**songbird**

**by** [justaluckybug](https://archiveofourown.org/users/justaluckybug)

**Summary**

It’s January 15, 1985. Max is in Hawkins, Indiana, 2,082 miles from Santa Monica, and in five hours she’ll be fourteen years old. At fourteen, you can be tried as adult. She knows because Billy’s told her, so many times.

It’s January 15, ninety-five days since the worst thing she’s ever done, but there isn’t any statute of limitations on that.

(Or, Max is miserable, Billy's in danger, and Steve just wants to help. A take on why Max and Billy moved to Hawkins in the first place, featuring too many 80's songs and also a love story, maybe two.)

**Notes**

So... I was watching season two and there's that scene where Billy and Max are fighting in the car about whose fault it is they had to move to Hawkins... and this fic hit me like a ton
of bricks. I'm not going to pretend that it's coherent because it probably isn't - I think this might just be the most self-indulgent thing I've ever written, and that's saying something.

As a disclaimer - this fic is more canon-adjacent, a just off center AU where Billy is more sympathetic, less racist, etc, and gets the redemption arc we all deserve.

All this to say that I wanted to write a fic delving into Max and Billy's background and relationship. So, this is Billy/Steve (and there's plenty of that coming up) but it's also a sibling fic too. And it's an excuse for me to reference every 70/80s song I love, so there may or may not be a playlist with every song referenced.

Last note – this very first scene (the main idea of it) is blatantly stolen from a book called Broken Soup that I read when I was 11 and never got over. Jenny Valentine, if you're reading this, I'm sorry - huge fan.

Okay, enjoy.

See the end of the work for more notes.
A Case of You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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\[I've \text{ had a life spent chasing}
\]

what my heart couldn’t name.

Love, you fan that flame.

Oh, my dear sister, you’re the fire in the field,

my other hand on the wheel.

And I will be your songbird, I will sing a lie for you.

And if we forget the melody, we’ll write another tune.

-“Songbird,” by Cory Chisel and Adriel Denae

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Part I: Max

Just before our love got lost you said, “I am as constant as a northern star,” and I said, “Constantly in the darkness, where’s that at?”

Max hates Joni Mitchell. Hates her stupid whine and her ugly, dripping sadness seeping into everything.

On the back of a cartoon coaster, in the blue TV screen light, I drew a map of Canada.

Joni’s hurt is too sharp to curl up in, too awful to just throw on, on a Tuesday night with nothing better to do.

Oh, you are in my blood like holy wine, you taste so bitter and so sweet.

If she could, Max would throw the tape and the whole deck into the quarry or burn it in the backyard in the middle of the night where no one could see.

She usually tries not to listen, tries to tune Joni out and think about homework or Lucas or whether El really likes her now or if it’s a lie to make the boys feel better. She tries not to listen, and sometimes it works, until the part where Joni says,

I met a woman, she had a mouth like yours, she knew your life, she knew your devils and—

And then there’s a clicking-shuffling sound, like someone’s hand over a mic, and then a dumb, whiny, baby voice says,
Jaaack. That’s my tape.

More shuffling. A short, small laugh that she has to strain to hear. Then Jack says,

Sorry, Max.

And then Joni wails again, *I could drink a case of you darling, still I’d be on my feet, I would still be on my feet.*

Max punches the stop button and breathes in angry, cold Indiana air. Breathes in and out, in and out, hugging the tape deck to her chest, its stupid, kiddy red handle digging into her chin.

She had a real one, once, a grownup one with sleek, square edges, but it got wrecked, and now Max just has this one, stupid Fisher Price with big baby buttons. It works though, and *Blue* works too, which is the real miracle. The tape had been in her old tape deck when it got all smashed and Max was sure *Blue* would be cut up too, except, when she heaved her body up into the dumpster and dragged it out, Joni was spotless, plays perfect even now (as perfect as her stupid whiny voice can get).

And Jack is still there, right in the middle, his quiet laugh and *sorry, Max.*

Max scrubs her face with the sleeve of her jacket and huddles closer around the tape deck.

No one’s home, Mom and Neil out on some sort of awful “date night” joke, and Billy wherever the hell he goes when he’s supposed to be watching her and isn’t, which is good-riddance anyway. She could listen to the tape inside if she wanted, at her window maybe, which looks out onto the street, so she could still see if their cars pulled in.

She pushes her heals into the frozen ground until her back is snug against the shed wall, keeps pushing until it creaks. It’s just better out here.

When her lungs are aching with the cold, she shoves the stupid, giant rewind button, punches play when she knows it’s the beginning.

Joni wails into the frigid night.

*Just before our love got lost you said, “I am as constant as a northern star.”*

It’s January 15, 1985. Max is in Hawkins, Indiana, 2,082 miles from Santa Monica, and in five hours she’ll be fourteen years old. At fourteen, you can be tried as adult. She knows because Billy’s told her, so many times.

It’s January 15, ninety-five days since the worst thing she’s ever done, but there isn’t any statute of limitations on that.

Sorry, Max, says Jack from the tinny, plastic speakers.

Sound travels farther out here in Indiana, something about the cold in the air, maybe, or the things Max knows went on in the lab nearby. Either way, Max hears the livid roar of the Camaro with plenty of time to bolt back to the house, shove Fisher Price and Joni and Jack all back behind the Barbie playset in her closet that no one (even her) has ever touched, before the front door bangs open and then shut.

Max breathes shallow and soft as the heavy bootsteps get closer and closer, but Billy doesn’t pause at her room. The slam of his door rings out like a gunshot moments later.
She counts down from a hundred and tries to make her heart settle. Around the thirties she thinks she hears Jack saying, *sorry, Max*, but it’s just the wind whipping through a tree outside.

The next day The Party (minus El) are all waiting around her locker, fighting about something, loud and getting louder. Mike and Dustin are the most vocal, shouting something about balloons and promises and *Goddammit, Mike, I told you a million times, how did you fuck this up?*

“I was in charge of the *cupcake!*” Mike yells as Max gets closer.

“No,” Dustin shouts back and flings a wayward arm towards Will, who ducks just quick enough to get out of the way. “*Will* was in charge of the cupcake, *asshole. You* were in charge of *balloons!*”

Will *is* holding a cupcake (red velvet, looks like), carefully in two small hands, like it’s a baby bird.

“Guys,” says Max, but it’s hard to hear over all the shouting. Will’s the only one who seems to notice, and he gives her one of his *shy-boy* smiles, which usually makes her nervous but isn’t so bad today.

“Guys,” she tries again, and this time Lucas hears, his eyes lighting up when he sees her. She ignores the stupid tumble of her dumb heart and focuses on the two boys still screaming, making every other kid in the hall turn and stare. At some point a teacher’s gonna notice all the yelling and that’s not something Max wants to deal with today.

“Hey, *idiots!*” she shouts. Dustin whips around to face her while Mike scowls and hugs his arms to his chest. He still doesn’t like her much, which is whatever, fine. As Dustin’s mouth hangs open in cartoon surprise, Max smirks and says, “Can I have that today, or do I have to wait till I’m fifteen?”

“Max!” says Dustin, all smiles now. “Duh, yeah, of course. *Will*, the cupcake.” And then they’re all bumbling over each other, trying to offer her other *things* they’ve got – not just the cake, but a home-made card (from Lucas) and a small model car (“It’s the one from Mad Max, get it?” from Dustin) and no balloons (“*God dammit, Mike!*”) but that’s okay, because she’s not, like, five.

It’s all pretty great and also one of the nicest things they’ve ever done. So, hours later, after the arcade and the slurpies and the movie night at Mike’s, when Dustin asks, “We did good, right, Max? I mean, come on, you can admit it, best birthday ever, right?” Max just laughs and says, *yeah, definitely, thanks, guys, really.*

It’s easier than saying anything close to the truth. That fourteen’s never gonna fit her right, no matter how much free sugar’s involved. That she’s had a lot of birthdays and they haven’t all been great, but the best one still isn’t this, even if she is tucked next to Lucas in the warm dark of Mike’s basement, the air smelling like candy and buttered popcorn.

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“Best birthday ever, right, Max?”

It sort of was, with the weather just right and Billy puking his guts out in a bush nearby cause he couldn’t handle Space Mountain.

Jack grinned up at her from where he was still sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk. He’d fallen there when Billy first turned from shaky pale to green, howling with laughter as Billy lost every one of the hot dogs he’d stuffed in his mouth before the ride.

“It better be,” said Billy between gross, heaving breaths, his head still bent toward the leaves. “Only cost you, like, an arm and a leg.”

Max hadn’t really thought about that till now, but there was a reason she’d never been to Disneyland before, even though she’d lived forty minutes away her whole life.

“Oh,” she said, the beaming feeling of spending a whole day with Jack dimming a little. “I can pay you back—”

“Shut up, Bill,” said Jack and stood up to tower over Max like normal. He tugged on one of her braids that Billy said make her look like Pippi Longstocking. “It’s a present, Max, okay? I can spend my money any way I want.”

“But, it’s too much—”

“It’s not. Really. You only turn thirteen once, right? Gotta do it in style.” He tipped his sunglasses back over his eyes and wiggled his eyebrows till she laughed. Jack was good at that, looking cool, even wearing denim on denim like a dope, and making her feel better when Billy was being a jackass.

“Hey,” said Billy, finally making his way back to them. Jack dug a water bottle out from his bag and handed it to him without a word. Billy took a swig and spit it out like the animal he was, right on the pristine red brick.

“Should I be worried,” he went on after wiping his mouth with his shirt. “You guys gonna elope, or what?”

“Man, you’re really looking to get it today,” said Jack, shoving Billy a little. It wasn’t like Neil did, though, late, late at night, not like he said sometimes, sharp and ugly even muffled by her bedroom wall, you’re really looking for trouble today, aren’t you, boy?

Jack said it the way he and Billy were always talking, like a joke was sitting right below the surface but only they knew the punchline. When he pushed Billy, it was just a little, and his grip on Billy’s shirt was loose.

They were good at this by now, this dumb thing they did in places with too many people looking on. Jack was taller than Billy by a lot (Billy was always saying how he’d catch up one of these days, but Max didn’t think so. Neil was pretty short, too) so it was easy for him to throw an arm around Billy’s shoulder, all seemingly rough, to pull Billy’s head in close like he was gonna give him a noogie.

Max knew how it must’ve looked to the Mom glancing over at them, shuffling her kids closer to her side – two boys a little too old to be at Disneyland, with beat-up shoes and secondhand jackets, eyes a little too sharp. It looked like trouble to the attendant shifting uneasily behind the burger counter. Jack leaned down to whisper something in Billy’s ear, maybe a threat.
But Max, only a foot or two away, could see that Jack’s lips didn’t really move much, just rested slightly on the space behind Billy’s ear. Billy put a hand on Jack’s chest like he was gonna push him off, gripped his shirt tight in a fist like he was gonna throw him, but he never did.

Max turned away to see if there was a map nearby or maybe if she could convince Jack to buy her some of those Mickey ears. She scratched at her arm, scuffed her shoes into the bricks, and didn’t turn back around till she felt a tug on her shirt.

“Come on, Maxine,” said Billy, his cheeks pink now instead of green. “Let’s do Space Mountain, again.”

“What,” she said, the churning feeling she got when they did that stuff making her mean. “Like you can handle it?”

“Oh man,” Jack laughed and put one giant hand on her head, shook her like a soda can. “She’s got your number, dude.”

“I’m sure,” said Billy, rolling his eyes. He tugged on Max’s other braid. “Pick something, then, smartass, we don’t have all day.”

Except they did, sort of. It was dark when they piled back into the Camaro, and for once Max didn’t even mind sitting in the back. Billy let Jack pick the music (“But not any of that Bonnie Tyler crap, Jesus, man”), which was nice cause she and Jack liked the same songs. The Mamas and the Papas sang *California Dreamin*’ as Max pressed her sun-warmed cheeks to the cold glass and watched the lights blur all the way back to Santa Monica.

She took her Mickey ears off when they got to Jack’s place, for something to do. Both Jack and Billy got out like always, even though Billy didn’t really need to. It’s not like he had to walk Jack to the door like he was some girl. Max rubbed her thumb over the cheap Mickey patch and didn’t look out the window until her car door squeaked open.

“Get in the front, Maxine, I’m not a fucking Taxi service.”

She slammed the passenger side door a little harder than she should, but Billy didn’t say anything. He never did after they dropped Jack off.

When they got home, Max barely had a hand on the car door before Billy snatched the ears from her lap.

“Billy!” she whined in the way that made her sound like a stupid baby, but she couldn’t help it when Billy was being an *asshole*.

He tossed the ears into the back seat and huffed, like she was the unreasonable one. “You can bring it to school or something, Jesus. But you never went to Disneyland, got it? We were at the pier all day, just you and me.”

“Yeah, whatever.” She kicked the door open with her heal the way Billy hated. He lurched across the console and grabbed her arm. “Stop!” Billy was so *dumb*.

“Promise me, Maxine.” She hated the way his voice got when he said that, and he was *always* saying it, all serious, like the way he said, *yes, sir*, when Neil got sharp and ugly.

“I promise, okay? Let go!”

Billy let go, and Max was out the door before he could ruin the best day of her life with more of his
stupid promises. She was so sick of them building up inside her. She was sick of finding other things to look at.

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It’s June 23, 1985. Two-hundred and fifty-three days since the worst thing Max ever did, except she’s trying not to think like that anymore, not now, with the cold thawed out and the water not so bad even if it is dark and brown with gunk at the bottom.

It’s a good night. All the boys and El and the older kids and Will’s mom and Chief Hopper at the closest thing Hawkins has to a beach, the edge of a lake thirty minutes from town. There’s a bonfire almost dying, and before the sun went down, when everyone was laughing and pushing each other in the water, Lucas whispered in her ear that he really, really liked her. So, it was a good night, at first.

It happens when she’s lying on a towel she stole from Dustin, who’s too busy bothering the older kids over something to notice, and staring at the sky, which isn’t as big as California’s because the trees block most of it, even here by the edge of the lake. Still, it’s not so bad, clearer without all the lights from the pier and more stars than she thought existed.

She’s not thinking about much, still sort of glowing from the thing Lucas said. And then El’s just there beside her in the sand that’s really more like dirt, staring through the semi-dark with her big, solemn, Bambi eyes.

“Safe and warm,” says El in her stutter-stop way, like a baby just learning to talk. Max likes El, mostly, but that doesn’t mean she’s not still creepy, all wide-eyed and too still, especially in the middle of the woods at night.

But, whatever, Max thinks, that is sort of what she’s feeling, if she was gonna be all weird about it.

“Yeah,” she says and hopes that’s the last of it, like maybe El will run back to Mike and leave Max alone to think about Lucas’s voice so close to her ear. But El doesn’t leave, just gets more still, if that’s even possible, and puts a hand on her chest like she’s a Victorian widow about to faint.

“I’d be safe and warm,” she says, as if it’s a line from a play she’s quoting, which is just so weird and everything about El is so weird.

But Max just says, “Sure, okay,” because she just got into The Party for real, and she’s been trying really had not to mention the fact that El is so creepy, because if she does she knows Mike will force a revote and make her leave.

El stares and stares with her giant eyes, and Max is seconds away from calling the others, trying to get some backup over here, when El says,

“Who is Jack?”

Which doesn’t make any sense, because she doesn’t know anything, barely knows how to read, and definitely doesn’t know anything about Max, since they just met. There’s no way she could know about Jack because Max has never, ever said his name, not ever, not here in Hawkins, Indiana.
She’s thinking about how she hasn’t heard that name out loud in two-hundred and fifty-two days, and then things go a little grey around the edges. Something in Max goes sideways, stuck, like Will says, between two worlds. It’s so easy, suddenly, to slip back into thirteen-year-old Max, who didn’t know shit, just a stupid little girl who doesn’t know shit about the real world.

One second she’s flat on the towel in the dirt and the next she’s up, two hands gripping El’s shoulders, hard, hard enough to leave red finger marks that’ll probably turn blue. She knows because Billy’s gripped her like that, too, is gripping her now with his shaking hands, so, so pale, from the anger and maybe something else, screaming, don’t you say that, don’t you—

“—say his name, you keep his name out of your mouth!”

El’s eyes are so wide, but not scared, just confused, like Max is a word she doesn’t know yet.

“Jack?” El says again, and—

Billy is red, red, red, his hands and his face, plus there’s blood on his shirt like he just left a fight, and Jack’s gonna be mad about that, probably, except Billy’s eyes are red too and maybe that’s not from a fight, but something Max did, something so bad her bones don’t really get it yet, something so bad it hasn’t sunk in, just the feeling that she shouldn’t have done it, she really, really shouldn’t have done it. Billy’s not done yelling, Max thinks maybe he won’t ever stop, I’ll kill you, you think I won’t, I’ll do it, don’t say—

“—his name ever again, don’t you dare—”

A whoosh in the air and heavy thump like the time she fell back, flat, into the public pool and Billy had to fish her out from the bottom cause her lungs forgot to work. It hurts in a distance way, but all Max can see are the endless, too-stark Indiana stars stretching all into the trees. Voices start bleeding on her like Joni’s bitter wine.

“What the fuck was that? What was that, what the fuck—”

“Dustin, shut up, man—”

“You’re telling me to shut up right now—”

“Guys, be quiet, holy shit, someone go check on her—”

“I’m not going, she’s crazy, she’s gone rogue, dude—”

“Max? Sweetheart, can you hear me, can you sit up, Max—”

There’s a hand on her shoulder but it’s not so hard this time. She thinks for a second, maybe, because no one’s called her sweetheart in a really long time, like, two-hundred and fifty-three days at least, so maybe El killed her, which is really okay.

But then things start getting a little less blurred, and it’s just Will’s mom, all dark eyes and concern, her face gold-yellow from the fire still dying out.

“Are you with us, honey?”

There are other faces in the dark, too. Max can see the edges of Lucas and one of the older kids, Steve, maybe, fading in and out with the dancing shadows.

“Yeah,” she tries to say through her stupid mouth, but she fucks it up like everything else and
stutters, “I didn’t tell,” which is true this time, even if it wasn’t before.

_I didn’t tell, I didn’t, Billy, I swear, I didn’t tell_—just lies crawling out from the animal thing inside her that wanted to live, even though she didn’t deserve to.

“Didn’t tell who, sweetheart?”

She’s not really crying, but her face is cold with something and also hot. She really wishes Fisher Price were here, so Joni could cry instead, that’s how much it hurts to look at all the faces in the dark and know that, after everything, _she scared them_, and to know that _they know_ even though she hasn’t said _a word_ for two-hundred and fifty-two days.

“I never told her that,” she says, fourteen again now, and burning up, a little angry but mostly with _shame_ because, how _fucking embarrassing_, they’re never gonna invite her back again. Still, it’s not fair that— “She just _took_ that from _my brain._”

“El,” says Chief Hopper, all gruff. “We _talked_ about that, remember? That’s a _rule_. No trespassing in people’s heads.”

“Not tress-passing,” says El, slow but fierce, “I was _helping_. Max is my _friend_.”

Which is nice and all and, any other day, Max would be thrilled, and mostly _relieved_, to hear that but it doesn’t seem to matter now that everything’s ruined. They’ll probably have to move again.

“Move?” says El.

“_Stop, _” says Max, because _what the fuck_ were they _just_ saying.

“El,” says Hopper, a warning. And then, after a beat of awkward silence where they all just stare at Max like _she_’s the crazy one, Hopper says, “Okay. Let’s call it a night, huh? Good,” and then he goes to douse the dying flames with a bucket of lake water.

One by one the boys drift away, gathering things or arguing over who’s _supposed to be_ gathering things, until it’s just Max and El again.

“Sorry,” says El, “I pushed you. I _looked._”

“I’m sorry, too,” says Max because she’s really trying to like El, and she’s _really_ trying to do better, here in Hawkins. “For yelling at you and—and grabbing you, like that. Just. Don’t do it again. Don’t _look._”

El nods solemnly and they’re silent as they head back to the group, until,

“But I can _help._”

Max stops walking and El stops too, which is good because they need to sort this out, like, _now._

“You can’t _fix_ this, okay? So, don’t—go looking around in my head anymore, and don’t tell anyone. You want to help me? Don’t tell _anyone_ what you saw,” and then, before she can stop herself, she adds, “Promise me,” the same awful way Billy used to.

“Promise,” says El.

But thirteen-year-old girls aren’t so good at keeping promises. Max _knows_ that.
“Yeah? Well, what about Jack,” Lucas yells, and even with the breath sticking in Max’s throat and her eyes burning and the awful, ugly mean inside making her want to break something, she can still think clearly enough to know exactly who to blame.

It’s August 3, 1985. The Party’s hanging out at Steve Harrington’s house because Dustin sort of adopted him somehow, or maybe it’s the other way around. Either way, it means they get to use Steve’s pool when his parents aren’t home, which is pretty much all the time. Everything was popsicles and cannonballs and zero parent supervision, until Lucas pulled her aside and asked if they could talk.

Somehow in the five minutes since then, they’ve gone from whispered questions to Lucas screaming in her face about things he doesn’t know anything about.

It’s been two-hundred and ninety-three days since the worst thing she’s ever done, two-hundred and ninety-two days since anyone but El has said that name out loud. But no one’s ever said it quite like Lucas does just then, like Jack is something awful and ugly and mean.

Fuck you, Max wants to say, and, you don’t know shit, and you keep his name out of your mouth.

What she says instead, because she’s been trying so hard to be good, and also because her mouth doesn’t always get the words right when she feels like this, is, “What do you mean?”

“Jack’s your boyfriend, right? Back in California, that’s why you freaked out when El said his name at the lake. You still love him, don’t you?”

Max opens her mouth to say something—

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“Jack’s your boyfriend, right?”

“Jesus Christ, Maxine, shut your fucking mouth.” The car behind them honked obnoxiously, probably cause Billy had stopped short at Max’s question, like a dumb drama queen.

“Alright, alright, you stupid fuck,” Billy muttered as the car passed them. He flipped them off before he flicked his gaze back to Max. His hands tightened around the wheel. “You know better than to say that shit,” he said lowly.

Max rolled her eyes. “We’re in the car, Billy. Who’s gonna hear?”

“It’s not about that,” he snarled and turned to look at her for too long, his eyes that scary-wide they got sometimes. Max glanced out the dashboard and tightened her grip on the door. Billy wasn’t watching the road.

“You don’t talk about that, ever, Max.”

“It’s just a question,” Max said, even though she knew she shouldn’t. No good ever came from talking back to Billy when he got like this, but he was such a fucking jerk and he couldn’t push her
around just cause he was older. “It’s not even a big deal.”

“You don’t know shit about what’s a big deal. You’re just a stupid little girl who doesn’t know shit about the real world. You never know who could hear, and also it’s none of your goddamn business, got it?”

“Billy—”

“I don’t want to hear another word out of your mouth, unless it’s ‘I got it, Billy.’ So, do you get it, Maxine?”

“Billy—”

“Do you get it?”

“Billy, watch the road!”

Billy swerved into the other lane just in time to keep from rear-ending the minivan in front of them. They were silent for the next three miles or so, and then Billy said, “I’m serious, Max. Don’t ask that shit again.” Something in the way he said it that time, something like yes, sir, and promise me, made her say, “Fine. Whatever.”

