as he hurried down the hallway.

*Yeah, it worked.*

Back in the sanctuary of his dark bedroom, Steve flung the armload of clothes onto his bed and kicked off the rainboots. His boxer shorts and t-shirt were wet from the rain and clinging to him like plastic wrap; as he peeled them off, he didn’t even bother trying to resist the mental image of Billy helping him undress.

*He’s not really here. Nobody’s here. Who gives a shit?*

Steve sighed with relief when the wet shirt and shorts plopped to the floor; it felt so nice to be naked, with the cool air in the room drying the water on his feverish skin. He didn’t turn on any lights; there was moonlight shining between the curtains, bathing the room in a faint grey glow. He tilted his head back and inhaled deeply; his room smelled *so good.*

“Oh, shit! Hang on a sec…”

Steve couldn’t believe he had almost forgotten the very first thing he’d ‘acquired’ from Billy. Unsure which dresser drawer it was in, he spent a frustrated minute or two pawing through each one, tossing socks, pants, and underwear all over the floor until he finally found what he was searching for: the Metallica sweatshirt.

Even though more than a week had passed since Billy left it at Steve’s house, the black sweatshirt still smelled faintly like cigarettes and Paco Rabanne cologne. Steve was long past caring that he was acting like a freak and probably looked like a housewife in a Downy commercial; he hugged the thick sweater against his face and just… breathed.

*Wow.*

Steve sank down onto the bed and felt the towel and clothes and pajamas around him. With his eyes
closed, it was easy to imagine that Billy was right there on the bed beside him, kissing his neck the same way he had in the record store on Friday.

*I wish…*

“You wish what?”

*God, I dunno how to put it into words.*

“Try.”

*I wish… no, forget it. It’s stupid.*

“Tell me,” the deep voice insisted. “It’s okay.”

Steve swallowed and licked his lips.

*I… I wish you were here.*

When there was no response in his head, Steve thought he might have said too much. It didn’t make any sense to get worried about *not* hearing things, of course, but there he was, smiling like an idiot when he finally heard that low, husky voice again.

*“Wish I was there, too, pretty boy.”*


Steve wasn’t sure how many times he jerked off, but he knew it was a lot. He didn’t know how much time had passed, but he knew it was hours, not minutes. Hours and hours of jerking off interspersed with brief, feverish naps.

For someone who’d had at least ten orgasms (and counting) in one night, Steve wasn’t enjoying himself very much. He was hot and ridiculously sweaty— his bedroom felt like a sauna— and almost as soon as he finished jerking off, he would start getting another boner. Once upon a time, he used to crack jokes about guys at school that he considered losers, speculating that they masturbated so often that they developed ‘carpool tunnel’ and their cocks became chafed and blistered. Now, in a sobering turn of events, *Steve* was the perverted loser with an aching wrist and a sore dick.

’Sore’ and ‘dick’ are NOT words that go well together.

Despite rubbing himself raw as a scrubbed carrot, he still had to continue to resist the crazy urge to run downstairs, jump in his car and drive to Billy’s house. He wondered if this was what it felt like to be an alcoholic or a drug addict— trying to resist temptation but constantly battling a sinister voice whispering, “You know you gotta have me.”

Steve squirmed uncomfortably on his bed. There was a second, even stronger urge he had been fighting for hours, but he hated to admit it, even to himself.

*Don’t. Just… don’t.*

His ass had felt strange all night— it sort of itched, but it wasn’t the standard unclean itch that suggested he had missed a spot with the Charmin… it was more like a tickle, and it was getting harder and harder to ignore.

*Jesus, this is awful.*
When he drifted off to sleep again around three or four in the morning, he had yet another dream about Billy. In the dream, Steve was lying flat on his back, watching Billy crawl closer until he was hovering over him. He was so gorgeous that he actually glittered in the faint moonlight—the tiny diamond in his ear, the necklace he rarely took off, and the rings on his fingers all glinted, along with the beads of sweat on his pecs and those perfectly white teeth.