So, Max never asked again. It’s not like she didn’t know the answer.

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It’s not true, it isn’t ever going be true, but Max doesn’t care if Lucas thinks that, not really, what matters is—

“Who told you that,” she says, even though she already knows. She doesn’t like the way the words come out, dead-like, the way Billy talks at home, now, nothing left inside.

“Mike,” says Lucas, “And El told him, so I know it’s true, she’s a mind-reader.”

“El said—”

“She said you loved him still, and, like, missed him and everything. So, what are you doing with me if you’re in love with some other guy? That’s not fair to me, you know? Like, maybe we shouldn’t even be together if that’s true.”

Sometimes when things get too insane to be real, Max can sort of leave her body for a little while, like flying in a dream, a ghost trip. The problem is, enough of her gets left behind that she still walks around and talks and everything, she just doesn’t remember it so well after. It happened that night with demodogs, the night Billy almost killed Steve. She remembers watching herself grab the needle, remembers screaming and not much else.

She doesn’t know why it’s happening now. There’s no real danger, just Lucas knowing things no one’s allowed to know. They’re just in Steve’s kitchen, the other boys supposedly in the pool, but no doubt leaning against the swinging door, listening in and hearing things no one’s allowed to know.
So, she floats away, gets trapped around the ceiling fan and can’t do much but watch words come out of her own mouth.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” says the Max still talking to Lucas. “It doesn’t matter, anyway. He’s dead, okay? Happy?”

Lucas looks a little stunned, from what’s she saying but also probably how she’s saying it, that dead-talking again.

“Max, I didn’t—”

“I killed him,” says the other Max, because she never knows when to leave things alone. She’s always saying things she’s not supposed to, giving big, sharp secrets away.

“What?”

“So, maybe you’re right. We shouldn’t be together. I’ll just get you killed, too.”

“Max, wait, what—”

But the other Max is leaving, pushing the swinging kitchen door open and barreling over the idiots on the other side, listening in like she knew they were.

Max is stuck up on the ceiling, so she doesn’t know what happens after that, where that other Max goes. She watches Lucas race out of the room, hears the other boys yelling like usual. Then there’s just silence for a while, the buzzing from the fridge.

She wakes up in her bed hours later. She’s in her pajamas and it’s dark, the only sounds the stupid country crickets outside.

There’s a loud thump suddenly that makes her jump, makes her heart migrate up to her mouth. Something shatters down the hall, glass or porcelain, maybe a plate. Max closes her eyes and tries hard to remember what happened, just in case she did something fucking stupid again, but there’s nothing.

I killed him, she’d said, the last thing she remembers.

In the kitchen, something breaks.

When Max gets up the next morning, everything is spotless like usual, not a throw pillow out of place. Her mom makes breakfast like normal, reminds her to drink all of her milk, like normal. Billy’s seat at the table is empty, which isn’t allowed (breakfast is a family meal), but she doesn’t ask why.
Before you go on about dramas - I remember what it's like to be 14. Let her live.
Broken Wings

Chapter Notes

In terms of updates - basically there may or may not be a Christmas chapter (there is), so I'm trying to space out the chapter updates evenly between now and then. This one's coming a little early, but there will be a new chapter every 6 days or so.

Thank you so much to everyone who commented!! I'm going to go and reply to everyone, but I'm really glad you guys liked it! It made my day reading all the excitement for this - these characters and this AU have kind of consumed by brain, so there will likely be even more fics after this. Stay tuned!

Hope you enjoy the update!

(Also, you can imagine Jack however you want of course, but I've been picturing him as a young Matthew Daddario, for reference)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s October 13, 1985. Columbus Day weekend. Mom and Neil decided to take a trip to Indianapolis to see Aunt Grace, leaving Max under Billy’s careful supervision. It’s Sunday, so they won’t be back till tomorrow.

Max doesn’t care about any of that, really, it’s just—Billy hasn’t left his room since Friday night, as far as she can tell. She knocked a few times but no answer. She tried to open his door anyway last night, but it wouldn’t budge, which means he’s lodged the desk chair under the handle (Neil took his lock away two weeks after they moved in).

It’s been three days and Billy’s door won’t open.

She thinks about calling someone, but The Party’s still uneasy about her since what happened in August, her last ghost trip. She’s tried to convince them it was a joke to limited success. Since she still won’t tell them the truth, they’re at a standstill. They talk to her at school (mostly Will and Dustin, who can’t seem to help it) but she hasn’t been invited to a movie night since.

She could call Chief Hopper, but she’s still mad at El, and besides, she doesn’t want to get the police involved. Billy would be so pissed if he really was fine, and if Neil found out, he’d be—not pleased.

She could call Will’s mom, who offered to help her whenever you need, sweetheart, but that seems like a lot, too. She doesn’t need help. She just—doesn’t know what to do.

It’s been three-hundred sixty-five days since the worst thing she’s ever done, and she’s just worried about what it could mean, that she hasn’t heard anything since Friday. That Billy hasn’t come out to eat or drink or yell at her, or even use the bathroom. She just—doesn’t like what that could mean.

She doesn’t want to worry, because Billy’s the worst. She wants to listen to Joni, to hear Jack say
her name a million times on that dumb tape and just one last time in person, too. She wants to go back three-hundred and sixty-five days, slap a hand over that Max’s mouth, shake her until she can’t speak, and say shut up, shut up, you stupid asshole, you’ll ruin everything, like always.

But none of that’s really possible, so she does the only thing she can think of that is.

“Harrington residence,” says the voice on the other end when Max finally gets the number right. She thought she memorized it, but it took a few tries.

“Steve? It’s Max.”

“Max?” Steve is instantly alert. “Where are you? Is everything okay?”

“Oh. Yeah.” It’s not like she’s in trouble or anything. “I mean, I’m at home. Everything’s—fine.”

“Okay. Uh, Dustin’s not here right now?”

“That’s okay, I’m not—that’s not why I called.”

“Okay. What’s... going on, Max?”

“It’s—it’s dumb, never mind. I’m sorry I called—”

“Max—”

“Billy’s in his room,” she says in a rush before she really does hang up, because Billy’s going to be so mad when he finds out she told Steve about this. “He’s been in his room a really long time, like, days. Mom and Neil aren’t here, and I tried to open his door, but it’s locked, and I tried the window from the outside, but that’s locked too, and the shades are down, so I can’t see inside. It’s just, he hasn’t come out and—I don’t know what to do.”

There’s a long pause on the other line. Max twists the phone cord around her finger and waits for Steve to say it’s not his problem, that she should call Hopper, that she should just wait it out.

But then Steve says, “Okay. I’m coming over, okay? You said your—parents aren’t home?”

“Yeah. They won’t be back till tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’m coming, now, alright? Max?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s good you called, okay? I’ll be there soon. Everything’s going to be okay, Max.”

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“Everything’s going to be okay, Max.”

“What do you mean?”

There was something awful about how still Neil was, his hands flat on the kitchen island. His breaths were measured and even, like he was counting the seconds between them.
He didn’t answer her, just kept going on in that too-steady voice, “Thank you for telling me. You’re a good girl. Your mother raised you right. It took a lot of courage to tell me this.”

The hairs on Max’s arms were standing up. Neil was supposed to get angry. He was supposed to throw things and call Billy a no-good punk, he was supposed to ground him for weeks and take his car away and make him miserable. He wasn’t supposed to be so calm or say so many good things about her all at once.

“Do you know where he is now?” Neil asked.

“Billy?” Max said, trying to stall, to figure out whether to tell the truth or not because something was really wrong. The tether keeping ghost Max from floating away was getting looser every second.

“Yes. Are they together now, Maxine?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“I think you do.”

“Yeah—I think so.”

“Where do they go? Where do they go when they’re together?”

Neil was just going to go get them. He was going to go find them and yell at Billy in front of Jack, probably call him a bunch of names, and Billy would be super mad and say awful things back, and Jack would finally realize what an asshole Billy was. That was all.

“They go to the park, sometimes, the dugouts by the baseball diamond. And, sometimes under the pier, by the hotdog stand.”

“That’s very helpful, Max. Thank you.”

“Are you going to go get them now?”

“I think I better call that boy’s parents first, let them know what their son is up to. What was his name again?”

“Jack. Jack Quincy.”

“Thank you, Max. Why don’t you go to your room for a little while. I just need to make this call.”

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It’s weird to see Steve standing in her living room, like seeing a dog on its hind legs. He doesn’t seem curious about the house, though, doesn’t stop to look at anything. He just walks down the narrow hall and goes right to Billy’s door, even though Max never said which one it was. Maybe it’s obvious. Maybe there’s a mean, glaring aura around it she can’t see. Steve shakes the handle a few times, but it doesn’t budge, just like when Max tried thirty other times today.

With two knuckles, Steve knocks solidly on the door. “Billy,” he says, which is weird, too, because Max doesn’t think Steve’s ever said that – it’s always shove it, Hargrove and fuck off, Harrington
the few times Max has seen them interact.

“Billy, it’s me, Steve. Uh.” Steve glances at Max where she’s just behind him, like maybe he forgot she was there. “Max is here. But that’s it, okay? It’s just you and me and Max. You don’t have to let me in, just, knock or move something in there so we know you’re okay.”

Steve actually presses his ear to the door, and it’s that, more than anything, that makes Max pause. Steve looks really worried, she realizes. Not curious, or frustrated, but really, really worried, as if it were Dustin behind that door.

Steve listens for a long time before he takes a step back, presses a hand flat against the wood and pushes a little, like he’s testing it.

“You’re not going to break it are you?” Max asks, alarmed. Steve would never do that, she doesn’t think, but nothing about this is normal. It feels like, just now, anything could happen.

“No,” says Steve, “Just checking. You said you tried the window?”

“It’s locked.”

“Show me?”

So, Max takes Steve out the back door, around the side of the house, and stops by Billy’s window. The shades are drawn just like when she tried to open it this morning, in a fit of desperation.

Steve doesn’t hesitate, just braces two hands under the wooden slat where the lock would be on the inside. He pushes up hard and shakes it at the same time. After a few tense seconds of nothing but the wind blowing through dead leaves and Steve’s panting breaths, it creaks open an inch, and then another. He lets go of the top part and pushes up from the bottom, until there’s enough space for somebody to crawl through.

“It’s not locked,” he says, “It just sticks, sometimes. The—uh, the wood shrinks and expands with all the cold fronts. My window’s the same.” He tacks on the last part like that’ll explain how he knows just the right way to jimmy open Billy’s window, as if that makes any sense, as if Max is still a thirteen-year-old idiot who doesn’t know shit.

“Okay,” she says, because she doesn’t want to think about it right now. She wants to know whether there’s a living person in that room or not, but she doesn’t want to check herself.

Luckily, Steve says, “I’m going in, okay? You go back in the house, and I’ll open the door from inside.”

So, Max watches Steve shimmy ungracefully through Billy’s window, getting all caught in the blinds, hears him land with a thump and a muffled curse, and then she turns and walks quickly toward the backdoor. She doesn’t want to know why he knows how the window works. She doesn’t want to hear if Steve screams at what he sees.

She goes back inside and waits by Billy’s door. Part of her wants to press her ear against the wood like Steve had, but she also doesn’t care that much. If she did, she would’ve floated away by now.

Even without listening too hard she can still hear vague murmurs, like Steve is talking maybe. At least there’s no screaming, yet.

After endless minutes, the door gives a lurch like Steve’s un-wedged the chair and then it sort of rocks open, sticking a little from being closed three days. Steve slips carefully though the crack
and then shuts the door behind him, so Max can’t get a look inside.

“It’s okay,” he says, which is Max’s least favorite word ever.

“Is he dead?”

“What? No—he’s fine. I mean, not fine, but. Look. Why don’t you—go hang out in your room for a little bit?”

Why don’t you go to your room for a little while.

“No,” says Max.

“Okay? Then, maybe, go watch something? It’s just—I’m gonna try to get him to shower, and he probably doesn’t want—”

“He doesn’t want to see me, I know,” Max finishes, because it’s why he’s been holed up in the first place, because it’s been three-hundred and sixty-five days since she killed the only person Billy’s ever even liked.

“Uh, I think it’s more that he wouldn’t want you to see him like—this, but. Just. Go watch TV, okay, Max, please?”

So Max watches Cheers reruns with the volume up just enough to seem loud, but low enough that she can still hear Billy’s door creak open again and Steve say, “It’s just across the hall, just a few feet, you’ll feel better, I promise, come on, Billy.” Then the bathroom door opens and shuts, and the shower turns on, and Max doesn’t hear much after that. She hears enough to know that the door doesn’t open again to let Steve out. It doesn’t open for a whole episode and a half.

Three hours after Max called Steve in some misguided worry over Billy that’s never going to happen again, she’s sitting on the floor of the living room, leaning against the couch, and watching some MTV Top 20 countdown that she’s already seen. From the floor, because Billy’s taking up half the sofa the way he always does with his stupid boy sprawl. Usually Max can fit at the other end, but Steve’s there now, pretending to watch the TV but really watching Billy the whole time, as if they both can’t tell.

Except, maybe Billy can’t. His eyes are sort of glazed over and he hasn’t complained once about the countdown, even though he always hates half the songs. He doesn’t say a word about it now, just stares at Mark Goodman with blank eyes.

When video four is fading into the hundredth Doritos ad, Max feels a nudge at her back and turns. It’s Steve poking her with his foot. He raises an eyebrow and mouths, hungry?

Max nods and flicks her gaze to Billy, realizes what the weirdness is about. He’s slumped down, asleep, his head an inch away from Steve’s shoulder, their knees touching from where Billy’s sprawled himself all everywhere.

Steve catches her eye and nods like they’re thinking the same thing, even though they really, really can’t be. He jerks his chin at the kitchen, so Max gets up and watches as Steve gently eases away
from the boy who almost beat him to death a year ago. He doesn’t look scared. He looks—

Max goes to the kitchen and opens the fridge, pretends to consider the options even though it’s empty, like it’s been all day. She just needs something else to look at.

“Hey,” says Steve softly.

“There’s nothing to eat,” says Max, not softly at all, because she doesn’t care if Billy wakes up, he should, he’s been sleeping for three whole days.

“Okay. . .” Max doesn’t care if he’s confused at her tone. She doesn’t want to look at him. “Do you want to get pizza? Or, we could go to the diner and bring something back.”

If Billy wants to eat, he should wake up and drive them there, since that’s his job. Max doesn’t say that, though. She stares at the buzzing white bulb in the back of the fridge and breathes in deep.

It’s not Steve’s fault. He’s just a nice guy, who cares about people, which isn’t something she’s used to seeing. So, maybe she’s just got it confused with—other things. He had a girlfriend after all, didn’t he? Mike’s sister. Even if they aren’t together now, it counts.

“Sorry,” says Max. She’s been trying to be better, and she really shouldn’t piss Steve off when he’s one of, like, three Party members still talking to her. And he’s only honorary. “I’m just tired.”

“It’s been a long day.” Steve agrees, like he has any idea how long October 13th even is. “So, pizza? I’m buying.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Is Tony’s okay? I know it’s not Rico’s, but it’s closer, plus I don’t think Rico’s is open this weekend.”

Max stares out the window, but there’s not much to see in the deep, Indiana dark. There aren’t that many street lights out here. She always wonders how many people drive off the road.

“How’d you know about Billy’s window,” she says, and she can’t even blame it on some other Max, really, just on the mean thing still burning in her stomach. Steve’s a nice guy. Maybe he gets that look on his face for a lot of people, but he still knew how to work the window just right.

“It’s like I said, I mean, mine sticks the same way, it’s these old houses, and the cold—”

“You knew which room was his. I didn’t tell you when you came in, but you knew.”

Steve glances at her, and then right back at the road, like a responsible driver. Billy would’ve glared till she looked away first.

“Yeah,” says Steve. “Okay, me and Billy are—friends, I guess. I’ve been over once or twice, while your family was out.”

“When.”
“Um. In the summer, that weekend you went to visit your cousin’s lake house or something.” They went to stay with Aunt Grace’s son, John, who’s sort of rich now that he’s a lawyer. Billy wasn’t allowed to go for reasons Max didn’t ask about. A weekend away from him was a gift she didn’t want to look to closely at. That was in June.

What kind of friends, Max wants to say.

“Billy doesn’t have friends,” she says instead, because it’s true.

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“Billy doesn’t have friends.”

The boy laughed like it was the funniest thing he’d heard all day, even though Max wasn’t making a joke.

“Shut the fuck up, Maxine,” Billy said and flicked his hair out of his face in irritation. It was so stupid long now, it made him look like a girl. Max hoped Neil made him cut it.

“Man,” said the boy, smirking in Billy’s direction. “I like her. What’s your name again – Maxine?”

“It’s Max.”

“Max, cool. Hey, can you keep a secret, Max?”

Max shrugged, so the boy moved away from Billy’s side and sort of leaned down. He was really tall.

“Me and Billy,” he said in a fake whisper, loud enough that Billy could still hear, “we’re not really friends. I just let him hang around me, you know?” He raised his shoulders, all what can you do and smiled like she was in on the secret. Then he stood straight again and finished in a normal voice, “But you seem pretty cool, Max. *Mad Max*. What do you think, *terminal crazy*? You wanna be friends with me?”

He talked weird, like he was famous, like maybe she owed him a favor, but he was letting it slide.

“I don’t even know your name,” she said.

He laughed really big again, and his eyes almost disappeared, all crinkled at the edges. He had a wide mouth, green eyes, and white teeth. He was pretty much the nicest looking guy she’d ever seen outside TV.

“Jack,” he said and stuck out his hand like a politician. Feeling under some spell, she shook it. “Jack Quincy.”

“Fuck,” said Billy, “Are you girls done yapping? We’re gonna miss the *bus*.” Billy had his permit, but he wasn’t old enough to take the driving test yet, and every time he said the word *bus* now it was like a curse word. Max rolled her eyes, and when she looked up Jack was rolling his, too.

“Take a chill pill, Billie Jean,” he said, and then he reached out and *tugged* on one of Billy’s blond, Shirley Temple curls, smiling so wide his cheeks looked ready to split. Max felt a cold start in her stomach, knowing what Billy did to guys who pissed him off, to *anyone* who even *talked* about his
hair, let alone touched it.

But Billy didn’t push Jack or call him a stupid fucker, he just scoffed and dropped his cigarette, crushed it with his boot even though it was barely half gone.

“Whatever,” he said, and he didn’t even say it mean.

Jack must’ve seen some dumb expression on her face, because he looked at her and winked. He’s just jealous, he mouthed, and when he caught Billy staring, he winked at him, too.

“I can feel it in the air, Mad Max,” said Jack, even though he was looking at Billy. “You and me, we’re gonna run this town.”

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“Yeah, well,” Steve says, still looking at the road. “I don’t really have friends, either.”

“What?” That’s not true, and Max would know, because she’s the one whose only friends probably don’t consider themselves her friends anymore. “You have—Dustin. And The Party. And, Will’s brother.” She realizes it’s not a great list and wracks her brain for someone else. “What about Tommy?”

Steve looks away from the road again, so she must’ve really surprised him. “How do you know about Tommy?”

Max knows about Tommy because there were a few weeks last year, right before the second worst night of her life, where Billy wouldn’t shut up about it. It was all King Steve this and King Steve that, and some guy called Tommy H. who was gonna help him bring that Harrington fucker down.

“Dustin told me,” she says, because she doesn’t like thinking about that suddenly, why Billy was so caught up.

Steve sighs, loud, like a girl. “Right. Tommy isn’t really talking to me anymore. And, I’m not talking to him. And, yeah, I’m friends with The Party, but I’m also their babysitter.”

“Lucas is gonna be fifteen in a month,” says Max, because they don’t need fucking babysitters, and she wishes more grownups would get that. Not that Steve’s a grownup.

“Yeah, and I’m nineteen, Max. I shouldn’t even be hanging out with you guys.” Nineteen? That can’t be right. That’s like—old, old. Like, almost twenty, old.

“Billy’s seventeen,” she says. Maybe Steve shouldn’t be hanging out with him either.

Steve’s eyes leave the road again. “Billy turned eighteen in June.”

Max does the math and realizes they’ve been in Hawkins a year now. Billy had to have had a birthday sometime. She never remembers when it is because they don’t do anything special. Max doesn’t think Billy’s ever had a cake the whole time she’s known him.

So, then, “How do you know that?”

“Because we’re—we hang out, I guess. I don’t—sleep, that well, anymore. Sometimes I just drive
around town, you know, to clear my head. I guess Billy does the same thing. We bumped into each other a few times.”

What, Max wants to say, in your cars?

“Jonathan and Nancy are busy a lot with school, and Tommy’s still a dick. You guys are cool, but sometimes I want to talk to someone who was born in like, the sixties, you know?”

She doesn’t. “And you picked Billy?”

Steve shrugs. “He’s not so bad.”

Max wants to say, he almost killed you and he’s only had one friend his whole life and he’s dead, but then Steve pulls into Tony’s Pizza Palace, and that’s not the kind of thing you can say in front of other people.


Max hangs up the phone and goes back into the living room. She checks the bathroom, her bedroom, looks out the window at the backyard, and even opens the front door again to make sure. Steve’s Beamer is still in the driveway, just like the last time she checked, but he’s nowhere in the house.

Last night, after they’d eaten their way through a large pepperoni and watched way too much Cheers, Steve had told her to go to bed, if she wanted, that he’d stay the night to keep an eye on things, if that’s okay with you? I’ll stay on the couch, and I’ll be gone before your parents show up.

When Max got up and didn’t see Steve, she thought he’d left. It was only when she took out the pizza boxes that she noticed the car. It isn’t a big house. It didn’t take her long to check once, twice, and a third time just to be sure.

It’s noon now, and Mom and Neil will be back in an hour.

Max stands in front of Billy’s door and places a hand against the wood like Steve did yesterday, just checking, pushing against it to see if there’s any give. Nothing. She takes one big breath in and turns the handle—if it opens and Billy’s awake, he’ll be so pissed, but considering how much he’s been sleeping the past few days, maybe it won’t be a problem.

It doesn’t matter anyway. The door doesn’t budge.

Max stands there in the narrow hallway of her house and feels like it’s all she’s done for days. This was supposed to be her long weekend, too, and all she’s done is stand in front of this fucking door and imagine what’s on the other side.

She wishes she hadn’t called Steve. She wishes she’d let Billy rot.

She puts her ear against the door and thinks about Steve with his ear against the door, his stupid, worried eyes, and his voice in the car last night when he said, he’s not so bad.
Despite how good she’s tried to be, the ugly, churning thing comes back so easy.

She bangs on the wood with both fists, again and again and again, as hard as she can, and screams, “Get up! Get up! Get up!” until the door swings open. Steve’s eyes are wide with panic.

“What?” he gasps. “What is it, what’s wrong?” It’s only when he realizes that she’s not bleeding or being chased by a demodog that he seems to notice the fury shaking her bones.

“Max—” he starts, but she pushes past him into the room before he can come up with another dumbass excuse.

Billy is a mound of blankets, his stupid blond hair sticking out the top to let her know it’s him. She runs at the bed and uses her momentum to shove at him, hard, and he falls with a satisfying thump on the other side.

“Max, what the fuck!”

At first, she thinks that’s Billy, but it’s just Steve from somewhere behind her, trying to grab at her arm. She dodges him and rounds the bed to get a better look. Billy hasn’t even moved. She yanks the covers off him and—the sound he makes is like nothing she’s ever heard, almost a whimper. She might feel bad about it later, but right then, it just makes her feel good.

She stares at the boy on the ground, his eyes rimmed with purple, his permanently split lip and his tangled hair, and can’t believe, even two minutes ago, she was afraid of him. He’s nothing. She wants to say something smart and biting and awful, she wants words that’ll make him dirt, but there’s a hand on her shoulder before she can think of anything—

“Max!”

Steve looks scared, which isn’t as good. He’s a nice guy. Which reminds her—

“I hope he kills you this time,” she says to Billy.

Then she twists out of Steve’s grip and leaves, slams the door behind her. It rings out like a gunshot, probably heard for miles in the Indiana air.

End Part I

Chapter End Notes

This might be making explicit what (I hope) is obvious, but Max’s feelings around
Billy/Jack's relationship are complicated by her own crush on Jack, and Billy/Steve's relationship is in the shadow of that. But she has also been brought up in a homophobic environment, and that's going to color her thinking, too. She'll learn! None of her opinions are my own ofc, just wanted to make that clear!

Hope you enjoyed!
Chapter Summary

It’s October 14, 1985. Steve stands in Billy’s bedroom, listens as another door slams somewhere in the house, and tries to figure out how his life got to be like this. It’s something he thinks about pretty much once a week, though, so it doesn’t take long for him to get over it.

Chapter Notes

I'm so glad you guys have liked Max's POV so far! She's still here, of course, but I'm really into seeing stories from different points of view, so... onto Part II!

Remember how I said this fic was self-indulgent? Well, we're really in it now, boys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part II: Steve

It’s October 14, 1985. Steve stands in Billy’s bedroom, listens as another door slams somewhere in the house, and tries to figure out how his life got to be like this. It’s something he thinks about pretty much once a week, though, so it doesn’t take long for him to get over it.

He takes another few seconds and then goes to right the chair he’d pushed over trying to open the door. He’d really thought Max was being murdered. He’d thought Billy’s dad had come home, or more demodogs were loose, or another million other life-threatening things. Turns out it was just Max going absolutely fucking crazy. Dustin told him about some total freak out she’d had back in August, but Steve thought he was just being dramatic, because he’s Dustin.

He scoots the chair next to the wall, but on second thought, pushes it back under the door handle. Safer that way. When he notices Billy hasn’t gotten up yet, he walks back to the far side of the room, slumps against the wall and slides down it, wraps his arms around his knees so he doesn’t do something stupid. He really wants to go over there, to fix the blanket that’s tangled around Billy’s legs and make sure he’s still breathing.

But he’s never heard Billy sound like that before, so he just watches the almost invisible rise and fall of Billy’s chest and waits.

Maybe ten minutes later, Billy says, “Fuck off, Harrington,” from where he’s still lying on the ground.

“You’d like that, huh,” Steve says back, which doesn’t really make sense, but the less he thinks
about the things he says, the better chance he has of making Billy laugh. And Billy does, sort of, a weak kind of huff.

This is the part where Billy’s supposed to make some comment about Steve’s way with words, his superior wit, and mad comedy skills, man, you ever think about writing for SNL? But the moment dies and there’s just a heavy silence that grates on Steve’s skin and makes him feel like shit. It’s how he’s felt since he picked up the phone yesterday, since he crawled through Billy’s window and found him like—this.

It’s just—Steve is supposed to be the fucked-up one. When he and Billy started—whatever—over the summer, Steve was the one who jumped at every car that passed, had to have the lights on 24-7, woke up screaming, and couldn’t even be around dogs anymore. Billy was the one who laughed at him and told him to chill the fuck out, Harrington, Jesus, but also the one who changed the lightbulbs when they went out in the middle of night and told probably made up stories about California in a low, raspy voice till Steve fell asleep.

Now, Steve feels like a total asshole. He’s always been bad at this part, which isn’t an excuse, just true. He says the worst things at the worst times, misunderstands even the biggest hints, and is basically the shittiest boyfriend in the world.

Which—doesn’t matter, anyway, because that’s not even what they’re doing. He’s just bad at supporting people, or whatever, and it turns out they can’t both be nutcases at the same time, or else Max might come in and murder one of them. Steve isn’t sure what she meant by that last thing, but it sounded like a threat.

Didn’t Dustin say something about her killing somebody?

That can’t be real. Right?

“I mean it,” says Billy before Steve can go completely off the rails with that train of thought. “Get lost.” Which, fuck him, but also is probably a good idea considering—Steve checks his watch—it’s after noon already.

He really doesn’t want to be here anymore, in this fucked up house, but he also doesn’t want to leave. Not when Billy’s still on the ground like that.

“Get up, man,” he says, instead of something stupid (are you okay, are you gonna be okay, will you come home with me). He doesn’t help him up, just sort of stands there and looks at him the way Billy hates, one eyebrow raised, expectant.

“Shut the fuck up,” says Billy, a good sign. He doesn’t stand, but he sits and presses his back into his bedside table, curls around his knees, and puts his head down on top of them, like just that small movement took the life out of him. His hair is such a mess, even after the shower. Steve’s fingers itch looking at it, he wants so bad just to—

He’d better go.

“I’d better go,” which makes it sound like his idea rather than Billy telling him to fuck off. But he doesn’t just yet. He stares at the chair blocking the doorway and wonders if Billy will have the energy to put it back after he leaves.

“Hey,” he says before he can think about it, because that usually works out for the best. He stands in front of Billy again, who doesn’t look up. “Just, um. Come over? If you want. Later. Or, whenever. Just use the fake rock key, okay?” Billy doesn’t respond, doesn’t even move, which is
perfect, really, cause then he can’t see how badly Steve wants to touch him, just to check that he’s still warm. It also means he hopefully doesn’t see Steve climb awkwardly back out the window and struggle to close it again.

He really is gonna go then, except—Max had been so pale before. Clearly furious, but also shaking, the same way she had that awful night last year, when everything was over, like aftershocks of fear. And even if she wants to kill him, she’s still also one of his kids, so.

He smooths over the dirt outside Billy’s window with his shoe and then heads around to the back, hopes Max forgot to lock door. She did. Steve feels like he’s breaking in when he makes it back inside, the narrow hall leading to bedrooms shadowed and quiet.

Max’s door is firmly shut, so he just knocks and says, “Hey Max, um. I’m going now. So. Just—call me if you need anything. I know you’re mad but, you can still call—okay?” He doesn’t expect a reply, but he still sort of hangs around in the hall for a minute just in case she comes out. She doesn’t.

The house is silent as he drives away, oddly dark even in the brisk October sun.

When Steve wakes up later that night, it’s not because Billy’s in his bed again (he’s gotten really good at getting in without shaking the mattress). It’s because of the dream, the big black empty crawling up and taking Dustin and Billy and Max, too. Everyone, and him last so he has to watch.

He used to wake up screaming, but it’s shifted in the past few months. Now he wakes up reaching out, looking for warmth, cause he’s so fucking cold all the time. Billy lets Steve curl his shaking fingers into his shirt and, then, after a beat, lets him slide his hand just under it, to steal the heat from his skin there. Billy runs hotter than anyone, like he’s got that California sun trapped inside him, like he brought it all the way here to Indiana just to keep Steve warm.

It’s a bad night, probably from Max’s freak out or from being in that house, knowing that’s where Billy gets all fucked-up.

Steve is shaking, which almost never happens anymore, and it must be pretty annoying because Billy puts his hand on top of Steve’s, over the shirt, and says, “Easy,” which he only does when Steve is really losing it.

Maybe he’s really losing it. He just wants more, more warmth and more skin under his fingers and more of Billy’s sleep-thick voice saying easy, easy.

“Please,” he says, which isn’t how this works. Whatever they’ve been doing all these months, it’s built on small, wordless things, just offered. Steve’s always thought that asking would be the end of it, that Billy doesn’t let people take from him, he gives what he wants and nothing more.

But it’s going on three in the morning and, Steve hasn’t slept in thirty hours, and something’s wrong that he can’t fix, and he just wants—

“Easy,” says Billy, “Jesus. Take a breath, Steve, come on. C’mere.” Steve was pretty close already, but Billy gets an arm around him and pulls him closer, right up against his side. Steve curls into him, hides his face in Billy’s neck, behind the curtain of his tangled hair, and it’s so good, warm
and safe. He wants to be that for Billy, his warm, safe thing, but he doesn’t know how.

“Sorry,” he says, because he’s so tired, and he can’t say, sorry we’re both fucked-up but only you know how to help me, sorry I can kill monsters but just not yours.

Billy rubs the shell of Steve’s ear with his thumb. “Did I ever tell you about the time we went to Disneyland?” he says in his low, sleep-rumble. “Max puked up, like, six hotdogs after Space Mountain.”

Billy goes on about the rides and the food and the Mickey Mouse ears Max made him buy, and Steve sinks into his voice, the weird tilt of his vowels, lets everything go hazy again now that he’s warm.

He’s almost asleep but something’s bugging him, some important thing Billy’s supposed to know.


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“Don’t go anywhere.”

Billy was dripping blood down his face and his shirt, all over the counter he was sitting on, and if he tried to leave now he’d just trail blood after him, and Steve would have to clean it up.

“I mean it, man, you’re making a mess. Just stay put, okay?”

“Fuck,” said Billy, “really? Cause I was thinking of going for a run, you know? Maybe whipping up something to eat.” He grinned all wide and sharp even though it must’ve pulled at the cut on his lip.

“Fuck off,” said Steve, and then he went to find the first aid kit. He thought he heard Billy laugh as he walked down the hall, like there was anything funny about this. He was so fucking weird. And now he was in Steve’s kitchen, bleeding into his mom’s fancy guest towel that cost, like, forty dollars, all because this was apparently what Steve did now – babysit preteens and fight monsters and patch up assholes who never thanked him for it afterwards.

Steve was pretty sure if Nancy knew about this, about Billy in his kitchen right now, or all the other times, she’d say he needed to find better a way to deal with your trauma, Steve, there’s no shame in talking to someone. But she was busy with her summer courses and Jonathan, and she didn’t get a say in his life like that anymore, so.

“Hold still,” Steve said later, trying to get the butterfly bandages just right. Billy always squirmed during this part, which made sense, cause Steve had to get pretty close to see and he was pretty much breathing all into Billy’s face. But it wasn’t like Steve was forcing him to show up in the middle of the night all fucked-up, so he could just deal with Steve’s shitty first aid skills.

Billy usually closed his eyes, but he didn’t this time, and it was just—weird. Steve hands were shaking as he fit the bandage over the cut on Billy’s forehead, which bled like a bitch but didn’t seem as bad as Steve had first thought.

The normal silence between them was changing, the crazy blue of Billy’s eyes making the air all
tense. It went on and on, and Billy didn’t shut his fucking eyes, and Steve was getting drunk with it, his limbs too heavy, his blood too hot.

He fit the last of the butterfly bandages onto Billy’s too-warm skin, but he was in some kind of trance, so he couldn’t keep his fingers from rubbing the edges down again and again even though they were stuck already. He was suddenly so aware that his hands were on Billy’s face, that his skin was so hot, and Billy kept looking and looking and not saying fuck off, Harrington, what’s wrong with you, which Steve wanted to hear, to break this thing holding him hostage.

“Billy,” Steve said, because it was the only thing he could think right now, but it just made everything worse. He’d never said that out loud before, not to Billy’s face. It’s not like they were friends.

Billy’s eyes sort of fluttered and Steve’s breath did something weird in his chest. He was thinking this has to be a dream and he’s so warm and who the fuck has eyes that blue, clearly losing it, which is why he reached to fix the curl of Billy’s hair that had fallen into his face, gotten caught on all the blood and bandages. Steve was just thinking it was as soft as it looked, when Billy jerked back like Steve had hit him. His boots banged against the counter, and something metal fell behind him and clanged loudly, and the trance was finally broken.

“Get the fuck off me, Harrington,” said Billy, which was exactly what he should be saying, but it made something ache in Steve anyway.

“Sorry,” he said.

Billy jumped off the counter and shouldered past him, threw the fancy, bloody kitchen towel into the sink and stalked out of the room. Steve was waiting to hear the front door slam, the Camaro roar to life and drive away, so the sudden peal of laughter made him jump. He followed the sound into the living room, hadn’t realized how shitty and cold he felt about Billy leaving till he saw him watching Cheers, his dirty shoes up on the coffee table, making a mess, but still there.

Steve sunk into the other end of the sofa, leaving plenty of space between them. He didn’t sleep anymore, but knowing Billy was here and patched-up and not mad enough to leave made it easy to close his eyes and drift off.

Billy was gone when he woke up hours later, but the TV was still on and there were three different blankets thrown over him, so for once, he woke up warm.

***

It’s November 29, 1985. The day after Thanksgiving, which Steve planned on spending entirely in sweatpants, watching shitty daytime TV, and waiting for Billy to show up.

Instead, he’s parked outside the arcade in the slowly mounting snow, wondering once again how he ended up the designated preteen-driver. It’s just Dustin, today, though, the rest of The Party getting rides from Nancy and Jonathan. So, he’s going to drive him home as fast as legally possible, get back into bed to get warm, and then Billy’ll show up to make him warmer. It’s the perfect plan, until the passenger side door opens, and someone slides in, someone a little too slight and pale and ginger to be Dustin.

“Uh,” says Steve, because he hasn’t really seen Max since she threatened to kill Billy and maybe
him, too. He’s unclear about that still, and it’s not the kind of thing he can ask Billy without ruining the sort of easy thing they’ve got now.

“I told Billy I had a ride,” she says.

“Okay.” They’re just gonna ignore it, then, which is fine by him. “I’m dropping you at home?”

“Drop Dustin off first.”

Before Steve can say something about taking orders from ungrateful fourteen-year-olds, Dustin yanks the backseat door open, already whining, “—called shotgun inside, goddammit.”

“Language,” says Steve automatically, which horrifies him about thirty seconds later, but it’s probably lost anyway as Max says,

“You have to be in sight of the car to call shotgun, dipshit, everybody knows that.” Which is true, but Steve doesn’t like the way she says dipshit, not the good-natured ribbing the boys always do, but with something real and mean underneath. She sounds like Billy, before they were—whatever.

The kids bicker back and forth as Steve pulls out onto the road, and Dustin at least doesn’t seem to notice Max’s stormy mood. Steve gets increasingly paranoid the closer they get to Dustin’s place, though, wondering why Max wanted him to drive her, why she seems so frankly homicidal.

When he slows to stop outside Dustin’s house, he almost wants to come up with some excuse to go in, invite himself to dinner, maybe—it’s not like Mrs. Henderson would turn him away. But Max still needs to get home, and Steve knows very well what can happen when she’s not there on time.

So, Dustin climbs out with a reminder that there’s a party meeting tomorrow Steve, and you’d better show up if you want to keep your honorary status, and then it’s just Steve and Max. It only takes twenty minutes to get to Max’s but it’s going to be the longest twenty minutes of his life if he doesn’t come up with something to say that isn’t, do you still want me dead or are we cool?

Then Max says, “Let’s go to yours,” which isn’t at all reassuring.

“Don’t you need to get home?” Steve knows what happens when Max is late.

“I said I’d be back at four.” The clock on the dashboard reads 2:47.

“Okay. . .”

“I have to tell you something important, and I can’t tell you in front of The Party or Billy or anyone, so let’s just go to yours, okay?”

“Okay,” Steve says again. He’s pretty sure he could take her in a fight anyway, even though she is pretty wily.

Thirty minutes later, Steve is stirring instant hot coco mix into two mugs and wondering, again, how this day got so off course. He’s supposed to be in bed right now, warm, and instead he’s got a pissed-off fourteen-year-old girl in his living room, watching MTV at a near-deafening level and seething.

They’ve been here twenty minutes, and all she’s done is comment on the Christmas decorations Steve’s mom half put up before she left for Monte Carlo—isn’t it a little early? She must’ve lost her nerve about the very important thing he needs to know. That or she’s just trying to make him sweat. Probably the second thing.
Steve’s escaped to the kitchen, but it turns out instant hot coco is ready pretty much instantly, and he can’t hang out in here much longer or it’ll go cold.

“Here,” he says and hands Max her coco. On the TV, Starship sings about a city they built with rock and roll.

They watch the rest of the video, and then two more. Then Max says, “Did Billy tell you about his last boyfriend?”, which is so far from anything Steve was expecting that his mouth hangs open, like an idiot. When Max sees, she rolls her eyes and mutters, “So, no.”

“Max—”

“He didn’t tell you.”

“No, but Max, that’s um. Really something he should tell me, if he wants to. I get that you want me to know, and, like, I appreciate it but—”

“I don’t want you to know so you’ll be jealous or whatever. I want you to know so you’ll stop.”

“Max—”

“You’ll die, okay?” Max nearly yells. The silence after isn’t really quiet, with MTV still blaring in the background. Steve doesn’t know what to do with that, or any of this, so he gets up to shut the TV off even though the remote is right there, just for something to do.

Max drops her mug loudly on the coffee table and hugs her arms to chest, doesn’t look at Steve when she adds, softly, “He’ll kill you, too.”

“Who?” Steve asks, feeling kind of dumb. It’s like a conversation from a dream that he just goes along with because there’s nothing else to do. “Billy?”

Max shakes her head and squeezes herself further into the corner of the couch. Steve doesn’t like looming over her while she looks like that, so he sits back down and almost misses it when she says, “Neil,” just above a whisper.

“What are you saying, Max?”

Teenagers lie all the time. He knows that. They sneak out and they smoke, and they go to parties when they’re supposed to be studying. Max has lied to his face before, probably dozens of times, but he doesn’t think she’d say something like this just to get rid of him, even if she hates this thing he’s got with Billy. As much as he can’t believe her, he doesn’t think she’s lying. She looks really small tucked against the sofa like that.

Max stares at the blank TV screen still buzzing with heat and says, “They were gonna go to San Francisco.”

It’s a conversation from a dream, so Steve says, “Who?”

“Jack was gonna be a teacher, there was this program in San Francisco he really wanted to go to. Billy was gonna go with him even though he wasn’t done with school. He said he’d just get a job or something.”

Jack. El told Mike, who told Lucas, who told Dustin, who told Steve that Jack was the name of Max’s ex-boyfriend back in California. Who she’d killed, apparently. Steve’s getting a better picture of things the more Max goes on, and he really wishes she would stop.
But she doesn’t. “Jack was really smart, you know? He took these classes at the college, for extra credit. He was gonna graduate early, in January, but he didn’t tell anyone because he just wanted to go. They were just gonna go.”

Max is pulling at her hair like she doesn’t know she’s doing it, and Steve doesn’t want to hear any more of this, knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that this isn’t something he’s supposed to know.

“Max—”

“I didn’t want them to go. I just thought they’d get in trouble, like, grounded. I didn’t think—”

“That’s why you told him?”

Max jumps, and Steve is reaching for a weapon, anything, turns to see—

Just Billy, standing in the doorway, his coat dusted with the snow coming down outside. It’s caught all in his hair, which would be kind of nice, except for how he looks like death, like wax, the way he did that day Steve climbed through his window, all the life sucked out.

“Billy,” says Steve, because maybe saying his name will make him look real again.

But Billy’s eyes are trained on Max, who’s sunk even further into the cushions.

“Billy—” she says, too.

“That what you wanted, Maxine?” The taunt in Billy’s tone sends Steve back a year. That’s not the Billy who keeps Steve warm and tells him stories through the night, but the one who smashed a plate over Steve’s head—is that you, Harrington? “You wanted me to spend a few more years in that house, so you told him about us?”

“I didn’t—I didn’t know, I thought—”

“Thought, what? I told you, Max! I told you, over and over—keep your mouth shut. You don’t tell anyone, and then you told the one person who—”

“I’m sorry.” Max is crying silent, awful tears, and Billy keeps stalking closer to the couch in a way that makes Steve afraid of what he’ll do, for the first time in months.

“Billy,” he says again, but neither of them seems to hear. It really is like he’s trapped in a dream, nothing he can do but watch everyone break apart around him.

“You’re sorry?” Billy says, and then he laughs, a chilling thing. “You think that means shit to me? Huh? You think I care that you’re sorry?”

Max changes then, pushes past fear the same way Billy does, straight into fury. Her hands are white, shaking fists. “He was my friend, too!” she yells.

Billy does that thing with his tongue like he’s itching to fight, to feel his knuckles split open on someone’s face. He told Steve once, maybe when he thought he was already asleep, I don’t feel the pain right away, you know, I just get this rush.

“You’re friend?” Billy echoes, low and dangerous. “He only let you hang around because of me. Because you’re my kid sister and I told him to be nice to you. You think he was your friend? You were nothing to him.”

Steve watches as each one of Billy’s words lands like a physical blow, Max’s tears starting fresh
again. He’s got to stop this, but it feels like he’s trapped in honey or amber—one of those bugs Dustin’s got. He can’t move.

“He was my whole world,” Billy says. Steve hears him like he’s behind glass. “And you got him killed.”

Max crumples into the sofa, curls into a ball, and stutters heaving breaths into her arms. Billy watches with blank eyes, a wax thing again, all his fight gone away.

Steve watches, too, and thinks distantly about the day he was supposed to have, how in some universe (Dustin’s told him there are many), there’s a Steve and a Billy watching shit TV and sharing warmth in bed.

Not this one, though. Steve doesn’t really get lucky like that anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Steve climbing out of a window just so Billy doesn’t have to get up? Peak romance.

Let me know what you think!
Love of My Life

Chapter Summary

Steve doesn't know what to do.

(Title of his memoirs, basically)

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for all the feedback and comments! Sorry (again) for not replying yet but I will! Working life is the Worst.

To make up for it, here's a slightly longer chapter. Chapter warning for U.A.Q: an Unrealistic Amount of Queen. (Guess who just saw the new movie?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve pulls up outside Max’s house at 3:58. He had to break a few dozen traffic laws to get there on time, but he had a pretty good incentive.

Max hasn’t said a word since the screaming match, and she still looks a little ragged around the edges, despite all the hot chocolate and Joni Mitchell he let her play on the way over. Steve’s at a loss, never knew what to do when Nancy cried, except hug her, which didn’t always work and definitely doesn’t seem like the way to go with Max.

He doesn’t have a chance to figure it out—she opens the car door, says, “Sorry,” under her breath, and then slams it before he can say a word. Steve stays until she’s safe inside anyway.

He doesn’t speed on the way back. As awkward and terrible as the drive with Max was, he knows the real trouble’s waiting at home.

Steve passes the Camaro parked in its usual spot at the end of the street, but when he pulls up to the house, all the windows are dark. The sun was just setting when he left Max’s and now it’s nearly gone, dipping below the tree line. Steve usually turns the lights on an hour before nightfall, just to be safe, and when Billy’s over, he helps. Guess he didn’t feel like it today.

Steve is nineteen years old, he’s fought literal monsters, but he still falters when the front door
opens into the dark hall. Dustin gave him a flashlight keychain for Christmas last year, maybe a coincidence (but probably not—that kid’s pretty smart), and Steve flicks it on now even though it’s less than two feet to the nearest lamp. He keeps it on, and keeps his back to the wall, as he makes his way through the house, until, one by one, every room is yellow with light and as warm as they get.