Steve twined his arms around his broad shoulders and tried to kiss him, but Billy wanted to tease him.

C’mon, Steve whined, pushing himself up onto his elbows.

Billy grinned and opened his mouth, revealing three tiny white pills on the tip of his tongue.

What the hell are those?

Billy didn’t answer; he just swallowed, smiled enigmatically, then moved in to give Steve what he wanted: endless kissing and hand jobs. For some reason, they were both wearing their green gym shorts from Hawkins High and Steve had on the black Metallica sweatshirt, while Billy was bare-chested.

“It’s your dream… might as well make it your own.”

Stop talking, Steve panted between kisses.

He pressed his heels down onto the mattress and raised his ass just a tiny bit, imagining that Billy’s strong hands were tugging his shorts off and grabbing his upper thighs, squeezing hard enough to leave bruises.

Steve gasped when he felt hot fingers wrapping around his balls, pulling them up and out of the way, immediately followed by one thick finger venturing confidently between the cheeks of his ass.

There’s no way in hell I’m letting you do tha—ah!

It was the strangest sensation Steve had experienced in his life to date, and that included sinking a nail-studded baseball bat into the flesh of an alien from another dimension. One of his own fingers would have been weird enough, but this was Billy Hargrove’s thick digit inside him, moving deeper and deeper until Steve was certain he could feel the hard ridge of his silver ring.

“Lemme see those pretty eyes.”

Steve shook his head furiously and kept his eyes pinched closed; he couldn’t believe how good he was starting to feel.

“I want you to look at me when I make you come.”

W-who says you’re gonna make me come, you arrogant son of a—

“Just the guy who’s been making you come all night… now open those big, brown eyes for me.”

Steve shook his head again and bit his bottom lip so hard it hurt.

“Pussy.”

Billy’s finger twisted and curled experimentally for a few more seconds before suddenly finding a spot that made him yelp.
Steve started wriggling and arching his back like he was trying to escape, so Billy pinned him down roughly with his free hand and kept using the other to fondle him until he surrendered to the inevitable and let the orgasm surge through him—it was powerful enough to wake him up.

“Oh my god, oh my god…”

He half-expected to hear a lewd or smart-ass comment from Billy, but his mind was suddenly just as quiet and lonely as his dark bedroom.

Oh… lost the transmission, I guess. Maybe it’s for the best.

Steve grimaced when he realized that his butt felt… different. He reached down and touched it hesitantly, his eyes widening in shock when he felt a warm, wet stickiness.

What the— is that… jizz?

He had no idea how so much could have possibly dribbled down past his balls and between the cheeks of his ass, but he was in no mood to sit around analyzing the nitty-gritty details, either.

Just, uh… just jump in the shower and try not to think about it.

Instead of ice cold water, Steve tried using the hottest water he could bear, even though he was already too warm and knew perfectly well that a scalding shower wouldn’t make him feel any less dirty.

I touched my ass… I touched it and pretended it was Billy… oh my god…

There was a line, and Steve had officially crossed it: he had gone from being someone who would never dream of sticking anything up his ass to someone who… would.

Who am I? I’m like a different person, except I still feel like me. Christ, I don’t know, anymore. I don’t know anything. I’m so tired.

The hot shower turned out to be a terrible idea; within seconds of stepping out of the water and into the steamy bathroom, Steve was sweating again. To make matters worse, his dick was hard enough to hang a towel on and the oddly ticklish sensation in his ass had returned in full force.

Naked, dripping wet, and chewing anxiously on his bottom lip, Steve walked across his room to stare out the window. So many hours had passed since he had gone outside for a smoke that the moon was in a different place in the sky and the rain had stopped.

Looks like it’s gonna be morning soon.

He spread his arms out like Jesus and flopped onto his bed, right back onto the messy but oddly comforting heap of clothes that smelled like Marlboros, cinnamon gum, hairspray, salty ocean breezes and the kind of flowers that didn’t grow in Indiana.

Within five minutes, Steve was reaching down between his legs again.