He doesn’t see Billy.

He checks again, because it’s a big house and entirely possible they missed each other. But he’s not watching TV, not in the kitchen, or napping in Steve’s bed or the guest room, and he’s not in any of the four bathrooms. Steve checks them all (he finds Billy in bathrooms usually, when he loses him – Steve thinks because they lock).

And then it’s 4:45 and Steve’s standing in his living room, hands on his hips the way Billy always makes fun of him for, at a loss. He has to be here. Steve knows Billy’s self-preservation instincts are, generally, terrible, but even he wouldn’t walk somewhere on foot from here, not with the snow really piling up, with night coming on, and his shitty excuse for a jacket.

Steve circles back to the kitchen just for something to do and that’s when he hears it—a faint rhythm coming from the door by the pantry, the one place Steve hasn’t checked because—Billy’s never been down there, no one goes down there. But the unmistakable sound of distant music is a pretty big indicator that someone has.

He thinks about just ignoring it, pretending he doesn’t notice and watching TV until Billy gets bored of brooding and comes up. But then he remembers how pale Billy was, how small he’d looked when Steve bundled Max out of the house, remembers Billy saying, he was my whole world, and feels like the shittiest person in the entire world. Just, a bullshit boyfriend. That’s Steve. But he doesn’t fucking have to be.

He goes back into the now-lit front hall and grabs a jacket blindly from the coatrack, a third layer just to be safe. He tugs it on as he walks back toward the kitchen, and it’s only passing the hallway mirror that he notices it’s Billy’s jacket, the varsity one he hates but wears cause it’s his warmest.

It smells like the Camaro, like motor oil and fast food, and Billy’s hair, the cheap shampoo he uses. Steve buttons it up all the way and pulls the sleeves down over his fingers. When he turns the handle of the basement door, he can’t feel the cold of the metal, just soft, worn cotton.

One of the worst parts about the basement (there are many) is that the bulb above the stairs has gone out, and it’s too high and awkward for Steve to reach. He’d never bother even if he could, because no one comes down here, but it means the only light for the first eighteen steps is the dim beam from his keychain, which is the fucking worst. If it weren’t for his nose tucked into the collar of Billy’s jacket, Steve would be losing it.

He counts each step and he’s almost at twelve before his brain pushes past the fear and adrenaline enough to recognize Queen blaring from the room below. Which—isn’t shocking by itself, exactly, because Queen’s got some hits, but the harmonizing of oh, you’re making me live echoes in the huge, empty space. It makes Steve actually pause on the steps and stop there, in the dark. Billy wouldn’t be caught dead listening to You’re My Best Friend, and Steve has a horrible thought that maybe it’s not Billy, but someone else waiting at the bottom of the steps.

He really wishes he’d thought to grab his bat, but it’s upstairs like usual (next to the bed), so he grips the mini flashlight tightly in one hand, the railing in the other, pictures Billy pale, shaken—needing him, maybe—and keeps going.
Basement’s not really an accurate term, even though that’s what it is, the floor beneath the first one. His mom calls it the billiards room, but that’s too pretentious even for Steve. Up until last year, he and Tommy mostly hung out down here, because it’s private, has its own fridge, a TV, three couches, and a pool table, so it’s pretty much perfect. Except that one entire wall is glass and looks out onto the haunting blue glow of the swimming pool.

Steve keeps his eyes on the room, deliberate and focused, trying to suss out a human shape in all the shadows. There’s a single lamp on in the corner by the turntable. Another awful thing about the basement—there’s only one overhead light, a flashy chandelier that’s more crystal than bulb, and the switch is all the way across the room.

Steve’s halfway to it before he stops short, his heart dropping into his stomach. The weird lump on the pool table that Steve thought was a blanket twitches. When he creeps closer, it starts to take shape, and then he can see it’s two legs, hanging off the side, hopefully still connected to a whole person.

“Billy,” he hisses, but Queen is still blaring, ’39 now, so he has to get closer. It’s easier once he recognizes the dirty boots Billy never takes off. Steve lets out a sigh, walks up to the edge of the table and—

Even with the crazy terror humming in his blood and the dark all around him, his breath still catches, because Billy looks like an actual fucking angel in the low, blue light, his hair like something out of a movie. His eyes are closed, and he’s got the longest eyelashes Steve’s ever seen.

Steve wants to swipe his thumb over the fading purple-green under Billy’s eye, wants to kiss the just healing scar above his eyebrow. But he can’t. So, he says, “Billy,” again, as softly as he can while still being heard above the music.

Billy twitches and blinks and meets Steve’s eyes, with no expression at all. He holds Steve’s gaze for a few seconds and then looks straight up again, without a word, and Steve’s—got nothing.

If they were switched, and he was the one losing it, spiraling into the dark empty like he still often does, Billy would know what to do. He’d rub his warm hands up and down Steve’s arms, breathe big and slow until Steve could match him, and say easy, easy, until Steve could feel the word echoed in the steadying of his heart. Steve never taught him how to do that. He never sat Billy down and gave him a list of all the things that made him better. Billy just knows, and Steve doesn’t, which makes him bullshit, a shitty, selfish person with no one to blame but his own awkwardness in the face of other people’s problems.

And they don’t ask each other for things, not really. But Steve did once, a few weeks ago, and the world didn’t crumble around them. It’s just—really dark, and Steve hates this album, hates this room, hates seeing Billy like this, so fuck it.

“Oh, you bring me down, you shout around, you don’t believe that I’m alone.

Steve wants to scream and break something, wants to shake Billy until words falls out. Maybe a piece of paper would slip out of his pocket, simple instructions, How to Make Billy Hargrove
Happy in 3 Easy Steps.

But that doesn’t exist, so Steve watches Billy until the song ends and then goes to turn on the chandelier, and every other light in the room. When he gets back to the pool table, he takes a good look at it, but it seems in pretty good shape—sturdy.

So, being careful about the distance he keeps between them, Steve heaves himself onto the green felt and lies back slowly, inch by inch, just in case. Billy doesn’t yell at him or flinch—he doesn’t react at all.

It’s sometime after five on the day after Thanksgiving, and Steve’s lying on a pool table with his not-really-but-what-else-is-it boyfriend, who is maybe even more fucked-up than him, listening to his mom’s Queen album.

Now I know, now I know, now I know, sings Freddie Mercury, which makes one of them.

Steve remembers why he hates this album. This song really fucks with his head, and is also, like, the longest thing in history, so he’s grateful when the strumming finally ends and shifts into piano.

Love of my life, Freddie sings, don’t leave me. You’ve broken my heart, and now you leave me.

Steve’s busy trying to remember how many songs are left, so he almost doesn’t notice Billy shifting next to him. But then their arms brush, and Steve’s head snaps up, tense and ready to jump off if he needs too. Billy’s still flat on the table, still staring at the ceiling. The lights are all on now, so, even though he can’t really believe it, Steve can clearly see the tears slipping down Billy’s temples and into his hair.

Billy’s the second person to cry in front of Steve today, which is a crazy thought, almost as crazy as the fact that Billy’s crying in front of him. And Steve’s just watching him like an idiot. All he wants to do is wipe the wetness away with the worn sleeve of Billy’s jacket, wants to pull Billy into his arms the way he does for Steve late at night, wants to hold him and say easy, easy over and over until his throat burns with it.

But Billy’s got this thing, about Steve touching him, especially when he’s upset, so all Steve can do is look. He lasts almost a full minute of watching his—watching Billy—cry, before he can’t take it anymore.

“Baby,” he says—and then his brain stutters, because that’s not what he meant. He doesn’t—say that, not even to Nancy, because it felt—weird. Like putting on an act for some invisible audience, having to prove they were in love with pet names.

“Please,” he says, when even that slip up doesn’t make Billy look at him. “Please, just tell me what to do. I can’t—I want to help you, just—you’ve got to tell me what to do.”

The song drags on, and Billy stays quiet, and Steve wonders what else there is—should he bring him a blanket, something to eat? Should he talk, maybe, the way Billy does? But he put the record on for a reason, probably wants to hear that instead of Steve’s babbling. And besides, he doesn’t have stories like Billy does.

Love of my life, Freddie croons, and then Billy shifts again, not subtle this time, but with purpose. Steve holds his breath, doesn’t want to risk anything as Billy turns onto his side, facing Steve. His eyes are dull, his face still blank, but he meets Steve’s gaze with something like attention, so at least he’s here and not locked away somewhere.

“Billy—” Steve starts when the seconds tick by and Billy’s eyes start making him nervous. But
Billy doesn’t let him finish.

“Stay still,” he says, his voice like gravel, like he’s been screaming. Steve wonders about that, but mostly he tries to be really, really still, and then Billy’s against his side, his head lowering slowly to Steve’s chest, right above the rapid beat of his heart. The temptation to bring his arms up around him is like nothing else. It’d be so easy, but he knows better, so he doesn’t move, barely breathes.

They lie like that for ages. Steve can feel Billy getting used to it, sinking into him a little more with each passing minute. Eventually, the music stops, giving way to the steady flick, flick, flick of the needle catching on nothing, but Steve can’t move now, even if he wanted to. Billy said to be still.

Steve doesn’t know how long it is before Billy says, “Gonna ruin the record.” Because, of course that’s what he’s worried about.

“I really don’t care,” says Steve. Billy’s like a living space heater next to him, so warm, and it’s been such a long fucking day. He thinks maybe he’s got a few more minutes before the noise drives Billy crazy, but it’s less than thirty seconds before there’s a pinch at his side.

“Ow, what the fuck!”

“Go fix it,” Billy says, and any other day Steve would give him shit. But Billy’s voice is still shot and too quiet, so Steve eases away from him, slowly, and goes to fix it.

He almost starts it over, since Billy likes Queen so much (apparently), but then he thinks about how nice and good and safe it feels when they’re in bed, and the blankets are warm, and Billy’s got him all close and tucked against him. Billy doesn’t need that, doesn’t even like it, the way Steve does, but maybe it would help.

There’s no harm in asking—or, he hasn’t ruined everything yet by asking, so.

He switches the turntable off, roots around until he finds the right sleeve and puts the album away before he heads back to Billy, goes to stand by his side and look at him. He doesn’t get to just look that often. Probably a good thing, too, cause Steve’s chest feels tight, his lungs too small. He’s gonna run out of air staring at the faded summer freckles on Billy’s nose.

“Hey,” he says, softly, but it still echoes in the sudden quiet of the room. “Bed?”

Billy blinks and stares at him, but Steve stands his ground this time, doesn’t let the blue of Billy’s eyes undo him. They just look and look and look at each other, and then finally Billy huffs and nods.

Steve flicks the chandelier off but leaves the rest on, follows Billy towards the stairs. He does one last sweep of the room and makes sure Billy’s at least halfway up before he follows him, checking over his shoulder once or twice, to be safe.

He feels fucking drained, so it’s easy to go through his usual nighttime routine even though it’s just past six. When he’s leaving the bathroom, he sees Billy pull an old pair of sweats out of Steve’s drawer, and something about it makes his chest weird and hot again—it’s just nice, how he knows where things are.

It’s only when they’re both under the covers, all but one light turned off, that Steve lets himself think about whether Billy’s going to roll over and put his head on Steve’s chest again, or if that was a fluke, something secret for the dark of the basement. He lies on his back anyway, as still as he can.
When Billy’s like this—and he has been, more and more since October—anything can make him stiffen and pale, make him slam doors and lock them, and sometimes even leave, roar away in the Camaro with Steve left cold and guilty, wondering what the fuck. He can’t take that now, not after today, not with the work it took to get Billy here, warm in bed.

Normally he’d just keep quiet, not wanting to risk it, but he’s sick of being cold, and he’s sick of feeling like shit, and now that he has some idea of why, he doesn’t want to settle for silence. He wants to do something good—he wants Billy to be better, to not to be fucking suffering all the time, hurt and grieving.

He did that, already—with Nancy. She was hurting and grieving and he just—ignored it, thought that it would get better on its own and it didn’t and that was bullshit, and he’s not gonna make that mistake again.

So, he turns on his side, facing Billy, who’s flat on his back and staring at the ceiling, just like he was downstairs.

“Hey,” says Steve, in a whisper, and doesn’t bother waiting for Billy to respond. “Look, if you want me to shut up, just tell me, but—I just. You always know what to do, for me, right? You’re so good at it. And I’m not. So. If you want me to just go to sleep, I can do that. Or, if you want me to talk, I can talk, or I can just be really still, and you can lie on me like before. I just need you to tell me, because, like, this, right now? I can’t do this. So, please, just tell me how to help you.”

His voice sort of breaks at the end, because he’s just realizing how in over his head he is, how bad he’s been, historically, at helping people, and if he loses Billy because of that—

Billy sighs and turns his head to look at Steve, the dim light making his eyes look darker than they are. “S’quite a speech, man,” he says, which Steve knows.

“Fuck off,” Steve shoves at him before he remembers he’s not supposed to and then he stills, waits for the fall out.

Billy stares at him for a while and then sighs, looks back at the ceiling. “You don’t have to do that, you know.”

“What?”

“Be so fucking careful. I’m not gonna—” Billy’s jaw clenches. “I’m not gonna hit you,” he says lowly, which Steve knows.

“I know.” He wouldn’t think that—maybe like a year ago, but not now. “You just don’t always like it, when I touch you, when—” when you’re having a breakdown, he almost says, before he catches himself.

Billy nods, still not looking at him. “It’s not—you, it’s just. . .”

“I know,” says Steve. “I get it. I just don’t want to do anything and piss you off, you know, or like, make you leave.”

Then Billy does look at him. “Leave?”

“Yeah, you know, like, before.” Billy stares at him blankly, but not like a ghost, more like his you’re a fucking idiot look, which is a relief, sort of, a good kind of familiar.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”
“You know, like, I say something wrong, or do the wrong thing, and you just get all mad and leave.”

“What are you talking about?” says Billy, and then “What, like, in the summer? In fucking July?”

Was it summer? That can’t be right. Steve remembers opening the front door to watch the Camaro drive away, remembers the chill of the breeze that he couldn’t shake all night. But—he’s always cold, so. He shrugs at Billy’s question, feeling dumb, and a little hollow. He’s such an idiot, of course it was summer, Billy was so mad all summer, except the few good days, and they weren’t—like this, as much, back then. Before he can sink more into how dumb he is, Billy reaches over and flicks his forehead.

“Ow, asshole!”

“Stop doing that.”

“Jesus, what, caring about you?”

Billy rolls his eyes, so he’s definitely feeling better. Which makes sense. Billy loves when Steve makes a fool of himself. He should’ve thought of that sooner.

“Getting all mad at yourself. You always do that, like, when you think you fucked up.” Then it’s Steve’s turn to stare at Billy with no words. Steve has no idea what’s going on in Billy’s head 90% of the time, and then he just says shit like this, like he’s got a window directly into Steve’s brain.

Billy shrugs at Steve’s look and says, “I’m not going to leave, alright? I said I wouldn’t, so.”

Now Steve’s confused, “What are you talking about?”

“You made me fucking promise, didn’t you? So, I’m here, okay? I’m not gonna just leave in the middle of the night, or whatever.”

Another conversation from a dream—Steve would like, for once, to know what’s going on today. “Are you fucking with me right now?”

“What?”

“I made you promise? When?”

“Oh my god—”

“Billy—”

“You were fucking asleep, weren’t you? You asshole.”

“What,” says Steve, all sympathy lost. Billy’s obviously back to normal and back to being a giant dick about everything. Of course, he’s making jokes now.

“It was like a month ago,” Billy says, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes. “Like, that shitty weekend or whatever.” October, he means. Columbus Day weekend. “When I came over and you woke up, freaking out, and I told you about Disneyland, you remember that?”

Steve nods. He does—he likes that story. Billy’s told it a few times since then. It’s one of his favorites.

“Yeah, so then you were like, don’t go anywhere, and I was like, I’m not, and you were like
promise me you won’t go anywhere, you have to stay here, and you were saying it all weird—I should’ve known you were asleep—and so I promised.”

“I don’t remember any of that,” says Steve, who’s last memory of that night was feeling warm and safe and so grateful for Billy that he was gonna burst with it.


You’re an idiot, says Billy’s look. “When you talk in your sleep.”

“I don’t do that.” At Billy’s disbelief, he says, “What? Fuck off, I don’t! I’d know, I mean—” Nancy would’ve said, right? And then Billy’s reading his mind again.

“What, the Wheeler chick didn’t give you the low-down—”

“Fuck you—” But then Billy’s laughing, like not a huff or whatever, but his big, real laugh, the one that makes Steve feel like he could light the whole house up with the buzz it gives him.

“Man,” Billy says when he catches his breath. Steve’s trying to get the grin off his face, so he doesn’t ruin it. “You really didn’t know?”

“No way, dude. That’s creepy as hell.”

“Fucking tell me about it. The first time I stayed here, man. You woke me up at 3am talking shit about some kid called, like, Cassineti?”

“That fucker!” Tim Cassineti was the asshole on Steve’s little league team that used to trip him with bats on purpose, shove the visor of his helmet down so he couldn’t see.

Billy laughs again, this breathless, giddy thing that’s, hands down, the best sound Steve’s ever heard. “Don’t start again, man, I got it all the first time. It was like we’d already been talking. You just started, like, and then Cassineti put blue dye in tequila and told us it was Gatorade.”

“He did!” Billy laughs more, and Steve kind of feels like the king of the world. “I was eight, man! Eight-year-olds are not physically prepared to drink tequila at seven o’clock in the morning!”

“And you’re so prepared now, huh?”

“Shut up,” says Steve, but he’s laughing, too. It’s so good, the relief most of all. Billy’s been so quiet. They fall silent again after that but it’s the good kind, warm and full.

“You are, you know,” says Billy a little later, when Steve’s in the hazy place before sleep.

“Hmm?”

“Good at it.” Steve opens his eyes to see Billy on his side, looking at him. Then Billy reaches over and swipes at Steve’s eyebrow with his thumb, for no real reason. He’s always doing that, maybe cause he reads minds and knows how fucking good it feels—any touch from Billy, no matter what it is, just makes him feel—solid, like he’s really here.

It’s so fucking good, it takes him a second to hear what Billy said, and even then, he doesn’t get it. “Good at what?”

Billy shrugs and rubs at his face, the way he does when he doesn’t want to say something.
“Knowing what to do. When I get—whatever.” Which is just—blatantly wrong, so.

Steve scoffs. “Not really. Like, at all, though.”

Billy glares like he’s actually pissed, which is annoying because if anything, Steve should be pissed, that Billy’s lying to make him feel better.

“Shut up,” says Billy. “You just think, cause like, you don’t touch me or talk to me or whatever like I do for you, that you’re not doing shit. But I don’t—like that, I just want. Like, earlier you know, when you, like, putter or whatever.”

Steve laughs then, his annoyance fading for a second because—“Putter? I’m sorry, dude, are you, like, a sixty-year old woman, cause you gotta tell me that shit up front—”

“Fuck you, man, I’m trying to do what you wanted—”

“Okay,” says Steve, because yeah, he can see that now. Billy’s just trying to tell him what to do. “Sorry. So, you like it when I—clean?”

“No, like, you just do this thing, when you’re nervous, I guess. You walk around a lot and do other shit. Like when you were turning all the lights on or fixing the records and stuff. It’s like—knowing you’re there without having to. . .”

“Touch me.”

“Yeah.” Which Steve still doesn’t really get, because touching Billy is pretty much the best thing in the world, and it fucking sucks that while he loves it, Billy doesn’t.

“Sorry if I made you—like, before—”

“Jesus, you didn’t make me, okay? That’s the point.” Billy rubs his knuckles harder into his eyes. Steve wants to feel the grooves on his hands, all the old scars that crisscross his skin, but he knows he can’t, so. “Look. When I get—when I start thinking too much about that shit, it just feels like I can’t talk. Like, I’m trapped or something.” Steve nods even though Billy can’t see him. Billy gets that look in his eyes sometimes, like the animals at the shitty Indianapolis zoo—all caged up. “So, when people touch me, I can’t tell them not to. It feels like shit. But it’s only when I’m not the one doing it, okay? Like—before. That was fine, it was—good, I guess.”

“Because I was being still, right?”

“Yeah,” Billy says and finally takes his hands away from his face. He reaches over and tugs on the collar of Steve’s t-shirt and then leaves his hand there. Steve can feel the warmth of his fingers against his skin. “You were really good,” says Billy, which—

Steve has to close his eyes and breathe through the feeling he gets then. He—he really likes hearing Billy say that, which he knows from when they do other stuff but. Billy’s never said it just for everyday shit. It feels the same, though. Maybe even better.

“Yeah?” he says when he can talk again.

“Yeah,” says Billy. “You were so good, baby,” he adds and when Steve’s eyes snap open, Billy’s smirking like such an asshole.

“That was an accident—”
“Sure, man.”

“Fuck off. Whatever—you liked it.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah,” says Steve, mostly just fucking around, but Billy only shrugs in response, which is—interesting. Something to think about.

Billy’s so much better now, swiping his thumb absentmindedly at Steve’s jaw with the hand still holding his shirt. That, and the echo of Billy saying baby, even if it was a joke—makes Steve want to kiss him. He’s just not sure if they’re back to normal yet, or if that’s even a thing they’re still doing, after—what Max said. He hears the echo again, Billy saying, he was my whole world, and wonders how Billy even stands Steve so close to him if all that’s true.

He blocks that for now, too big to even think about, and shifts closer anyway. Billy’s fingers are hot against his throat, and the need is thrumming in his skin, but where he might’ve just gone for it before, he pauses now, unsure.

Billy’s hands are on Steve’s hips then, tugging at him, and when Steve meets Billy’s eyes, they’re dark, expectant in a way Steve knows so well—you gonna do something about it, Harrington?

But when Steve doesn’t move like he should, Billy sighs, squeezes at the round part of hips.

“That’s only for when I’m fucking catatonic or whatever, okay? You know what that looks like. This?” he says and pulls Steve closer. “This is good.”

Maybe it shouldn’t be enough, but it is. Steve tips him sideways onto his back, crawls over him and revels in the way Billy’s grip tightens. They just kiss for a while, Steve keeping it from moving into something else because Billy was fucking catatonic or whatever only a few hours ago, and Steve’s also still exhausted.

It slows until they’re sort of just breathing on each other. Steve’s face is tucked into Billy’s neck, his favorite spot, while Billy rubs his hand up and down Steve’s back, under his shirt. It’s pretty much the only way Steve wants to fall asleep for the rest of his life, but he’s not gonna do something stupid, like say that.

So, he keeps that thought inside and drifts off. But there’s one more thing—

“Good, too,” he says, from the hazy, warm place.

“Hmm?”

“You’re really good, too, Billy.”

“Yeah?” There’s a soft huffing laugh, the one Steve wants to bottle up and keep in his pocket.

“You sleeping, baby?”

“Hmm, yeah.”

“Okay. Go back to sleep, then.”

“Okay.”
When Steve wakes up the next day, warm, warm, warm, it takes more than a second to remember why he can’t just revel in it, why he can’t just press small, quiet kisses into Billy’s shoulder the way he always does the mornings they’re together.

It takes a long moment of watching the light from the window turn Billy’s skin golden, of thinking stupid, sleep-dumb things like angel, honey, California blue—it takes that—his slow thoughts drifting to Billy’s life before—to remind him of the screaming and crying from yesterday, too sharp to be a dream.

All he’d wanted last night was Billy to be better, to get that blank, faraway look out of his eyes, and maybe it was sort of too easy to forget the reason he was like that in first place. It just—can’t be real. Shadow monsters from another realm he can understand, but this is—TV drama, not stuff that happens in real life. But he thinks about Max, pale and quiet in his car, and Billy, crying in front of him, and thinks it’s too much to be a lie, either.

When it all comes back, he feels—wrong, curled up in the white sheets, watching Billy sleep, with all these new secrets tangled up inside him.

It’s so much harder without Billy’s dumb smirk, his quiet nighttime murmurs to distract him. He just watches the sun get brighter, filled with all this fresh hurt that isn’t his, just a giant fucking pit in his stomach. He watches and doesn’t touch, waits until Billy finally squints and grumbles and turns away from the window, towards Steve. He blinks his eyes open, and there’s this second where he must forget, too, cause he does this sort of half smile and rasps,

“Mornin’,” his voice rough and deep. Something in Steve’s gut tugs despite the hurt making him sick.

“Hi,” Steve says back. It comes out weird, croaky from the sudden burning in his eyes.

Billy notices, of course, cause he’s got that laser beam vision right into Steve’s head. His eyes flick over Steve’s face and he reaches over to thumb at Steve’s cheek, like he’s checking for tears.

“Bad dream?” he asks, more confused than worried, cause he’s always the first to know when Steve’s had a nightmare.

Steve shakes his head, feeling so fucking stupid—it should be the other way around, Billy filled with ugly hurt and crying, and Steve making him better—at least trying to. Not this, not Billy consoling Steve over shit that’s not even his to be upset about.

“You okay?” Steve says, because maybe hearing I’m okay in Billy’s rough, morning voice will get rid of the ache in him that’s only getting bigger.

“Yeah,” Billy says instead, but his gaze falls, dips to Steve’s chin. The ache spreads like ice, a frost that won’t melt. It’s just—it’s sunny and warm and Saturday. Last night, he had Billy’s big, real laugh seeping into his skin, felt like he could take on the world, and now it’s eight o’clock in the morning and he feels like shit, and Billy’s lying to his face.

“Are you?” Steve says softly, wishing it was still night so they could whisper in the dark again.

Billy’s face hardens, and he snaps his hands away from Steve, rolls away and sits up. “Yeah,” he says again tightly. And then, “You gonna be like this?”

“Like what?”
Billy sighs loudly from his nose and drags his hand over his face, digs his knuckles into his eyes. “Whatever,” he mutters and Steve—Steve doesn’t know what to do.

He doesn’t think there are any rules for this—when you find out your boyfriend’s piece of shit dad murdered his ex, not that long ago, and that you’re probably a rebound and also you might die, too.

Staring at Billy’s tense form, hunched, now, over the other side of the bed, Steve thinks the ache growing inside him is from knowing all of it at once. And knowing that, back in June, Steve kissed Billy first, and second, and he thinks third, too. It was Steve trembling and needing things, and Billy being quiet and solid, but silent, most days.

He might actually be sick, thinking about that, how he didn’t really ask that first time, did he, or think that Billy would be hung up some way, that he might not want—

“Jesus Christ,” says Billy. Steve blinks back to find him turned toward Steve again, one leg fold as he twists to look at him. “What is that face for?”


“What the fuck in any of this,” says Billy, “could possibly be your fault?”

“I started it,” Steve wants to say, I thought we were together in this, but maybe I’m alone.

“I didn’t know,” he says instead, and he means to go on—didn’t know you were hurting so bad, didn’t know the danger you’re really in. But Billy looks mad and it’s hard to get the words out with that scowl on his face.

“Yeah,” says Billy, like duh. “Cause I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want—that isn’t your fault, idiot.”

It’s Steve’s turn to scowl. Billy calls him an idiot all the time, it’s practically a nickname. But it feels shitty right now, when Steve’s trying to go over the past five months, trying to remember all the times Billy was quiet and cold and figure out if it was something Steve did. He gets why Billy wouldn’t tell him this, he’s not mad about it, not really, just—

“Do you even want—” he starts but he can’t finish the thought without a terrible shame swelling up inside, the idea that Billy might not want this the way Steve wants this.

Billy must sense the awful ache in Steve with his mind reading thing, cause the anger melts a little from his face and he shifts closer on the bed. There’s still at least a foot between them, and Steve feels it like a freezing wind, all that space between him and Billy’s warmth.

“Come on, Harrington,” Billy says and snorts a laugh. “You think you can make me do something I don’t want to do?” He moves closer still and wraps a hand around Steve’s wrist, his face all serious when he says, “You think I do this shit with anyone?”

Steve doesn’t think that, but there’s a difference between holding someone’s hand and feeling like you’ll die if you don’t. He doesn’t say that, though, just focuses on Billy’s warm grip, the way it makes his pulse seem louder, steadier, thinks about what Billy said last night—this is good.

Billy tugs at Steve then with the hand he’s got hostage, dragging him in. Steve goes easy, what else can he do with Billy still drenched in morning sun, his eyes unreadable but a wild kind of blue.

“I want,” Billy murmurs the words into Steve’s mouth and kisses away any response Steve could have. He wishes he could push Billy and get to the bottom of it all, get all these secrets sorted into little boxes and stored away. But Billy is warm from the sun, he smells like Steve’s sheets, and
even as raw as he is, it’s so much easier to lean into it, to let Billy get his way.

And it’s easy, too, to pretend Billy means *I want* the same way Steve does, *I want this thing we’ve got forever.*

At the diner a week later, Steve says, “Hey, Nance?” He was gonna wait till maybe Jonathan went to the bathroom or something, but they’ve been hanging around for almost two hours, picking at their plates, and it’s killing him, so. “Can I ask you something?”

Nancy glances up from the napkin she’s been folding absently. Then she and Jonathan share this look, which they do a lot since they’re a couple or whatever, but it’s not usually about him, so that’s fucking annoying.

“You can ask me *anything,*” she says, a little too seriously.

“Uh, okay. Do I talk in my sleep?”

She looks surprised, like it’s not the question she and Jonathan thought it would be, which, good, but also, what—do they talk about him when he’s not around?

“Sort of, yeah.”

“What? *Really?*”

“Yeah,” she shrugs and starts picking at the napkin again. “Not that often, but sometimes.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“I don’t know, it wasn’t that often. I thought maybe you were embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed?” Great. Just perfect. What kind of dumb shit has he been saying to Billy?

“People usually mention that they talk in their sleep, Steve! And you never did, so I didn’t want to bring it up.”

“Would’ve been nice to know,” he mutters and stirs at the ice left in his glass. Who goes to bed with someone as often as they did and doesn’t bring up the fact that Steve’s spilling his secrets in the night? Whatever—today just *sucks.*

Billy’s not coming over tonight like he usually does, has to work on some group project that’s super important or whatever. Which means Steve doesn’t get Billy soft with sleep tomorrow, won’t see him like that for a whole nother week, and he’s spending his Saturday night with his ex and her boyfriend, who apparently share *looks* about him—so it just—*sucks.*

“How’d you find out?” says Jonathan.

“What?”

“How’d you find out you talk in your sleep? I mean, if you didn’t know before.”
Nancy gets a slow kind of grin on her face that can’t be good. “Yes, Steve,” she adds, “How did you find out? Did someone tell you?”

She’s got this light in her eyes, and Jonathan looks all happy and interested, too—and Steve knows they worry about him, that he’s—lonely, or whatever. He should just shrug and play it cool, make up some story about a one-night stand. But he doesn’t want to.

He wants to tell them how warm Billy makes him, how he’s kind of an asshole but only when he wants to be, how they’d like him, maybe, if they knew him like Steve does. They’re both smart so they’d get it, and if Steve asked, can you still fall in love with a guy if you never stopped liking girls, too, they’d probably know.

Even without the terrible thing he knows now, he wouldn’t say anything. But now, he definitely can’t, maybe not ever. Which sucks, so.

“Dustin told me,” he says and Nancy frowns, probably at his tone, this flat, angry thing he can’t really help. “I fell asleep on the couch, during movie night, or whatever.”

“Oh,” says Jonathan.

“Yeah. Anyway, thanks. For, um, telling me. I’m gonna go.”

“Oh,” says Nancy.

They usually do something after dinner, go to a movie or hang at Jonathan’s (Nancy still doesn’t like going to Steve’s and he doesn’t blame her). But it’s the too-bright lights in here, maybe, or the smell of all the food now that he’s full—he feels gross, like he needs to shower and fall asleep on clean sheets. He needs Billy to rub his back and tell him about Disneyland again, but that’s not gonna happen, so, whatever.

He pretends he doesn’t see them sharing another look about him as he heads to the register. They can think what they want. It’s not like they’d guess the truth in a million years.

“So see you later,” he says when he’s done paying and makes his way out into the dark.

***

“So see you later.”

“You’re really gonna go?” It was 2am and cloudy, pitch black outside. Steve watched Billy from the bottom of the stairs and tried to figure out what he could say to get him to stay here, where it was light and warm.

“Gotta get back,” Billy said. He was swinging his keys on his finger, messing with the ends of his hair, checking his pocket for his wallet. Stallling. There was a cut on his cheek that only stopped bleeding an hour ago.

Steve shifted on his feet a moment before he thought, fuck it. He still didn’t really know what they were doing, what was allowed and what might make Billy punch him. He just knew he hated seeing him fidget like that.
He crossed the hall in slow steps, gave Billy time to move away. When he didn’t, Steve pressed in close and kissed him.

Billy had all these edges, made you think he was tough as shit, and he was—but his lips were soft, and he kissed soft, too, like he wasn’t really sure of things. It made Steve so warm inside he hardly knew what to do with it.

He meant to keep it quick, but when he tried to pull away, Billy followed him, kept him close with his hands on Steve’s hip. It was hours later, probably, when Billy finally let him breathe.

“Gotta go,” he said again, rough and low.

“Okay.” Steve patted Billy’s chest, once, twice, just to be safe. Then Billy turned and opened the door, stepped out into the dark. It was August still but barely, and the breeze coming in was cold.

Steve stayed by the door anyway, feeling the chill seep into him. Billy was halfway down the walk, but he couldn’t help himself. “Be careful!” he called, hating the way the shadows seemed to suck Billy in, like they would never give him back.

Billy did a sort of half-wave, and called, “Not all of us are afraid of the dark, Harrington!” As if there wasn’t reason to be. As if that’s what Steve even meant in the first place.

As he watched the red taillights burn down the road, the cold settled in his bones, deep and heavy. It wouldn’t leave, Steve knew, till he saw Billy whole again tomorrow, and safe.

***

When Steve wakes up later that night, it’s not because Billy’s in his bed again, and it’s not because of the dream. It’s because of the awful, shrill blaring coming from somewhere, like a siren, making his heart jump to his throat. It takes him more than a second to realize it’s the phone.

He checks the clock—1am—and feels his skin get tight and cold. This can’t be good.

His voice sort of trembles when he answers, wishing distantly that Billy were here to warm his shaking hands. “Hello?”

“Steve? It’s Chief Hopper.”

This really can’t be good.

*End Part II*
As I keep moving on to different POVs, I think something to keep in mind (and that I hope is coming across) is that, even though this is really close third, sometimes, as people, WE don't even know what we're thinking. We lie to ourselves, or don't see our own actions clearly, and we definitely don't always say what we mean. Steve sees Billy much differently than Max does, and he sees himself differently than Billy sees him. Hope that makes sense!

Let me know what you think!
Every Breath You Take

Chapter Summary

A long night.

Chapter Notes

This fic is just soft interrupted by pain, and the last chapter was pretty soft, so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interlude: Hopper

It’s December 8, 1985—by a few minutes at least.

Jim’s having a pretty good night watching Indiana Jones with the kid, her first time seeing it. He likes looking over to see her face during the good parts, the way her eyes still get wide like a Looney Toon. He keeps thinking maybe, the more time she spends with Mike and her other friends, she’ll start losing those quirks, but so far, she still eats too many Eggos, reads the time all wrong, and slams the door with her mind when he pisses her off.

El’s eyes are drooping and it is pretty late for a kid, even a bigger one. He’s just about to get her up and into bed when the phone rings, at—he checks—12:06am. Not a good sign. Neither is the way El snaps to attention and stares at the phone like something possessed, too still.

Jim keeps his eyes on her as he goes to answer, a sinking feeling building in his gut. It’ll be the station, reporting something strange as hell, Hop, you won’t even believe it.

“Chief Hopper,” he answers, and then—nothing. Silence, at first, and, when he stains to hear, breathing, maybe.

“Hello?” he says and thinks maybe it’s just kids playing a prank, might’ve hung up already if it weren’t for the way El still hasn’t moved, her gaze going too sharp. He waits and waits for something on the other end of the line, but it’s just breathing.

“Who is this?” he says, gruff. Nothing.

Then El says, “It’s Max,” her voice faraway.
“Max?” Jim echoes. The breathing on the other end hitches and stops. The sinking feeling in his gut sinks lower. “Max, are you hurt? Are you safe?”

“You have to come arrest me,” says Max, her voice that sort of flat Jim knows too well—shocky. Not a good sign.

“Where are you, Max,” says Jim, thinking of the snow coming down and how fast he can get to that house on Old Cherry Road.

“At home,” says Max.

“Okay. Who’s there with you? Are you alone?”

“No,” she says, and Jim can hear the tears in her voice better now, the way it shakes.

“Who’s there with you?” Jim says again. He doesn’t know much about Max’s family, but he’s seen that Hargrove boy littered with bruises enough to know that violence isn’t a stranger.

“I hit him,” says Max instead of answering. “I think he’s dead.”

“Okay,” says Jim—he’s heard enough. “Max. El’s going to talk to you now, alright?” Jim catches El’s gaze, back to normal now, worried and curious. Jim waves her over and she scrambles up the back of the couch. “El’s gonna tell you about the book’s she’s been reading. You’ve got to listen close, okay? She gets words wrong sometimes,” and El glares at him for that but it’s the least of his worries, “so I want you to make sure she says ‘em all right, got it?”

“Got it, Max?” he says again when he’s met with more silence.

“You’re coming here?” she says.

“I’m on my way. But El’s going to talk to you the whole time till I get there, okay? Max?”

“Okay,” she says.

So, Jim hands the phone to El, who takes it impatiently, starts talking before she’s even got the receiver to her mouth, “Have you read Mat-ild-a?”

Jim shoves his jacket on, grabs his hat and his keys before making his way back to El. “You talk to her till you hear me on the other end,” he says lowly. El nods, never stopping her rant about Trunchbull, so Jim nods back and then heads to the truck.

He waits till he’s through the roughest patch of ice and is on the road before he reaches for the radio.

“This is Hopper—copy?”

There’s just static for a too long moment before—“Hey, chief,” says Powell. “Pretty late for a drive.”

“Calvin, I need you to send an ambulance to the Hargrove place on Old Cherry Road. But tell ‘em no sirens. I don’t know what the situation is out there, and I don’t want to give anybody a heads-up we’re coming.”

“You got it,” Powell says instantly, all his joking gone. “You need backup?”

“Meet me there,” he says. “But call that bus first.”
All the lights are on when Jim pulls up to the Hargrove place, the yellow windows standing out from the other dark, sleeping homes. He slows down the last few yards to make sure the engine isn’t heard, knowing how sound travels out here in the cold.

The ambulance beat him here, still and silent out front. He can only hope they kept quiet on the way up the street. He parks the truck behind it and by the time he’s out, the EMT is there to meet him, a young guy Jim recognizes from the few times he’s had to call a bus.

“Hey, Hop,” he says, his voice low.

“Tom,” says Jim. “Been here long?”

“About five minutes. Cal said to keep the lights off, so I figured we were waiting for you.”

“Yeah. Look, I’m going in, but the guy could still be armed, so just wait for my signal.”

“Got it.”

He pats Tom’s arm, and then unclips his holster, keeping the gun there for now as he makes his way to the door. He doesn’t bother to knock, and the knob turns easy. The lights are all on in the front hall and the living room, but he doesn’t see anyone—not till he makes it to the kitchen.

The first thing he notices is the blood. The floor is white, the counters white, the walls white, too, so the red stands out—on the edge of the table, in pools on the floor, and one big streak, like a body being dragged across the tile.

Max is curled in the corner under the telephone, the receiver still to her ear. There’s blood on the cuffs of her pajama pants, on the bottoms of her bare feet, and all over her tiny, shaking hands—one gripping the phone like a lifeline, the other holding a kitchen towel to the bleeding face of the Hargrove boy—Billy, Jim thinks—who looks unconscious, sprawled with his head pillowed in Max’s lap.

It’s quite a scene, when thirty minutes ago he was watching Indi and thinking about making homemade pancakes for El the next morning. It’s easy, usually, to switch that off, to think about the problem at hand. It’s harder, when he crouches by one of El’s best friends, eases the phone out of her iron grip, and hears his little girl on the other end, still going on about Matilda. She loves that damn book.

“—found the family they wanted. That’s the best part,” she’s saying.

“El,” he says, “I’m here.”

“Good,” says El. “She’s scared.”

“Yeah. Look, I’ve got to deal with this now, but you go to bed. I’ll call you later.”

“Be careful,” she says, stone serious, a habit she’s picked up from one of those kids.
“I will,” he says. “Lock the door.”

After he hangs up, he moves so he’s facing Max and has a better look at Billy, who’s bleeding pretty heavy. But head wounds do that—and he’s not too concerned about the punk, who must’ve done something pretty bad to make Max defend herself like that.

“Are you hurt, Max?” he says, slow and clear, trying to get her shocky eyes to focus. She’s looking at him, but he’s not sure what she’s seeing, her grip on that towel turning her knuckles bone white.

“Max,” he tries again. “Is any of that blood yours?”

She looks down at her shirt like she didn’t notice it was soaked through with red, and then meets Jim’s gaze.

“No,” she says.

“You’re sure? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“No.”

“Billy didn’t hurt you?” he tries again. Sometimes the shock hides the pain for hours. She could be bleeding out under there and not even know.

Max stares down at the boy in her lap, puts her other shaking hand on his forehead. When she looks back up at Jim, there are tears rolling down her cheeks, even though the rest of her face is calm.

“I think Billy’s hurt,” she says. “He gets hurt a lot. But this time, it’s bad.” Her breathing starts picking up. “I think it’s really bad this time.”

“Oh, okay,” says Jim, “I’m just going to get help, alright? I’ll be right back.” He turns to get up, to get Tom, and it’s only then that he notices the body in the hall. He shoots up, a hand on his holster, eases closer, quietly, to the doorway.

It’s Neil Hargrove, lying face down like he fell there, a bloody gash bleeding pretty badly, too, on the back of his head.

_You have to come arrest me_, Max had said. _I hit him. I think he’s dead._

Jim crouches down next to the body and slowly lifts a hand to his neck. He lets out a sigh at the faint pulse he feels—that’s not something Max deserves on her conscious, no matter how much it’s looking like the bastard deserved it.

He meets Tom out in the front yard. He’s clearly gotten antsy from waiting, halfway up the path to the house despite Jim’s warning.

“When I tell you to wait, you know I mean in the bus.”

“Sorry. It was just too quiet, I thought—”

“Not now. There’s three in there, all of ‘em need to go to St. Vincent’s. I want you to take me, the girl, and the boy with you, and call a second ambulance. Cal’s gonna wait here for it, and then go with the third. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”
Jim leads the way back to the kitchen, then leaves Tom and his partner to work as he checks to make sure the rest of the house is clear. When he makes his way back, though, they haven’t made much progress, and it quickly becomes clear as to why.

He crouches next to Max again. “Max, we’re going to go the hospital now, alright?” He tries to grab the towel from her, but she won’t budge. “Billy’s hurt, just like you said. He needs to get to a doctor, right? You and me are gonna get him to one, right now, but you gotta let you go so we can do that.”

Max looks down at Billy, with those silent tears still rolling down her pale, freckled cheeks. She’s fourteen, he knows from El, but she looks so much younger. She’s just a kid. Jesus Christ, what a mess.

“Billy’s hurt,” she says again. “He’s always getting hurt.”

“I know,” he murmurs, eases the towel from her hand. “I know, but we’re gonna get him better, right? That’s right, there you go.”

Tom and his partner, Sandra something, Jim thinks, make quick work of things, once Max is out of the way. They get Billy on the gurney and out the door in under two minutes. Jim puts an arm around Max’s shoulders to guide her after them, but she won’t move.

“Steve,” she says, which makes him pause. He swept the house and didn’t see anyone, but it’s possible he missed something.

“Is Steve here?” he asks.

“Billy’s hurt. He’s gonna be hurt, too. We have to call him,” she says. “We have to call Steve.”

And the thing is—Jim knows this town pretty well, and he does patrol just as often as the deputies, since there frankly aren’t that many bodies to go around and flu season spares no man. So, he knows how often that Camaro with the California plates parks in that part of town, on that particular street, late at night. Jim thought the Hargrove kid had something going on with a girl up there. But maybe not.

“Okay,” he says, “We will. But we need to get to the hospital first, right? Billy’s not gonna get there without us, and they have phones there, too. So, let’s go. We’ll call Steve from there.”

It’s December 8, 1985, somewhere around one in the morning, and Jim’s in the pediatric ward of the hospital, listening to the ring on the other line. He stares at the cartoon elephants littering the walls and wonders why he’s making this call. Well, he knows why—because Max would only let the doctors shine lights in her eyes, take her pulse and all that after he promised to call Steve, please, Hopper, you’ve got to, he’s gonna be hurt, too.

So, after a quick call to El to let her know what’s going on and get the Harrington kid’s number, here he is.

After five rings, a shaky voice finally answers. “Hello?”
“Steve?” says Jim. “It’s Chief Hopper.”


“El’s fine,” he says, knowing what Steve’s getting at. “The kids are fine. All’s quiet on that front, alright? Look. I’m calling because Max asked me to. She said you might be—hurt.”

“Max? Why, is she—did something happen?”

There’s an instant fear in Steve’s voice, a knowing thing that Jim doesn’t like.

“Yeah,” he says. “She’s alright—in shock, but it’ll pass. She seemed pretty insistent I call you, though. She seemed to think you’d be in trouble. Are you—”

“What happened?” Steve starts, ignoring the question. “Was it just Max? Was—was anyone else there?”

Jim thinks again about that damn car, sitting on Steve’s street 24/7 and sighs. “Yeah—Max hasn’t said much, but it’s looking like a domestic. Her brother’s in pretty rough shape. The father’s in surgery, now.”

“Rough shape?” Steve’s voice gets high and fast. “What does that mean, rough shape—he’s, he’s gonna be okay, right?” Jim listens to the kid getting more and more frantic, thinks about Max saying, he’s always getting hurt.

“He was unconscious a long time, kid, he lost a lot of blood—doctors don’t know yet. Look—do you want to come down here? I think—Max would like that. She was asking for you, and I don’t know where her mother is, she wasn’t at the house, so—”

“She’s in Indianapolis,” says Steve, distant, like he’s talking from a dream. “Her sister’s sick, or something. She was visiting for the weekend.”