Morning finally arrived—or it did in his dreams, anyway. Steve could feel the warm sunlight shining into his room from between his curtains, and he knew he must not really be awake because he wasn’t
overheated anymore. Mercifully, his boner was gone and so was the bothersome feeling in his butt; it was hard to believe that the long, strange night had actually happened.

*Maybe it didn’t… maybe it was all just a really long, crazy dream.*

A large body beside him shifted slightly, making the mattress creak, and Steve felt a heavy arm draped across his stomach; he lightly dragged his fingers across the warm skin, silently marveling at those round, firm biceps.

*Yep, definitely still dreaming.*

He opened his eyes just enough to take a quick peek.

*Where the hell…?*

Steve knew he must still be at least ninety percent asleep because he was dimly aware of how different everything was: he was lying naked on a bed he didn’t recognize—it had clean blue sheets on it and no piles of Billy-scented clothes and pajamas—in a bedroom that was considerably smaller than his own.

*Kill ‘em all*, he mumbled, reading the words on a Metallica poster tacked to the wall.

The bedroom smelled like cigarettes, cologne, hairspray, and… *Billy.*

*Wow, so this is his room? Really?*

“I know it’s not much,” a sleepy voice mumbled beside him. “But it’s not so bad with you in it, sweet-cheeks.”

*Oh my god…*

Billy Hargrove was stretched out on the bed, lying on his stomach with one arm draped over Steve; he was completely naked.

*Whoa.*

Billy shifted closer and nuzzled his face against Steve’s shoulder. “*Let’s just sleep s’more.*”

*I’m gonna wake up soon, I can feel it…. none of this is really happening.*

Billy sighed heavily; his warm breath tickled Steve’s neck. “*Don’t remind me.*”

Steve thought of how stunned he was that morning when Billy had started playing ‘Faithfully’ at church; he suspected he would never be able to hear that song again without thinking about Billy.

*Are… are you gonna remember any of this?*

Billy shrugged. “*Maybe, if I’m lucky.*”

*Oh.*

*“Hey, Steve?”*

*Yeah?*

*“Steve, sweetheart?”*
It was strange enough to hear Billy say his name, but being called ‘sweetheart’ was just plain bizarre.

“Are you up yet, Steve?”

Am I… up?

“We need to get on the road soon.”

Road…? Road to where?

Steve heard a soft click and bolted upright when he realized that his mother was opening his bedroom door.

Shit, I thought it was locked!

Panicking, he reached over to grab his dirty sheet from the floor and flung it over both himself— he was still completely naked— and Billy’s crumpled clothes just as his mother stepped into the room.

“It’s six o’clock, honey, so I hope you’re almost— what in the world?”

Her eyes narrowed with disapproval as she looked around, wordlessly observing the blanket, wet boxers and rain boots strewn across the carpet near his bed.

“Jeez, Mom!” Steve whined as he wrapped the sheet around himself and hastily covered the pajamas, bloodstained shirt and black sweatshirt with his pillow. “Can’t a guy get a little privacy around here?”

“This room looks like it was hit by a tornado, Steven,” she scolded, bending down to pick up his damp t-shirt from the floor and frowning when she saw the slightly squashed pack of Parliaments still tucked in the pocket. “Why are you smoking when you know how terrible it is for you? And why on earth are you leaving wet laundry on the carpet?”

“It… it was raining pretty hard last night,” Steve mumbled meekly as he snatched the things from his mother, trying not to let his bedsheet toga fall off.

At least I don’t have a boner.

“That’s not what I asked.”

She bent down again to pick up the torn, wrinkled poster of Christie Brinkley.

Oh, crap!

Steve chuckled self-consciously and yanked it from her hand. “I’ll take that, thanks.”

“I really hope you got some packing done yesterday.”

“Packing for… sorry, packing for what?”

His mother closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose like she was trying not to lose her temper. “For heaven’s sake, Steven, please tell me you’re just pulling my leg.”

Steve stood there wrapped up in the sheet, feeling the cogs in his brain spin for almost five seconds before something clicked and he finally remembered the vacation his parents had planned for spring
“Oh, shi— I mean, shoot! That’s today? Really?”