Which, huh—“Okay, that’s good to know. Do you—have a name for the sister, or a number I can contact?”

“No, but. She would’ve let a note—it’ll be on the fridge, I think. She always leaves one.”

“Alright. Thanks, kid, that’s helpful. So, are you coming down here? I think you should. We’re at St. Vincent’s, off Route 6, you know it?”

There’s silence on the other end, which Jim’s getting to really hate tonight. “Steve? You still with me?”

“Yeah,” Steve says after a beat, his voice rough and unsteady. “I’m here.”

“Okay. Maybe—look, maybe I should send a deputy to get you—”

“No! No, I’m good—I can drive, Hop. St. Vincent’s, off Route 6. I know it. I’ll be there. I’m leaving now.”

“Okay. Drive careful, kid, okay? There’s no need to rush, no one’s going anywhere over here. Got it?”

“Yeah. Got it. I’m going.”

“Alright. See you soon,” but the line’s dead before he finishes. Kids these days.
Jim’s almost nodding off despite the hard plastic of the chair when he catches sight of a figure at the end of the deserted hallway—not that many people around the kids’ ward at 2am.

Steve Harrington looks the same as the last time Jim saw him, a week or so ago at Joyce’s Thanksgiving. He’d been quiet then, but content, smiling and making generous comments about Joyce’s pretty terrible sweet potatoes.

He’s not so content right now, in sweatpants like he didn’t bother changing, and visibly shaking, despite the giant winter coat he’s got on. He stands by the elevator bank, lost, so Jim steals himself and heads over.

“Hey, kid,” he says, and Steve whips around and goes to hug him in some kind of relief, which is—alright. He’s talking a mile a minute.

“Hop—where are they, where’s—have they heard anything, you said, nobody knew. Is Billy—”

“Easy,” says Jim and Steve stills, his eyes wide. “Take a breath, kid. Okay? Max is fine, she’s sleeping now. Last I heard, they had Billy in for a CAT scan. Those things can take a while, alright. So, let’s just sit down. I was hoping you might be able to clear some things up.”

He gets a firm grip on Steve’s shoulder and guides him over to the waiting area he’s commandeered, not that much to speak for, just three plastic chairs stuck to the wall and a stack of magazines from 1981.

The kid hunches down in the seat, pulls the sleeves of his jacket up over his fingers, like he’s still cold. “What happened?” he says immediately. “You never told me what happened.”

Jim sighs. “Max wouldn’t say much, but. She called me at the cabin, not really in her right mind. She said—she said she killed someone. So, I went over there. Just from the scene, I’d guess Billy’s dad was beating on him, and Max intervened, hit him with something.”

Steve takes all this in without a word, just hunched over and staring at his hands in his lap. Then he nods a few times, clears his throat and says,

“But he’s not dead? Billy’s dad.” Which isn’t exactly the first point Jim would’ve picked out, but.

“No. He had a pretty bad blow to the head, and they had to go in and relieve some pressure or something. But the doctor seemed confident he’d be alright.”

“But Billy—you said they weren’t sure. He’s not in surgery, but he’s worse? That doesn’t make sense, I mean, why don’t they know—”

“Every injury’s different, kid, and . . .” Steve isn’t family and shouldn’t be privy to details of a case like this, but he’s clearly got some stake in things, so. “Some of Billy’s bruises seem to indicate that Neil was—choking him. Billy was unconscious when I got there, and he hasn’t woken up since. With that kind of thing—the brain can only be without oxygen for so long, and we don’t know enough about what happened. They’re taking scans, like I said. And we’ll know more when he wakes up, but. That’s all I got. I know it’s not good news, but.” But it could be worse, he doesn’t say.
Steve rubs at his eyes like he’s tired, his fingers trembling from where they’re peeking out of the sleeves of his jacket.

“He choked him?” he says and then he laughs in this strangled, hurt kind of way. “He’s, uh. He’s never done that before.”

Jim wonders what Steve knows, wonders if it ever occurred to him to tell somebody. It’s just one of those things, Jim knows, that people let slide, thinking there’s nothing to do about it.

Steve sits back up suddenly, and his eyes when he meets Jim’s are wide. “But—he’ll go to jail for this, right? I mean, this is bad. *Really bad.* So, he’ll go to jail, for years, right?”

Jim sighs again and rubs at his jaw, wishing he could be optimistic. “I don’t know, kid. Probably, yeah. He might get a few years.”

“Might? That’s not—he choked him, Hop. That’s—that’s attempted murder! That’s ten to fifteen, at least.” Jim raises an eyebrow at that and Steve shrugs, colors a little. “I’ve seen *Miami Vice.*”

Jim smiles a little at that, though it dies quickly. “Life’s not TV, kid. And, look, that’s possible. But—I’m just trying to be straight with you—it’s not that cut and dry. I know what I think happened, and you know what you think happened. But the only people who really know are Billy, his dad, and Max. And—” Jim sighs. “Billy’s eighteen. He’s not some wimpy kid, and he’s got a history of violence. I’ve seen enough of these cases to know, a defense attorney’s gonna take that and run with it, say it was self-defense. Put that in front of a jury—I don’t know.”

“Self-defense! That’s—that’s not true, Hop!”

“I know—”

“Billy wouldn’t—”

“Hey,” Jim says lowly, puts a hand on the kids shoulder to keep him from getting up. They’re still in the kids’ ward of a hospital, and now’s not the time for outbursts. “I get it, alright? I know, it’s not fair. But that’s how these things work sometimes. I’m just—I could lie to you, maybe, but that’s—just how it is.”

Steve hugs his arms to his chest and rocks forward, breathing big and deep like he’s trying to stave off a panic attack. Jim’s seen that before, recognizes the steady count between each breath. He tries to match it.

After a few minutes, Steve looks calm again, but when he speaks, his voice is too flat, “What if he did something worse?”

Jim gets that sinking thing again in his gut. “What do you mean?”

“What if he did something so bad, he’d have to go to jail.”

“How bad?” says Jim, not liking where this is going one bit. He doesn’t get to find out, though, because right then a nurse comes out from Max’s room.

“Chief Hopper?” she says, “Max is awake and asking for you.”

Steve shoots up from his chair and starts forward before he turns back to Jim. “I can—I can come, too, right? You said—”
“Yeah, let’s go,” says Jim before the nurse catches on to stop them. No one but family, and law enforcement maybe, should be allowed to go in, but Jim doesn’t care at this point. There’s something not right about all this, and he’s going to figure out what.

Max is sitting up when they walk in, looking small and pale against the pink sheets. She lets out a soft gasp when she sees Steve and reaches out like a little kid might for their mother. Steve’s at her side in an instant.

“Max,” he says and when she throws her arms around his middle and hides her face in his puffy jacket, he doesn’t seem phased, just puts a hand on her head. “Hey,” he says gently, “Easy.”

Max says something, but it’s muffled in Steve’s coat, at least too much for Jim to hear. Steve must, though, because he says, “No, I’m okay, I’m okay. I was at home. I’m safe.”

“Sure?” she says as she pulls away. “He said—” She looks at Jim and stops.

“What? What did he say, did he—” With a glance at Jim, Steve stops himself too, and Jim’s getting real tired of being kept in the dark here.

“Alright,” he says, fed up, and sick from the blood still under his fingernails that won’t come out. “Here’s what we’re gonna do. Max, I know it’s been a long night, but since you’re up, and Steve’s here, and the two of you seem to know more than I do about what’s going on, we’re gonna spend a few minutes getting on the same page, here. Okay? And then you can get some sleep.” Max looks at Steve for a long moment before she nods slowly. But Steve just keeps his hands on Max’s shoulders, says in a low voice,

“You’ve gotta tell him, Max. You’ve gotta tell him what you told me.”

Max glances lightning quick at Jim before she shakes her head adamantly. “No,” she says, “No.”

“Max—”

“No!” She pushes at Steve’s arms until his hands drop and presses herself back into the sheets. The nurse pops her head in through the open door.

“Everything alright?” she asks, more of a warning than a question, and Jim turns his best nothing to see here smile on her.

“Everything’s fine. We just have a few questions and then we’ll be out of your hair.”

“All right,” she says, “Because these aren’t visiting hours, you know. Max needs her rest.”

“Five minutes,” says Jim and the nurse gives him one more studying glance before she wanders back down the hall.

“All right,” he says, lowly, when she’s gone. “You two are going to tell me what’s going on. That means everything you know about tonight, and whatever else you’re not saying.”

“Max, tell him,” says Steve, in that frantic voice from before.

“Shut up!” Max yells, much too loud for the hospital ward. “You don’t know, you don’t know anything—”

“Neil’s not going to jail!”

Max blinks and shuts her mouth. Steve goes on a little quieter, but still that hurried, panicked tone,
“It’s not bad enough—even this, it’s not—he’s just gonna get out and he’s gonna keep doing this, and next time, you’re not gonna be there to stop him. Okay? Do you get it? Billy won’t listen to me, he won’t stay with me, he just keeps going back there and he’ll die from this, Max. Neil’s gonna kill him, too.”

“Too?” Jim echoes but neither of them seems to notice. Max is shaking her head and blinking hard.

“You don’t get it,” she says, just as frantic. “There’s no proof—no one will ever believe me and if I say anything, I’ll get in trouble too—cause it was my fault.”

Steve deflates a little. “Max, that’s not how it works.”

“It is. I told.” Her voice cracks and Steve reaches for her again, but she squirms out of his grip. “If it weren’t for me,” she goes on, her breath hitching, “they’d be—they’d be in San Fran, and Jack would be a teacher, and—and Billy would be—he’d—” She starts hyperventilating then, too much to speak. She finally lets Steve gather her up. He cradles the back of her head and meets Jim’s eyes, his gaze flat, but resolute.

There’s nothing but Max’s stuttering breaths for a minute, and then Steve says, “Neil killed Billy’s friend back in California.”

Max stills and then wrenches out of Steve’s arms, pushes at him hard enough to make him stumble back. “Shut up!” she yells.

“He needs to know!” Steve yells back, and Jim knows that nurse is going to throw them out in about thirty seconds with this racket.

“All right, enough,” he says firmly. They both turn to look at him—Max, pale as a ghost, and Steve looking about ready to collapse, too. This was a bad idea.

“This was a bad idea,” he says. “Max needs to rest and it looks like there’s too much going on here to get out tonight, so we’ll just get back to it in the morning. Alright?”

Max wipes at her face and glares at Steve, crosses her arms and sinks into the bed. “I’m not saying anything, ever.”

Jim sighs. “I can’t force you to tell me anything, Max. But Steve’s right—unless you actually hurt somebody yourself, you aren’t in trouble. But we’ll talk about it in the morning. Steve?” Jim waits for the kid to look at him before he starts out of the room, makes sure the he’s following. “Try to get some sleep, Max. Your mom’s going be here real soon, and we’re going to get all this sorted.”

Jim gets a hand on Steve’s shoulder and starts guiding him to the elevators. “Look, I know you drove, but why don’t you let me give you a lift home. I can get somebody to drive the Beamer out to you tomorrow.”

Steve stops in his tracks and stares at Jim like he’s a lunatic. “I’m not going home. You said Billy was getting scans, that’s gotta be over now, right? So, let’s go see him.”

“Kid—”

Steve slinks out of his grip. “I’m not going home.”

Jim sighs again and curses the number of teens he has to deal with every day that seem to think they’re in charge. “It’s almost three in the morning, Steve. They only let us see Max because she’s a minor, and her parents aren’t here. Billy’s not even in this ward.”
“Can’t you just ask?” Steve tucks his fingers back into his sleeves and hugs himself with his overlarge, poofy arms. “Please, Hop, I can’t—I can’t go home. I’ve got to see him.”

“Alright, look. I’ll ask if we can see him. But he’s probably not even awake yet.”

“I don’t care,” says Steve, which figures.

The nurse—Janine, her nametag reads—is not amused about the commotion they’ve been causing, but Jim is the chief of police, so, with only a little persuasion, he’s able to learn that Billy’s been moved to a room in the general wards.

Jim figures if he lets Steve see Billy whole and alive, that and the awful plastic chairs will be enough to convince him to go home.

They’re just out of the elevator when a crash echoes down the hall and a voice calls out, “We’ve got a code grey, here!” A scream rings out, foreign and terrible in the quiet clean of the hospital. Jim’s hand goes to his holster instinctively, and two orderlies race from other rooms. Steve bolts after them, and Jim curses before following.

It could’ve been anyone’s room, but Jim knows he’s not that lucky.

Inside, there’s a lamp smashed on the floor and what looks like a tray of tools scattered. A nurse is filling a needle with something, her hands shaking, while the orderlies hold Billy down as he bucks and tries to get out their grip, yelling in wordless terror.

Steve, who beat Jim to the room, grabs one of the orderly’s scrubs and yanks him back. “Get off him! You’re hurting him!” The orderly tries to shake Steve off, hitting him hard with an elbow and sending him spiraling into the wall. That snaps Jim’s final thread of patience.

“Hey!” he shouts, his no-nonsense, Chief voice in full effect. It does its job—everyone in the room stills, except for Billy, who scrambles off the bed and half-crawls to the corner. He curls into his knees and covers his head with his hands, like he’s waiting to be hit again.

“Get out,” says Steve, and then, when no one follows, he whips around to the nearest orderly and yells, “Get out!”

“Easy, kid,” says Jim but he knows the feeling. “Let’s just give Billy some space,” he adds to the nurse staff. “I’ll keep an eye on him, alright, and tell you if he looks like he’s hurting himself.”

“He really needs to be in bed—” the nurse with the terrifying large syringe says. She has the nerve to sound annoyed.

“I’ll tell him,” says Jim. “Give us the room. Now. Please.” He smiles, fuck you very much, and watches all of them leave, before he heads over to stand guard in the doorway.

Jim waits for Steve to go over to Billy, to calm him down, expects some sort of urgency with how frantic he was to get here. But Steve makes an aborted step in Billy’s direction before he stops, goes to pick up the fallen medical tools instead. Jim watches, mystified, as he slowly cleans up the room, gathering the broken lamp pieces, fixing the sheets that fell off the bed in Billy’s haste.

It’s five minute later when he finally stops and looks at Billy again, who’s uncurled enough to rest his chin on his folded arms and watch Steve’s progress around the room with a flat, distant stare. Steve goes over to him slowly and stops about a foot away, crouches so he’s eye-level.

“Hey,” he says. Billy doesn’t respond, though his eyes settles on Steve. “Max is okay,” Steve goes
on. “She’s in the kids’ ward. Your dad’s in surgery. Um. I’m fine. I don’t know if he said anything, to you, but I was at home, okay? I’m okay.” Billy stays silent and Jim’s starting to wonder if this was the right idea, but Steve doesn’t seem bothered. He looks around for a minute and then grabs the TV remote, turns it on and changes the channel till it hits MTV. At 3am, it’s nothing but reruns. *Every Breath You Take* sputters out of the old, tinny speakers.

Steve settles next to Billy against the wall, leaving a few generous inches between them. Jim flicks his gaze intermittently from The Police on the TV to the two boys on the ground, wondering if he read this wrong. But then the song goes to commercial and when he looks back over, the space between them has disappeared, and Billy’s got his head tipped onto Steve’s shoulder, one hand tucked between both of Steve’s, so—not wrong then.

Jim gives them two more songs before he clears his throat pointedly. Steve’s eyes snap open and he meets Jim’s gaze, nods. He doesn’t make to get up, but he says, “Hey,” Billy doesn’t make a sound. Steve squeezes his hand. “I’m not going anywhere, okay? I’m not gonna let them do *anything*. But—you should probably get back to bed.”

Steve gets up without Billy, goes over to the bed and readjusts the pillows, which don’t really need readjusting. Then he wanders too casually over to Jim, keeping his back to Billy. Jim clues in then, turns like he’s checking on the nurses in the hall, keeps his attention elsewhere.

There was this stray cat that used to visit the alley behind Jim’s old place in the city. He tried to feed it a few times, and even though it never moved an inch while Jim was watching, the food would always be gone two minutes later. Like it was just waiting for him to look the other way.

It’s only when Jim hears the scrape of a plastic chair against the linoleum floor that he turns back to the room. Billy’s in bed again, calm this time, his eyes closed like he’s already sleeping. Steve’s got the chair pulled as close as it’ll get, one legged tucked under him, picking at a stray string on Billy’s blanket. He’s murmuring something too soft for Jim to make out.

Jim watches Steve watch Billy for a while, until someone coughs behind him. It’s the nurse from before. She flattens her lips and tries to peer past Jim into Billy’s room.

“I really need to check on him,” she says. Jim stares her down for a moment, but Billy is pretty messed up, and none of that commotion from before probably helped. Jim moves sideways in the door, making his gaze heavy and known as she maneuvers by him and into the room.

Steve glares at her but doesn’t make too much of a fuss as she checks Billy over and reattaches some of the wires that came loose in the struggle. Billy grits his teeth and stares determinedly at the wall as she moves his hospital robe aside to get a better look at the bruises around his neck. In his spot beside the bed, Steve stills. His fingers curl around the arms of the chair and turn white.

Jim waits until the nurse has finished and left, until Billy settles back and slowly relaxes, until his breath evens out. Until the stiffness in Steve’s spine finally gives and he hunches over, buries his face in his trembling hands.

Then Jim makes his way into the room and puts a hand on Steve’s shaking shoulder.

“Easy,” he says.

“What do we do,” Steve whispers, choked and hollow.

Jim just squeezes Steve’s shoulder, stares at the ugly bursts of red and purple littering Billy’s skin, stark in the white hospital light, and thinks *Christ if I know kid.*
“We’ll figure it out,” Jim says instead. Then he heads back out to the hall to call El, tell her he won’t be home for a while. It’s going to be a long night.

End Interlude

Chapter End Notes

I hope it didn't feel too much like a filler chapter! Part IV next week.
Chapter Summary

Christmas Eve, 1985 - Billy’s got it bad and is doing his best.

Chapter Notes

Happy Christmas Eve! This chap was going to be one long one published tomorrow, but it actually takes place partly on Dec. 24 and partly on Dec. 25, so I thought, why the hell Not split it and publish those parts on the real days? I do what I want. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part III: Billy

It’s December 24, 1985. The day before Christmas, and Billy’s in Steve’s guest bathroom trying to calm the fuck down. He curls further into the space between the counter and the wall—there used to be a hamper here, but he moved it weeks ago. He grits his teeth and tightens his grip on the hand towel, twists it in his fists to keep from doing something stupid, like punching the fucking mirror.

Used to be he could just break shit—mirrors, walls, peoples’ faces. But he’s at Steve’s place, and Steve likes things tidy, plus everything in here’s like, a hundred dollars, probably. Then he’d just be the asshole that broke Steve’s fancy, expensive shit. Used to be he’d do it anyway, but ever since—

Two sudden raps on the door—knock, knock—and Steve’s voice saying, “Billy? You in there?”

Billy can’t really say shit, can he, with the fucking jack-rabbit racing of his heart, all lodged up in his throat. Steve knows that, though, so when the silence drags on and on, and the door stays locked from the inside, he just says, “Okay. Um. I’m gonna be in the kitchen, okay?” Idiot’s probably burning the whole place down. “Not burning shit, asshole,” Steve adds, like he can read Billy’s thoughts. He’s always fucking doing that.

Billy listens to Steve’s footsteps fade, wishing he could get his fucking shit together, so he could follow after him, finish the stupid gingerbread cookies they were actually making from scratch, like some kind of cheesy movie.

Steve looked so dumb when he mentioned it a few days ago, these cookies he used to make with his nana or some shit, real gingerbread men with, like, the candy eyes and everything. He’d gone
all fidgety and quiet and soft, like he gave a real fuck about cookies. So, whatever, they were gonna make them, together, cause Billy actually likes cooking and no way in hell is he gonna let Steve near a fucking oven.

Except now Steve’s stuck making them on his own, will probably end up burning them to a crisp, all cause Billy keeps loses it all the fucking time. Which, like, sucks and also doesn’t make any sense, cause if he was gonna be this messed up, it should’ve been last year, after—

Not now, with this dumb shit. Like, whatever, sure, it was bad this time. He hasn’t gone to the hospital in a while, which was a fucking trip and a half. But he gets beat all the time, and no one else got hurt, not even Max. So, there’s no reason for this shit all over again and worse, not with Steve singing Christmas carols under his breath and being all happy, while Billy wastes the fucking day away being a nutcase.

He tries to breathe slow, the way he does for Steve at night when he wakes up. But it doesn’t really do shit for the ugly, heavy ball sunk right in his gut, as if he swallowed a jawbreaker made of pure panic. Those things are indestructible, and no amount of slow, deep breaths is gonna get it out.

So, Billy just waits and waits and wishes there was something to listen to other than his stupid, wimpy breathing and his stupid, racing heart. But there’s no records to put on and no Steve to bump into shit and be noisy, so. He just waits.

It might be fucking Christmas already when he finally feels steady enough to move. His knees crack when he stands, and his ass is numb from the cold, hard tile, and he’s thinking about maybe taking a shower to warm up when he opens the door and—

There’s Steve, sitting on the ground, leaning against the guest bed with a bag of frozen peas clutched in one hand and a plate with a single, blackened cookie in the other.

“Uh,” he says, and when Billy just stares at him, he stumbles to his feet. “Okay, so. Here’s the thing—I didn’t burn all of them.”

“What did I say—” Billy starts.

“I just wanted to try one! To, like, prove you wrong, or whatever. But I didn’t want to ruin all of them in case you had a point, okay? So, I just started with one, except then I might’ve gotten distracted and then—the fire alarm was going off, and I do not need that asshole fire chief calling my mother, again, so I went to turn it off with the broom, but I sort of fell—” Steve gestures the hand holding the bag of peas at what is presumably a bruised knee. “Anyway—I got the alarm off, okay! And only one cookie man died in the process. So, you know what, I’m not sorry!”

He brandishes the burnt cookie like a prize, holding it out into Billy’s face, grinning like a fucking winner. There’s flour in his hair, something ashy smudged across his cheek, and he’s actually wearing the apron Billy dared him to put on earlier when he saw it hanging in the pantry—a red, checked thing, like Betty Crocker.

Billy’s heart gives this lurch, then, that actually fucking hurts. It keeps happening more and more, just normal days and hours and then these sudden moments when Billy can’t breathe, feels like he’s gonna be crushed under the weight of the dumbass, idiotic, life-threatening love for Steve that lives inside him all the time.

“What?” says Steve when Billy just stands there. “Are you—actually mad? Cause like, the rest of the cookies really are just in the fridge—”
“Shut up,” says Billy, who feels like he’s got whiplash from this shit—panic and anger and apathy and this all one after the other, like a fucking pinball machine. He takes the plate from Steve and drops it gracelessly on the bedside table, knocks the peas out of Steve’s hand and pushes him back onto the bed. He lets out an actual, “oomph,” when Billy falls on him, but then he’s grinning again, pleased as fucking punch.

“So not sorry,” he says.

“God, shut up,” says Billy, “You’re such a fucking dumbass.”

“You like it,” says Steve and then he doesn’t say much else, cause Billy’s got his hands trapped up by his head the way he likes. Steve shudders and goes still, and then he leans up just enough to bump his nose against Billy’s cheek.

“Good?” he says, and Billy doesn’t know whether he’s asking about Billy’s state of mind, or for some kind of praise, or what, but it doesn’t matter, either way, cause—

“Good,” says Billy, more a grunt than a word. He’s done thinking about shit with Steve so warm beneath him. So, he leans down and licks at the black smudge on Steve’s face.

“Ugh.” Steve tries to get a hand free to wipe at his cheek, but Billy’s got him pinned, his turn to grin at Steve like a loon. Steve wriggles and bucks and then he lets out this laugh, a loud, delighted sound that scrapes Billy to the core. When Steve opens his eyes, they’re sparkling like he’s a fucking Disney princess.

“You’re disgusting,” he says.

“You like it,” says Billy, but not as quick as usual. Steve’s face is so dumb like that.

“Yeah,” says Steve. He leans up again, except this time he presses his lips to Billy’s cheek, this soft, gentle thing that makes Billy kind of want to scream, want to pull back suddenly and say what the fuck are you doing, here with me.

But then Steve takes a quick breath and blows a fucking raspberry on Billy’s fucking face. He shrieks with laughter when Billy retaliates, digs his fingers into Steve’s sides where he knows he’s ticklish.

Steve laughs and laughs and laughs, and when Billy finally leans down to kiss him, Steve’s skin is flushed and warm for once. It’s just so fucking good, knowing he did that. He feels like he must be fucking glowing with it.

He forgets all about the smoke that’s probably smelling up the kitchen, forgets about the ugly bruises ringed around his neck. It’s so easy, with Steve’s giddy, breathless laugh still humming in the air.

He forgets until he doesn’t, until it’s three in the morning and, like clockwork, he wakes to Steve gasping and shaking beside him. The lamp by the door is still on, like usual, but Billy reaches for the one on the bedside too, before he turns back to put his hands on Steve’s skin and settle him. Except—
“Hey,” he says, too loudly, a little shocked. Steve’s sitting up, hunched over his knees, still gasping, like he’s been holding his breath under water. There’s a steady stream of tears running down his cheeks, and he keeps making this hurt little sound in his throat. Something awful and empty blooms in Billy’s gut.

“Hey,” he tries again, holding his hands out in the air between them. Steve likes to be held, Billy knows, the tighter the better when he’s freaking out—but this isn’t his normal freak out, and Billy falls back on instinct, don’t touch, don’t touch, don’t touch. “Steve, hey, it’s okay. Look at me, it’s okay.” But it’s like Steve doesn’t even hear him. He just stares into the air, gasping and crying, which is just, fucking terrible, makes the awful thing growing inside Billy clench.

He puts a hand on Steve’s arm just to test it, and when he doesn’t flinch back, Billy reaches for him fully, pulls him closer. It’s awkward without Steve helping, but Billy manages to get Steve in front of him, his back flush against Billy’s chest, his hips bracketed by Billy’s legs. He sneaks his hands under Steve’s shirt, flattens his palms against his heaving ribs, and breathes big and deep and slow.

“Easy,” he says lowly. “Easy. Deep breaths, Stevie, come on. In and out.” He curls around him as much as he can, presses his lips to Steve’s temple, wishing he could just take this from him, like all Steve’s hurt and worry could seep into Billy through their skin. It’s his fucking fault anyway—it was never this bad before, not even in the summer. It’s been like this every night since he got out of the hospital, and it’s just getting worse.

Without really meaning to, he starts rocking them slowly back and forth, like his mama used to do when he was a dumb little kid who cried too much. His eyes burn thinking about it, so he clenches them shut and tugs Steve closer.

It’s just in his head all of a sudden, that stupid song he forgot a long time ago—back, now, when he doesn’t even want it, filling him up, like it needed that terrible rock in his stomach to knock it loose. He’s not gonna sing, that’d just be dumb. But even though Steve’s breath is coming easier, he keeps making that sound, hurt and needy, and it’s tearing Billy up inside. He doesn’t even mean to, it just starts without him—

“You’re my world when it’s spinning, like a red balloon you’re going to the ceiling.” He breathes the words into Steve’s skin, that warm place by his ear, like maybe it’ll seep in, too, and do some good. “And my feet aren’t on the ground, you’re my anchor.”

Steve quiets, like fucking magic—mi canción mágica, mi’jito, ¿debería cantarte?—so Billy sings till the words run out and he can’t remember the rest. It’s too silent in the room after that, Steve pretty much back to normal, even though these little shivers keep running through him, like aftershocks.

Billy falls back slowly and brings Steve with him till they’re both lying down again. Then he pulls all four blankets up over them, tucks the top-most one around Steve’s head like one of those little old lady scarves, mostly to see if he’ll laugh. He doesn’t, just stares at Billy from the three inches between them. He brings his shaking fingers up to Billy’s lips, and Billy kisses them, soft, like a loser—that’s what Steve’s nightly breakdowns have done, turned him into a fucking loser. But Steve’s lips twitch like he’d smile if he could, and that’s really all that matters, at three in the morning.

Billy’s just closing his eyes and thinking about getting back to sleep, when Steve says, his voice rough from crying, “Do you speak fucking Spanish.” When Billy looks at him, he’s barely awake. It’s fifty-fifty, most of the time, whether Steve remembers this middle-of-the-night shit in the morning.
But just to be safe, Billy says, “No.” Steve huffs and smiles, there and gone, like he doesn’t believe him.

“Go to sleep,” Billy whispers, his usual line when Steve is hazy like this. Steve closes his eyes, and Billy can’t help himself. He runs the pads of his fingers over Steve’s eyelids, where he’s softest.

“Tell me in Spanish,” says Steve, and Billy can tell by the lilt of it that he’s definitely asleep now, so he leans over and presses the words into Steve’s skin,

“Duerme, cariño.”

“Hmm,” says Steve, “Sexy.”

Billy laughs and then he lets Steve sprawl over him, his usual spot, his breath heavy and deep against Billy’s neck. Steve is so careful awake, not to touch him there anymore, but asleep he falls back into old habits. It’s not like Billy minds. It barely even hurts.

Billy expects to fall asleep easy after that fucking ordeal, but sleep doesn’t come. There’s just that stupid song stuck on a loop in his head for hours, till the windows lighten, and some bird chirps, and then it’s Christmas.

Chapter End Notes

Note about the sudden Spanish - if you knew the extent of the backstory I’ve built for Billy in my head, you’d tell me to do some actual work at work instead of thinking about this world 24/7. - and also, I do what I want. That said, my Spanish knowledge is strictly high school level, so if there’s anything that can be made more authentic, let me know!!

The rest of this chap will be out tomorrow! Happy holidays!
Holding Out for a Hero

Chapter Summary

Steve loves Christmas and Billy loves—well.

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas! Happy Holidays! Here's the rest of this part. I split it up to match the days but there will be more to Part IV after this. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Billy never wakes up before Steve, cause he’s some kind of freak who gets up at seven even when he doesn’t have to work, even when he wakes up every night crying. But with that stupid song keeping Billy up, he’s awake to hear Steve’s soft, humming sounds, to watch him stretch and smile and reach for Billy before his eyes even open

“It’s Christmas,” he whispers against Billy’s jaw, breathing his gross morning breath all over him.

“Whatever,” Billy says, trying to squash the warm, bright thing breaking out under his skin. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“Don’t care,” Steve murmurs, mouthing more intently at Billy. “You’re here,” he adds, “on Christmas,” as if that’s something worthy of Steve’s sleepy wonder – Billy in his bed on Christmas.

“What the fuck’s with you and Christmas?” Billy says, pushing Steve’s hair up absently. It’s like a living thing in the morning, even without that Farrah Fawcett spray.

Steve braces his elbow on Billy’s chest and leans his chin on his hand, peers down at Billy with bleary eyes. “Uh, it’s best time of the year,” he says, like Billy’s nuts. “Snow. Cookies. Presents. All the good movies on TV. What else do you want?”

“What movies?”

Steve’s eyes get wider, and so does his dumbass grin. “Uh—Rudolph? Frosty the Snowman? It’s a Wonderful Life? Dude, come on. Best movies ever.”

The thing about Steve, that Billy’s only figured out over the past few months, is that he’s a giant fucking dork. The only reason Steve was ever King in the first place is because of his dumb face and his dumb eyes and his dumb hair, and cause he’s pretty good at basketball. Everything else about him is lame as fuck, just, objectively speaking.
And it’s like Steve *tricked* him, and now he’s stuck with this person he doesn’t really know what to do with half the time, cause Steve’s so—he’s just *so*—with his giant hair and his sparkly eyes and the way he sighs to himself when something good happens. He’s the kind of person *good things happen to*. Billy’s never known anyone like that before.

“Come on,” says Steve, fully awake now and buzzing with it. “Present time. No, wait—breakfast—waffles, syrup, coffee—then, presents.” He tries to squirm away, but Billy holds him tighter. At first, just cause he likes doing the opposite of what Steve says, but then because he wants that blissed out, soft Steve from five minutes ago, thinks he knows how to get him back.

He flips them over easily, traps Steve’s hands up by his head. Steve laughs and turns his wrists back and forth, not really pulling away, just testing Billy’s grip.

“*Billy,*” he whines, “It’s *Christmas*. Presents—breakfast—”

“Still be Christmas in an hour, Harrington.” Billy’s busy biting at the spot where Steve’s jaw meets his neck, trying to get him to make that sound—

“Oh,” Steve gasps—that one.

Two hours later, Steve gets up from the couch where they passed out in waffle-related comas and does this weird pacing thing, rubs his hands down the sides of his sweater like he doesn’t know what to do with them. Billy thought he got all this freaked, nervous energy out of him earlier. Guess it didn’t stick.

When he just stands there and fidgets, Billy says, “Fuck’s the matter with you?”

“Oh,” says Steve, “so, I got you something, but like—I don’t want you to take it the wrong way? Or get mad, or think it’s too much money or whatever cause—” he gestures at the blatant luxury of his fucking giant house, “—it’s not, really, and I just wanted to get you something you’d actually like? But if you don’t like it, it’s—”

“Holy shit,” says Billy, “are you gonna give it to me, or are you gonna talk me to death?”

“*Asshole,*” says Steve. And then he turns on his heels and goes over to the tree in the corner, digs something out from way behind it, by the wall. There are other things under there, presents Billy knows Steve got for his pack of little nerds, for Nancy and Jonathan, and ones Billy guesses Steve’s parents sent him—square, store-wrapped boxes with perfect corners and perfect bows.

Billy hasn’t seen one for himself, not that he’s been looking, just that he’s noticed the names and all. And, whatever, that’s good, cause Billy didn’t get Steve anything, not really.

But Steve *did* get him something, something fucking huge, apparently. He drags the present out and over to the couch, not lifting it, like it’s too heavy. It’s clear he wrapped it himself. It looks like *shit*, with too much tape and bulges in weird places where the paper sticks up.

Steve stands there in front of the sofa looking at Billy, and then at the gift, his hands on his hips in that way that makes him look like a fucking *mom*. When Billy just stares at him, he says, “*Open* it, dickhead.”
“Wow,” says Billy, “There’s that Christmas spirit.” Steve laughs, and only then does Billy feel steady enough to sit up, to tear at the paper awkwardly, not sure how hard to rip it. He hasn’t opened an actual wrapped present in—too long to remember.

It only takes him, like, four seconds to get the thing open, but much longer than that to take it in.

“You hate it,” says Steve, shifting his socked feet on the carpet. “Fuck, I knew it, okay, I can just return it—”

“I don’t—” says Billy, but he cuts himself off, cause he’s not really sure what he means—*I don’t hate it, I don’t get it, I don’t know why you spent so much to get me this shit.*

It’s a boombox, one of those portable ones, with a handle. It’s got two cassette slots and an antenna for radio. It must’ve cost at least eighty dollars, probably more like a hundred. It’s pretty much the best gift Billy’s ever gotten, and he doesn’t know what the fuck to do with that.

It takes him a second to realize Steve’s babbling again, “—just thought, you know, like, you like listening to music and there’s only two records players in the house”—*only,* he says, “and sometimes you need to, like, be *somewhere else,* but you still should be able to listen to music and—I don’t know. It’s *stupid,* isn’t it? I can return it.”

Billy just stares at Steve, at the way his hands won’t stop messing with things, at his constant, anxious twitching. It’s only when he notices the familiar awkward look in Steve’s eyes that it hits him—Steve got him a hundred-dollar boombox so Billy could have something to listen to while he’s locked in the fucking guest bathroom, too far away from any records, or Steve, to hear anything but silence and his shallow breaths, his racing heart.

Something cracks in Billy then, or maybe something’s coming together, like how they have to rebreak your arm sometimes to get it to fix right.

“Billy?” says Steve, in that cautious voice Billy hates, the one that makes him feel like the monster in the dark, the wolf in Steve’s fairytale.

“I got you something,” Billy says, so he won’t say something else.

“Oh,” says Steve. “You didn’t have to.” Which is—hilarious, cause Billy spent, like, a buck fifty, and Steve spent more money than Billy’s ever seen in one place at one time. He just looks at Steve till he gets how *dumb* he is. “Okay, *fine,*” Steve amends, and then he’s buzzing again, almost hopping in place. “Where is it?”

“Find it yourself,” says Billy, cause he still feels off-kilter and teasing Steve is the one thing he knows how to do, easy.

“Fuck you,” says Steve, but he looks excited at the idea. “It’s in the Camaro, isn’t it?” And, like, of course it is. As if Billy would hide Steve’s present in his own fucking house.

Billy shrugs and Steve races to the door, faster than Billy’s ever seen him move off the basketball court. He goes to follow but runs his fingers over the boombox first, not really able to help himself, and it’s then that he notices the difference between the two tape slots, one a little darker than the other, like there’s something in there. He presses the eject button and—there it is, just like he thought, a tape.

He fishes it out, feeling almost better, thinking this thing must be a re-gift, or secondhand, that Steve didn’t really shell out all that cash for him. And then he flips the tape over—
BiLLy’S PLAyLiST, it says in Steve’s funny scrawl. Billy scans the track list, feeling his heart crawling up his throat, his skin getting too hot.

1. HOLDiNg OuT FOR A HeRO
2. YOU MAKe My DReAMS
3. eye OF The TiGeR
4. LeTS HeRe iT FOR THE dOY
5. ANOTHeR ONe PiTeS THE dUSt
6. DANCiNG iN THE STReeT
7. YOUR My BeST FrIENd
8. We BUiLT ThiS CiTy
9. CaLiFORNiA
10. LOVe OF My LiFe

Just, the worst songs ever, truly, the shittiest music – he should be disgusted, to even be associated with this shit, to even—

“Where are your keys, asshole, let’s go. I want my—” Steve’s voice cuts off. Billy should look up, should see what’s the matter with him now, except he can’t stop rubbing his fingers over Steve’s chicken-scratch letters, his awful spelling.

“Right,” says Steve and Billy drags his eyes up to see him standing in the doorway, looking weird again—nervous. He laughs this strangled, high sound and tugs at his sweater. “I kind of wrapped it and forgot if I left that in there or not—I didn’t—it’s, like, a joke? I guess, I mean, I know you don’t actually like any of those, it’s more, like, uh. They remind me of you. That’s all.”

Billy’s stare drifts back to the tape. He reads the titles again, overwhelmed by the evidence sitting in front of him, by the boombox itself and every one of these shitty songs, Steve’s clumsy way of saying all the things he’s told Billy a hundred times already in his sleep.

Billy places the tape carefully back in the slot and closes it, then he gets to his feet, takes slow, measured steps to the doorway. Steve hunches back against the wood paneling, sideways in the door, as if to let Billy pass, as if he’s gonna leave, right now, on Christmas.

“Sorry,” says Steve, inexplicably, and it’s weird, cause it feels like months since Steve’s said that to him, like years, even if that can’t be right.

Billy crowds him up against the wood, puts his hands first on the wall by Steve’s head and then, when that’s not good enough, on his face. He feels like he’s in some kind of trance, maybe a dream, so he rubs both thumbs over the arch of Steve’s cheeks, feels the way his breath shudders in his chest.

“Billy,” Steve whispers. No one’s ever really said his name the way Steve does—like it’s something good.

He wants to say Steve’s name like that. He wants to say, you weren’t supposed to happen to me, and, I wasn’t supposed to get this again. He wants to say, I love you even though it’ll kill me.

But he can’t speak, the words are all stuck behind his heart, lodged in his throat. So, he just kisses him, warm and slow, like they’re still in bed, like it’s 3am and he’s a loser. Maybe he’s a loser all the time now—maybe that’s what’s Steve’s done to him.

He kisses him until he can’t breathe, and then, still too unmoored to think about moving away, he tucks his face into Steve’s neck. He feels Steve hesitate before he slips his hands under Billy’s
sweater, rests his palms on the dip of his back.

Billy doesn’t think about it, not ever, not really, but in some other life—Christmas meant hard wooden seats and too many candles, late, late at night, and Mama saying, ¿estás escuchando, miño? Billy never listened, not really, and he doesn’t pray, not ever, but if he did, he would now—for this, just this, for as long as he’s allowed.

He’s thinking about what he would do to keep it, and then Steve whispers, “Billy.”

“Hmm?”

“I want . . .” he trails off.

“What,” says Billy.

Steve puts his lips to Billy’s ear and then says, “My present.”

“Fucker.” Billy pushes away from him. He turns towards the door to go get it, though, cause he did spend a buck fifty, and, whatever, Steve’ll probably pretend to like it even if he doesn’t. Steve laughs and follows him, presses up against his back, tucks his forever-cold nose behind Billy’s ear.

“So, you liked it,” he says as Billy roots around in his coat pocket for the keys. Billy snorts, thinks that’s kind of understatement.

“Whatever.” He twists in Steve’s grip, waves the keys in front of his face. “Go get your fucking gift.”

After boxed spaghetti for dinner (because they live the high life at Casa Harrington), Steve wants to watch Rudolph, won’t shut up about it. Even though Billy says fuck no about six hundred times, somehow he still ends up with Steve’s head pillowed in his lap, one hand in Steve’s hair, and a dumbass kids’ cartoon playing on the TV.

Forty minutes in, Steve is heavy against him, and Billy figures he’s asleep, tries to sort out how to reach the remote without waking him. But then Steve says something, muffled by the mittens pressed to his face. He’s still got them on even though it’s probably pushing seventy-five in here, with the way Steve keeps the heat up. He was so quiet when he opened them, Billy thought for sure it was fucking stupid, but, so far, he’s only taken them off to eat, and keeps hiding his face in them like a little kid, so. He must like them okay.

“What?” says Billy.

Steve moves the mittens away from his mouth, but just a little, tucks them under his chin. “I said, I got Max something.”

Billy’s hand goes tense in Steve’s hair. He hasn’t spoken to Max since the hospital, doesn’t even know where she is. They were all supposed to go up to Susan’s sister’s place for Christmas, before—everything. He’s not sure, but he thinks they still did.

Steve’s saying, “—got stuff for the others, you know, and I thought it’d be weird if I didn’t get her
something—I mean, I wanted to, I just don’t know if she hates me, or whatever.”

Billy’s still not sure, weeks later, what the hell happened that night, or afterwards. He doesn’t know what went down between Steve and Max, just that, the morning Billy was discharged, she wouldn’t look at Steve, wouldn’t respond when he asked her shit.

“—thought maybe you could give it to her? Like, whenever you see her next.”

“What is it,” says Billy. He really doesn’t give a shit, just hates the idea of that, like, what the fuck’s he supposed to say—here, Maxine, this is from Steve, try not to get him murdered, merry fucking Christmas.

“Um, they’re, like, wheels for her skateboard? I sort of asked Dustin what she might want. I got them in red, though, which looks kind of cool, I thought. I mean, that’s her favorite color, right?”

Yeah, Billy tries to say, but his words are all stuck again, cause—

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“That’s her favorite color, right?”

“Yeah. But, dude—come on. You know you don’t have to get her shit.” Billy flicked at one of the plastic Cabbage Patch Kids boxes, eyeing their creepy faces. He shot a look at Jack when he didn’t answer. He was frowning at some robot car toy, looking like he seriously gave a shit about all this.

“Man, seriously. If you got her, like, a card, she’d fucking blow her lid. You don’t need to actually buy her any of this crap.” He poked some button on one of the plastic toys, just to watch it light up. It made this awful screeching sound instead, and the girl behind the counter looked up from her magazine to glare at them. Billy grinned at her, all teeth, before he turned back to Jack.

“I just want to get her something she’ll like,” Jack said, peering at the back of the car’s box before he looked up at Billy.

“The fuck do you care so much, man,” Billy said, thinking like always that it was so weird, Jack’s stupid fondness for Max.

Jack shrugged and put the box back on the shelf, tucked his hands in his pockets like he only did when he wanted to reach for Billy and couldn’t. Billy grinned up at him knowingly, and he rolled his eyes.

“Whatever, man,” said Jack, “You don’t know how lucky you got it. Like, you hate her now, but when you guys are older, it’s like, so much better—having someone who gets all your family’s dumbass drama, and, like, knows all your shit and still gives a fuck about you? That’s sick, man. My cousins are like that, you know? Built-in ride or die for life.” Jack shrugged again. “Being an only child fucking sucks, dude. You should be thanking Max for showing up.”

Billy thought about those few years when he first moved in with Neil, how he’d forget to get fucking food, forget he even had a kid to look after in the first place—how that changed when he started seeing Susan, when he had to act like a fucking standup piece of shit to trick her into sticking around.

“Whatever,” said Billy, hating the prickling thing he got under his skin when he thought about that.
“Max won’t like anything from here anyway, asshole. She’s gonna be thirteen, not five.”

“Why the fuck are you telling me now, and not, like, ten years ago when we got here?” Billy smirked up at Jack and then dodged the hand he pushed at his face, laughed.

“Just wanted to see what shitty thing you’d pick.”

“You’re wasting your own time, too, genius. Just tell me what to get her so we can go do something.” He said, go do something, the way Billy knew he meant, something just us in the dugouts by the field.

“Fine,” said Billy, and he hesitated a beat before he said, “How much were you thinking to spend? Cause, Max has never been to Disneyland, and they’ve got these day tickets—”

“That’s, like, twenty bucks, man.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know—we could split it, though. I mean, we could all go.”

“What, you, me, and Max?”

“Yeah, dude—you know she’s in love with you, right? You spend a day with her at Disneyland, that’s gonna be the best fucking day of her life.”

Jack got this dumb smile on his face then, reached out and tugged at the string of Billy’s hoodie. “Aw, shucks,” he said. “I got all these Hargroves in love with me.”

Billy pushed his hand away and dragged him towards the door. “Max isn’t a Hargrove, idiot.”

He started in the direction of the park and Jack followed, threw an arm around his shoulder like they were just buds. His arm was heavy and warm.

“I know all your shit,” Billy said, without really meaning to, the words just slipping out.

“Yeah?” said Jack, that knowing look in his eye—fucking smartass. “You ride or die for me, pretty boy?”

For life, thought Billy. “Fuck off,” he said.

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“Billy?” Steve’s sitting up when Billy checks back in, babbling in his freaked-out way, “I can just get Dustin to give it to her, he can say he got it, it’s no big deal—”

“Nah,” Billy chokes out, clearing his throat and wishing he could just be fucking normal for once—Steve has that worried wrinkle in his forehead now. Billy hates putting that there, especially when he finally got Steve tired and heavy—Steve is so shit at sleeping, but he sleeps best when he gets there slow, lulled by the TV and all the blankets and Billy’s hand in his hair. Now all that progress is lost, because Billy can’t keep his fucking head on straight.