“Yes, really,” his mother said impatiently. “Honestly, I don’t know where your mind goes, sometimes. How could you forget about our special vacation?”

Steve didn’t need his mother to scold him; he already felt like a complete moron most of the time without her help. Everything made sense now: his family was going upstate to Dune Acres for six days and they would be back in time for church on Easter Sunday.

“I’m… God, I’m sorry, Mom.” Steve instinctively reached up to rake his hand through his hair, which resulted in the sheet slipping off one of his shoulders.

As he scrambled to wrap it around himself again, his mother rolled her eyes and turned to leave.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before, Steven… remember, I used to change your diapers. Just hurry up and get dressed, okay? And don’t take too long packing— all you really need is a few changes of clothes and a toothbrush.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“Oh, and don’t forget to bring a sweater; it can get pretty chilly up by the lakeshore at night.”

“When do we have to leave?”

“Pretty soon, so scoot! Your father wants to be on the road by six-thirty or seven… it’s an awfully long drive. Now, I’m going downstairs to make some coffee.”

She shut the door behind her and Steve groaned wearily.

Well, that was awkward.

He wadded up the sheet, which still had some clear, sticky spots on it from the night before, and shoved it deep in his laundry hamper. Worried that his mother might barge into his room again, he put on a clean pair of underwear, jeans, and a polo shirt. His body felt strangely sore; the small of his back, in particular, hurt— presumably from being arched more than it ever had before— and his hips ached like he had been hula-hooping all night.

I might be turning into some kind of freaky sex addict, but at least I got a workout, he thought wryly as he dragged his old Boy Scouts duffel bag from his closet.

“Don’t forget to bring a sweater,” his mother’s nagging reminder echoed in the back of his mind.

Even though he owned at least twenty sweaters, cardigans, puffy down vests, jackets, and coats of various styles and colors, he had a sudden urge to put Billy’s black Metallica sweatshirt in his bag. There wouldn’t be a single soul who recognized him in northern Indiana, he reasoned, and he was almost positive that neither of his parents would notice or care if their son expressed a sudden interest in heavy metal.

It’s just for this week… I’m definitely gonna give it back the next time I see him.

Steve wasn’t sure how to feel about the fact that he wouldn’t see Billy again for a whole week (or six days, perhaps, if he decided to show up at church on Easter Sunday).

I shouldn’t give a damn, obviously, but… shit, I dunno.
He found the Metallica sweatshirt under his pillow and held it up to his face, briefly letting himself breathe in the familiar, soothing smell before stuffing it in the bottom of his duffel bag.

*After the crazy night I had, I bet I’ll never be able to look him in the eye again.*

Half an hour later, it was time to leave. Steve’s appetite had returned and after he finished packing, he wolfed down two bowls of Froot Loops, a banana, and an English muffin slathered with butter. His father had just finished loading up the car— his beloved blue ’72 Range Rover that was kept in the garage under a tarp most of the time— and his mother was in the passenger seat, double-checking the contents of her purse.

“Come on, Steve!” she called out the window, “We want to get to Dune Acres while there’s still plenty of daylight left.”

“Yeah, okay,” he grunted as he wedged his bag into the trunk. “Crap! I think I forgot my Walkman… I’m gonna go grab it, okay?”

His mother sighed. “Sure, honey. Just make sure you lock up when you come back out. And please don’t say ‘crap’. ”

“Sorry, Mom!” Steve called over his shoulder as he jogged back up the driveway.

He found his Walkman on a coffee table in the living room and paused, struck by a sudden thought.

*His number might be in Dad’s study.*

“God, this is stupid,” he muttered as he hurried down the hallway. “What the hell am I doing?”

He hardly ever ventured into this part of the house, which he considered his father’s exclusive domain.

*I bet Billy would say something snotty as hell if he found out our house has a library.*

Steve strolled quickly through the large room, which smelled like potpourri and paper. There were at least a dozen bookcases crammed with boring books about things like theology and Christian history. For as long as Steve could remember, the library had felt stuffy and unwelcoming; when he was younger, he used to imagine the dull, heavy books glaring down at him from their lofty shelves— “You’ll never read us,” they seemed to sneer. “Go back to your comics and dumb magazine articles.”

At one end of the library was an adjoining study where Mr. Harrington would sit at his large mahogany desk to look at real estate paperwork or write his sermons. It was on that desk that Steve quickly found what he was looking for: a Rolodex.

Just as he hoped, there was a card for the Hargrove family under ‘H’ with an address and phone number written in blue ink. It only took a few seconds to find a spare sheet of paper and one of his father’s old-fashioned fountain pens, but Steve’s hand was shaking so much he had to cross out his first two attempts at copying the phone number.

*Calm down, for Christ’s sake… nobody’s here, and it’s not like I’m writing him a goddamn love letter or something. It’s just a stupid phone number. Just ‘cause I’m writing it down doesn’t mean I’m actually gonna call him.*
“Alrighty, then,” he said when he finally managed to scrawl the seven digits legibly, folding the paper into a small square and shoving it deep in his pocket.

He hastened back through the house, realized that he had forgotten the Walkman on his father’s desk, ran back to grab it, then locked the front door of the house and tried his best to look innocent as he climbed into the Range Rover behind his parents. His mother twisted around in her seat and reached over to touch his forehead.

“You sure you’re okay, sweetheart? You don’t feel nearly as feverish as you did yesterday, but you’re still a little flushed—”

“I’m fine, Mom,” Steve insisted irritably as he shoved the Walkman into his backpack. “Can we please just go?”

“Say no more,” his father said cheerfully as he switched on the engine and pulled out of the driveway. “Off we go— adventure awaits!”

Jeez, he’s so corny.

“Thank goodness that rain we had last night stopped,” his mother remarked, putting on her sunglasses. “I hope we get plenty of good weather at the beach.”

His father turned on the radio to a local Christian music station, cranked up the volume and began singing along.

“Great is the Lord, he is holy and just, by his power we trust in his love! Great is the Lord, he is faithful and true, by his mercy he proves he is love!”

Here we go...

Pastor Harrington caught his son’s eye in the rearview mirror and winked. “Oh, c’mon, buddy, don’t make me sing all by myself— it’s one of your favorites!”

“One of your favorites, you mean,” Steve muttered under his breath, quiet enough that he couldn’t be heard over the radio and his father’s enthusiastic baritone.

“Great is the Lord, and worthy of glory— I can’t hear you, Steve!— Great is the Lord, and worthy of praise…”

Steve slumped down in his seat and stared moodily out the window as they drove out of Loch Nora and headed for the highway. His mother had brought him a pillow to use in case he wanted to take a nap; he was tempted to put it to use— he was exhausted, after all— but he was also worried about having a continuation of the crazy dream he had the previous night. What could possibly be worse than getting a boner in the car while his parents were right there, or moaning a certain someone’s name in his sleep?

The humiliating thought made him reconsider the folded piece of paper in his pocket. He rolled down his window and held it outside, pinching it tightly between his fingers and watching it flap in the breeze like a tiny white flag.

Just let go of it… you weren’t seriously gonna call him, anyway… just let go.

His fingers wouldn’t release the paper, though, and his hesitation was punctuated by his mother’s voice, raised sharply to be heard over the music.
“Steven Gabriel Harrington! I hope you’re not about to throw that out the window; we raised you better than that.”

“Sorry, Mom,” he mumbled, quickly stuffing the little paper back in his pocket.

“Whatever it is, you can hang onto it ’til the next time we find a garbage can… there’s no excuse for littering.”

Steve rolled his window back up. “I said I was sorry.”

But his mother hadn’t heard him— she was already preoccupied with stuffing pink foam plugs in her ears and fluffing up her own pillow.

*Wish she’d brought some earplugs for me, too. Is Dad gonna listen to Jesus music for the whole trip?*

Fortunately, Steve had something even better than earplugs; he pulled his Walkman out of his backpack, put on the headphones, pressed ‘Play’ and… nothing. The batteries were dead and he hadn’t thought to bring any extra ones.

“Terrific,” he sighed, tossing the Walkman onto the empty seat beside him. “That’s just absolutely terrific.”

“What’s absolutely terrific, Steve?” his father asked cheerfully as ‘Great Is the Lord’ ended and a new song began.

“Nothing, Dad… nothing at all.”

It was going to be a very, very long drive.

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Chapter End Notes

Recommended listening: ‘The Killing Moon’ by Echo & the Bunnymen, of course. There are many recordings of ‘Fever’ but the one on my playlist is by The Cramps.

- If you enjoy reading author’s notes, esp. rambling ones written in the middle of the night, you’ve come to the right place, my friend.

- I admit that after season three dropped and we were collectively reeling with feels and disappointment and the urge to throw things and sue the entire ST writing team, I was worried that the Harringrove fandom would stagnate and plummet in popularity. But nope! I have been absolutely floored by the surge in kudos, comments, bookmarks, and follows on Tumblr— I feel blessed, valid, valued, and simply spoiled rotten. Thank you (yes, YOU) for the part you play in stubbornly refusing to let this fantastic ship wither and die.

- Speaking of Tumblr, if y’all aren’t following me yet and would like more ST/Harringrove content on your dash, I’m @stranger-ships

- I just noticed that it’s been a long while since I a.) used a quote at the beginning of a
chapter that isn’t just a relevant song lyric or b.) limited myself to just one song rec in the end notes or c.) limited my song recs to stuff that was actually released during or before 1985. Oops, hope nobody minds. I’m pretty whatever about it, personally.

-I did a little Reddit research on urination while erect (as one does) and it seems to vary between men, with some finding it next to impossible and others able to pee just fine as long as they bend at the waist to put pressure on the bladder (plus the added bonus of not spraying piss on the bathroom wall/ceiling).

-One of my readers asked me about including other characters more (specifically, the kids) and I think I’ve figured out a way to accomplish that in a way that feels organic. I’m excited about it.

-Speaking of my lovely readers, many have asked about when Billy is going to find out Steve is an omega. The short (and probably underwhelming) answer is: not soon. A longer explanation would have to get into all the contributing factors here: a general lack of common knowledge within the alpha/omega “community” and a pervading assumption that men can’t be omegas, Billy and Steve being kept apart by forces beyond their control (*cough* Neil) for their first (and possibly second!) heat/rut, and Steve being an adorable dumbass who has even less information about it all than Billy does and thus arrives at some comically stupid conclusions about what’s going on with his body (“I have the flu” and “It must be jizz” lol). Mr. and Mrs. Harrington have a lot to do with why Steve knows so little and that’s going to come up later.

-There’s a “1985 Downy Commercial” you can watch on YouTube if you want to know what Steve thinks he looks like, huffing Billy’s clothes XD

-If anyone cares, the song Steve listens to (and then turns off) in his car at the beginning of the chapter is ‘Obsession’ by Animotion

-I don’t plan to incorporate any recent ST material because season three really let me down and I don’t care about the supernatural elements or the confusing/im plausible Russian stuff, BUT… Season 3 did inspire me to write an outline for a (hopefully) very cute Fourth of July chapter. Not sure yet whose PoV it will be from but it will be adorable as fuck and nothing bad will happen and nobody will die! Just the Independence Day shenanigans we deserve: eating way too much watermelon and hot dogs, getting buzzed on ice-cold Budweiser, running around with sparklers, listening to ‘Born in the USA’ on blast, and possibly climbing up onto the water tower to watch the fireworks and make out. Sound good? Anyway, that’s many chapters away; we’ve gotta work our way through April, May, and June, first. Don’t worry, I promise Billy will have fucked Steve multiple times by the time the July 4th chapter rolls around. Oooh, our boys are gonna have such a good summer!

-Next chapter we’ll see how Billy’s first rut went ;-)

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