He thumbs at Steve’s eyebrow, tries to get his words to come out normal, “You should give it to her.”
Steve looks at him like he’s crazy. “Um, or not. Did you miss the part where she wants my head on a stick?”

Billy rolls his eyes. “She’s fourteen, man. She wants everybody’s head on a stick. And then, like, a week goes by and it’s cool. Trust me, she doesn’t hate you. She likes you a lot better than me.”

Steve pulls back in even further, which is the opposite of what he should be doing. He looks at Billy like he’s *insane*.

“What are you even talking about?”

“What?” Billy pulls at Steve’s sweater to bring him closer, but he won’t budge, just sits there staring.

“Max pretty much saved your life, you know that, right? She loves you. She’d actually *kill* for you, dude.”

And that’s just—that’s—

Billy goes cold and then burning, like waking up from a dream. He’s aware, he thinks, of how many lives Max would end just cause she fucking feels like it.

He shrugs Steve’s mitted hand off his arm, too scratchy all of a sudden, and warm. It’s always so fucking hot in here. He lurches off the couch to get away from Steve’s sudden heat, the way he’s staring at Billy like he’s a *fucking idiot*.

“Billy?” says Steve. But Billy’s just *done* with this, waking up finally and realizing the absurdity of it all—what the fuck is he even doing here, playing house with Steve, fucking *holding* him on the couch on *Christmas*, like they’re fucking *married* or something.

He doesn’t hear the cartoon laughter from the TV, doesn’t hear the footsteps behind him, just hears his own rapid heart and his breath getting louder. So, he just doesn’t expect it, the grip on his arm—more of a touch, he thinks after, but in the moment it feels too hard, too much, so he just reacts to it, gets it *off*—

*Thunk*, goes Steve’s head against the wall, his breath rushing out from his lungs in a gasp that sounds like a bullet with how loud it cuts through the seeming silence.

Billy freezes—everything stops, his breathing, his heart. He watches things all slowed down as Steve brings a hand up to the back of his head like he’s checking for blood.

“Ow,” he says, like it took him that long to realize it hurt. And then he laughs, this fucking terrible sound, not even angry, just—like he should’ve known, like it’s *his fault*. “Yeah,” he goes on, “That was dumb. Sorry.”

*Sorry*, he says, like Billy saying, *yes, sir, no, sir, sorry, sir*. Like Billy thinking, *that was dumb, shouldn’t have said that, really gonna get it now.*

He’s gonna puke, or *cry*, or burst at the seams of his skin—he just wants it *out*, this big, dark *monster* stirring shit inside him, making him *hurt* people, hurt *Steve*, his—his *one good thing*.

“Billy?” says Steve, cautious and careful. “Are you—you want me to go? You want me to put the music on?”

Billy wants Steve in a suit of armor, in a glass case, somewhere far away from him or Max or Neil, or anyone who could make him check for blood like that.
“Sorry,” he croaks, and it hurts to talk through the bile in his throat, but after he does it once it’s not so bad—“Sorry, sorry.”

“Hey,” says Steve, holding his hands out between them, crouching down closer to Billy, which is weird, cause Billy doesn’t remember sitting down. “No, it’s okay. That was—I shouldn’t have touched you, I know that. It’s okay, I’m not mad.”

“Sorry,” says Billy, the only word he knows.

“Oh, baby, don’t—” Steve reaches for him and then stops, crosses his arms instead and sort of rocks back on his heals, looks like it hurts him to do it. “Don’t say that, okay, I’m not mad, Billy, I swear. Just—just take your time, okay?”

He gets up and walks away then, which is good, he shouldn’t be near Billy right now, shouldn’t be near him ever. It’s just gonna get him hurt, just gonna get him killed.

Where have all the good men gone, and where are all the gods?

The song starts up from somewhere, maybe Billy’s head. There are no good men, he knows, there are no gods—just the monster inside him, and its big, black claws, yanking at the strings from his heart to pull people in and know just who to hurt.

Could be hours later when things finally start looking dull and normal again, not so bright around the edges. Billy moves his fingers, his feet, taking stock of things.

He’s flat on his back on carpet, in the living room, must be, cause there’s white, twinkling lights floating above him—takes him a second to recognize the shiny bulbs on the Christmas tree. And there’s a weird humming sound, like a song is still caught in his ears, but it keeps going on even when he notices—coming somewhere to the left. When he looks over, it’s just Steve, curled up on his side next to him, his eyes closed, but not sleeping—Billy could tell even without the humming, knows the weight of Steve’s body just by looking, how it’s held too tight.

He must sense the twitch of Billy’s head on the carpet, or maybe hear the stutter of his heart, cause he opens his eyes right then. The humming stops.

No one looks at Billy quite the same way Steve does, like he better not blink too long, or Billy might disappear—like he’s too good to be real.

“Hey,” Steve whispers.

Billy swallows a few times, just testing it, and then he scrapes out, “You okay?” His gaze flicks up to Steve’s head, where it smacked, thud, against the wall. Billy can feel the echo of it in his ears, can feel the phantom bruise forming on his own skull, knowing that hurt pretty well.

“Yeah,” says Steve quickly. “Yeah, of course. I’ve had harder knocks than that, man, seriously.”

Billy curls his fingers into his palms, digs his nails into the calloused skin there—he doesn’t want to think about that right now, the harder knocks Steve’s had.
He’s not settled yet, kind of scrambled and aching, but he still wants to feel Steve’s skin under his fingers, wants to make sure he’s still whole. He reaches for him but stops at the last second, cause maybe it’s not such a good idea, with him still like this, not right, not steady, maybe he should—

Steve brings his face closer to meet Billy’s fingers, his eyes still saying don’t go anywhere.

“It’s okay,” he says. “I’m right here.”

Billy presses his fingertips to the purple smudges under Steve’s eyes, the ones that never really leave cause of his restless nights and all the worry Billy’s stirred up for him.

He wants right here to mean right here, for good. He wants to say promise me, the way Steve did that one night in his sleep, wants Steve’s pulse beneath his fingers always, always, wants to know for certain he won’t live to see it stop.

But he can’t ask for any of that, not when being near Billy is what’ll probably get Steve—what’ll get him—

He brushes his fingers down Steve’s cheeks, down his arms and to his wrists, that place where the steady sound comes through louder. He tries to think about that instead—how Steve’s here for now, and probably in ten minutes, in an hour, in two—and tries not to think about how the only people who’ve ever called him baby are long gone and in the ground.

“Some Christmas,” says Billy later, when they’re back in Steve’s bedroom, their usual places, Steve all crowded up against him. He’s thinking about twelve hours earlier, when he had Steve breathless and giddy right here in their—in Steve’s—bed, how quickly the ugly dark inside him ruins things.

Steve puts his lips to the pulse in Billy’s neck and breathes, “You’re here.” He doesn’t say best Christmas ever, doesn’t say that’s all I need, which would’ve felt fake, too-sweet even for the safety of their late-night talks. But, yeah—you’re here, that’s true enough.

He rubs the spot behind Steve’s ear that makes him shiver and says, “Go to sleep,” the low way Steve listens to these days. His body grows heavy on Billy’s, finally, making it harder and harder to keep from drifting off. But Billy likes to wait, to listen to Steve’s slow, deep breaths, until,

“Billy,” he mumbles against Billy’s chin, maybe an hour later.

“Yeah?” Billy whispers.

“Hmm, warm.”

Billy pulls him closer on instinct. “Warm enough, baby?” It just slips out, that stupid word, when Steve’s like this, his sweet, secret voice so close to Billy’s ear.

“Yeah,” says Steve. He always sounds like he’s smiling. “Warm?”

His murmuring gets higher at the end like he really wants an answer, and there’s no harm in it, really, he never remembers this part.

“Yeah,” says Billy into Steve’s hair. “I’m warm, sweetheart.”

“Hmm, good. Love you.”

It used to tear him up, hearing that and knowing Steve didn’t mean it, that it was just a trick sleep
played on both of them. But he thinks about the boombox and the tape and the mittens Steve hasn’t let out of his sight, and thinks maybe it’s just easier, like this. That’s all Billy wants, anyway—easy things for Steve.

“Yeah,” Billy says, ignoring his heartbeat ticking up again. It’s practice, that’s all. “Love you, too.”

He waits for some end of things, for the walls to give in, for Steve to shoot right up and laugh, say it’s all been a prank, all of it, since June. But Steve just curls closer, makes his soft, sleep sounds. The night is still around them, and nothing changes.

Chapter End Notes

The next update might be a little later than usual as I’m away for holidays next week.

Let me know if you liked it!
Two days after Christmas, Billy wakes to the light from the window shining in his face and rolls over to see Steve, silent and watchful, worry lines all up his forehead. Used to be, the few mornings they’d get together, Billy would wake to Steve shifting against him, pressing impatient kisses to his skin. But since the hospital, all he gets are anxious looks.

The doctors told him he was unconscious too long, that he could’ve had brain damage or some shit like that. Steve must’ve heard that, too, somehow, cause every morning he stares at Billy like he thinks it might still set in, all these weeks later, like Billy might wake up and not remember him. With Christmas, he thought maybe Steve’s happy mood might stick around but—he ruined that too.
He reaches to press his thumb to the spot between Steve’s eyebrows. Still muddled from sleep and feeling sort of empty, he thinks, *smile, baby,* and almost says it, too, except—

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“*Smile, baby.*”

“Fuck off,” said Billy, pushing Jack’s beat-up Polaroid out of his face. Fucking idiot snapped the photo anyway, the flash springing stars in Billy’s eyes.

“Come on,” said Jack, laughing his big, dumb laugh, the one that made his eyes crinkle and disappear, that made Billy’s skin heat. Billy tried to grab the camera from him, but he dodged, laughed again and, *flash,* another photo popped out the bottom. Jack snagged it before it fell, watched the color bloom.

“You’re gonna be sorry,” said Jack later when he’d packed the camera away. He kicked at the back of Billy’s heels to make him trip and Billy swore, pushing at him, thinking he was the one that’d be sorry if he kept this up. “I mean it,” Jack went on, catching Billy’s mock-punch mid-air and holding his fist a beat too long. “Years from now we’re gonna look back at these and everyone’s gonna think I’m holding you hostage with that look on your face.”

Billy snorted. “Who’s everyone?” he said, trying not to feel so good about Jack’s easy certainty. He was always saying shit like that, *years from now,* like it was all really gonna work out.

Jack shrugged, his dumb, sly smile creeping up. “I don’t know,” he started, “Max, my mom, our kids.”

Billy barked out a laugh. “Shut the fuck up,” he said and shoved at Jack. “I’m not giving you kids.”

Jack smiled wide and wrapped his arm snug around Billy’s neck, jostled him to make it look okay to anyone who might be watching. “Fine,” he said, “Dogs, then.”

Billy ducked out of his hold and pushed at him. “Jesus Christ. You’re crazy.”

“For you, maybe,” said Jack, leering how he always did to get his way. It worked like magic with just about any girl over fifteen. It was those fucking eyes of his.

“That’s it,” Billy growled. Jack grinned and then started backing away, knowing what was coming.

“Oh, yeah?” he said. “Whatcha gonna do, blondie?”

Billy lunged for him, but Jack was quick when he was being an asshole. He laughed and took off, Billy hot on his heels, for once not bothering to smother the smile breaking his face in two.
When Billy blinks, Steve’s still staring at him with all those worry lines. Billy thinks of weeks ago, Steve’s sleepy voice begging, *don’t go anywhere.*

He pulls at Steve’s t-shirt till he curls closer, sighs heavy into Billy’s neck. Billy puts a hand in Steve’s hair and swears to try harder, to be better today—it’s a bad one, he can tell already. It took him almost an hour to get Steve back to sleep last night, his freak out worse than even the last one. The purple under his eyes is dark and deep like twin bruises, and his breath against Billy’s skin is hitchy. Billy sneaks his hands under the back of Steve’s shirt and presses his palms there, knowing it does *something* but wishing it did *more.*

He’s just not fucking used to this. Before, when it was—when—

It was just *different,* with Jack. They were just the same. They both had shitty dads and shitty childhoods, swore and drank and smoked too much. They were like one fucked-up person split two ways, but he never worried if Jack was sleeping through the night, if he was cold, if he was missing Billy when he wasn’t around. He didn’t think about that shit. He’s never had to deal with this, this *ache* to make things easier. It sits under his skin, in his throat all the time.

“Hey,” he says, when Steve doesn’t start his normal morning chatter. “Know what you need?”

“Hmm?”

“Waffles.”

Steve shifts and Billy can feel his smile start against his neck. “Yeah? You makin’ ‘em?”

“Nah, you know, I was *actually* thinking what you need is a kitchen full of smoke, maybe see that fire chief you have such a fucking crush on—”

“Shut up,” Steve says, but he laughs, too, the sound making Billy relax a little. Can’t be too bad a morning if he’s laughing already. He eases away from Billy’s side, just enough to peer down at him.

“I *do not* have a crush on him. He’s, like, *forty,* and his name is *Bart.*”

Billy reaches to smooth Steve’s flyaway hair, making sure to keep his face serious when he adds, “That’s a strong, Christian name, man,” and waits for Steve to laugh his stupid donkey laugh, smirks when he does.

“You’d know,” says Steve, playing with Billy’s necklace like he doesn’t know he’s doing it. “*William,*” he adds.

Billy tries not to tense but the air gets weird anyway, too quiet. Steve’s smile dims, so Billy coughs and shifts before Steve can do something dumb, like apologize for shit that’s not his fault.

“Waffles,” Billy reminds him and moves to get up. But Steve doesn’t leave things alone anymore.

“Is that,” he starts, uncertain, “not good?”

Billy thinks about the way he snapped at Steve, months ago, back before they were doing this, that
one time Steve called him Bill. No one calls Billy that, not anymore, and it’d been so fucking terrible hearing it again, from some asshole he didn’t even know.

He thinks about the way Steve stopped just short of touching his hair, the third time they kissed, his breath still uneven when he asked, *this okay?*

Whatever, Billy said then, uncomfortable at the thought that Steve could read him so well, that he knew already how Billy didn’t like people touching his hair like they owned it.

Now, he just says, “Nah,” a little rough. “It’s cool.” It just—surprised him, is all. “You coming or what?”

When the doorbell rings halfway through breakfast, it almost feels like they were waiting for it, Steve still too quiet and Billy all off cause of it. The way Steve jumps at the sound and doesn’t get up right away makes a big, jaw-breaker-worry start up in Billy’s stomach.

Billy knows from Steve’s complaining that the kids don’t call always before they drop by—more like never—but it’s nine o’clock in the morning and winter vacation. No way those nerds are up.

“Want me to get it?” says Billy when another impatient buzz rings out and Steve still doesn’t move, just stares at the kitchen doorway.

“No,” he says, but he takes forever to put down his fork and slowly peel himself out of his chair. On bad days, Steve walks around the house draped in blankets, sometimes pulls them up around his head like a fucking Jedi. Today, he’s got the throw from their bed wrapped around him like a cape. He tugs it tighter as goes out into the hall.

Billy hears the heavy front door creak open, but there’s no yelling or shoving sounds, no sneaker squeaks on the hardwood, so—not the nerds. A minute goes by, and then two, and Steve doesn’t come back.

It’s just today’s luck, really, that when he goes to check what the fuck’s going on, it’s that cop in the doorway, murmuring something to Steve too low for Billy to hear, something bad, looks like. Steve’s not short, but standing next to the sheriff just then, he looks it. His shoulders cave when he’s nervous, when he’s cold. Front door’s still wide open, letting all the heat out.

“You assholes gonna close that or what?” says Billy, stomach sinking more at the way Steve jumps again. He used to think that was just something that happened in cartoons, before Steve. The cop doesn’t jump, just turns his too-knowing gaze on Billy, which is fucking fine. Better than making Steve all small like that.

“Billy. . .” Steve starts, but he trails off, like he’s been doing more and more these past few days, like Billy’s name is just some reflex before his brain’s sorted enough to put words into a sentence.

In the silence then, the thud of the door closing is like some kind of omen. The cop knocks the snow from his boots onto the doormat, and it’s only when a piece of ice flies off and lands on Steve’s socked foot that he quits staring at Billy and remembers what’s going on.

“Hop,” Steve says, lowering his voice as if he doesn’t want Billy to hear, as if he’s not three
fucking feet from them. “It’s Christmas, can’t you just—”

“It’s two days past Christmas, kid. I waited two days to make sure you had a good one. Did you?”

“Yeah,” says Steve, “but, Hop—”

“Steve,” says the cop, firm enough to snap Steve’s mouth shut. “I’ve waited as long as I can.” He turns his heavy stare back to Billy. “We need to talk.”

There’s this big grandfather clock in the hall that Billy can’t usually hear in the living room, cause they’ve always got the TV on or music or something, but he hears it now—just tick, tick, tick, and Steve’s anxious shifting on the couch next to him. The cop—Hopper, Steve calls him—sits in the hardback chair they never use and blows on the mug of coco Steve made for him for some goddamn reason.

They all sit in silence listening to the clock tick till Hopper puts the empty mug down—coasterless—on the coffee table. Billy watches Steve’s fingers twitch and curl into his knees, wonders if he’ll make it five minutes before he has to bring it to the kitchen or something. He’s such a mom.

“Alright,” says Hopper, fixing his eyes on Billy, who fights not to shift under the weight of it. “I wanted to come by, let you know how things are going, with the, uh, investigation.”

Next to him, Steve goes still.

“Okay,” says Billy, cause the day was already fucked, so, like, why the hell not.

“Like I said to Steve,” Hopper goes on, “I’ve been trying to keep you boys out of it as much as I can, give you some time to enjoy the holidays, but there’s no real putting it off anymore. So, I’ll tell you what’s going on, on my end, and then I’m gonna need you to answer some questions. Sound alright?”

“Yeah.”

Okay.” Hopper spares a glance for Steve, who’s picking at the skin around his fingernails instead of looking at either of them. If the cop wasn’t here, Billy would poke at Steve till he stopped, maybe reach over and cover Steve’s hands with his own. As it is, he can only watch the little beads of blood bloom along Steve’s thumb and wait for this asshole to leave.

“We charged your father with domestic battery and child abuse,” says the cop, “for what he did to you, and for doing it with Max there. The judge gave him bail, and last I heard, he’s going to put the house up for it. I’ve been able to delay it for now, but if it goes through, he’ll be out of county holding and back in Hawkins by the end of next week.”

Billy can feel Steve shift through the sofa cushions, hears the hitch in his breath that means he wants to start rambling but is holding it in. Hopper doesn’t seem to notice, just stares unblinking at Billy, expecting something.

“Look, kid,” he says, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “I don’t want that scumbag in my town. And I definitely don’t want him anyway near you, or Max or her mom—”
“He won’t hurt them,” Billy interrupts, not defending the asshole, it’s just, his dad hasn’t ever—and he wouldn’t, cause—“He’s got no reason to.”

Hopper’s eyes turn searching again and something too close to sympathy for Billy’s liking. “Okay,” he says. “But he’s still dangerous. I don’t want him here. The trial could drag on for months, or longer. It’s been a while since we had a case like this in Hawkins, it’s hard to say how it’ll go.”

Hopper sighs and shifts. “That’s why I need your help, kid. I want a done-deal, here. I want this bastard away for good. So, I need to ask you some things. And I get this isn’t stuff you want to tell me about—you don’t know me, you don’t trust me, I get that. But we need to work together, alright? I need you to be honest with me.”

It’s real cute, how this cop thinks he’s the first asshole to ever look all earnest at Billy, play the old, you can tell me anything, son, card. As if Billy’s dad’s never beat him so bad people started to notice before. As if hasn’t switched schools more times than he can count on one hand.

But Billy knows how to play his part, too, so he just nods all hesitant, and says, “Okay.”

“Okay,” Hopper echoes. Billy’s trying to figure out how he can spin this whole fucking ordeal as a one-off, so he’s not really paying attention when the cop goes on, “I need you to tell me about what happened back in California.”

“What do you mean,” says Billy, alarm bells starting in his ears at the solemn look on Hopper’s face.

“Why’d your family move out here?”

Billy swallows and doesn’t look at Steve, who might not even be breathing with how quiet he’s gone.

“Susan’s got family here.”

“That right?”

“Yeah, not too far.”

“Okay. So, nothing happened?”

“No, sir,” says Billy, the last part slipping out before he can stop himself.

“Okay.” Hopper leans forward even more, clasping his hands between his knees. “I’ll be more specific. I need you to tell me what happened to Jack Quincy.”

And all of a sudden, it’s not a game Billy knows how to play anymore. The normally too-warm air gets colder. Billy wonders what it is about Steve’s living room, that makes people talk about shit that’s not their business.

“Max tell you about that?” Billy scrapes out.

The cop has a pretty good poker face when he says, “It came up in the investigation.” But he glances at Steve, barely a second, just enough to make Billy look over at him, too.

Steve’s staring at a single spot on the carpet, his jaw tense and his face that special twisted way it gets when he thinks he’s done something wrong and it’s eating him up inside.
“Oh,” says Billy, and immediately wonders why he’s surprised. He’s learned absolutely nothing, fucking Christ. Of course, Steve told. That’s what you get for telling people shit.

There must be something weird in his tone, cause it gets Steve to look back at him, all guilty. And it’s fucked up, because Billy’s so used to seeing Steve’s big, sad eyes and wanting to make him better, that it takes a while for the anger to kick in. There’s a moment where his fingers want to reach out and press at the lines in Steve’s forehead. It passes soon enough.

“Yeah, fuck this.” Billy shoots up from the couch and stalks across the room to put some distance between them, feeling cold and empty and sick.

“Billy,” says Hopper, while Steve stays uncharacteristically quiet. “Look—I know this isn’t—”

“I don’t got shit to say about that, so if that’s what you’re here for, you should just go.”

“I can’t do that, kid.”

“Well, it’s still a free fucking country, isn’t it? I don’t have to tell you shit. You got a subpoena or something?”

The cop’s eyebrows go up like he’s surprised Billy knows the word subpoena, as if he’s an idiot who’s never seen Miami Vice before. Steve watches that shit like it’s going off the air.

“I’m not gonna subpoena you, Billy.”

“Cool, great. Don’t let the door hit you on your way out.”

Hopper doesn’t say anything back for a while, just watches Billy too much and sighs a few times. Then he turns to Steve and says, lowly, “Help me out here, kid.”

Steve stares at the cop like he’s nuts, which sends a hot rush of satisfaction through Billy’s veins before he remembers Steve’s not on his side anymore, probably never was.

He’s proven right when Steve rubs his palms over his knees, back and forth a few times, and then stands. He doesn’t try to get closer to Billy—good fucking thing, too—but that alone feels like a challenge, like a threat.

“Billy—” Steve starts, but the sound of his name from Steve’s mouth grates against Billy’s skin so rough, he can’t let him finish.

“Nah,” he says, making sure his eyes are ice, his face is rock. “I really got nothing to say to you.”

Steve’s teeth click when he snaps his mouth shut. Billy watches his throat bob and tells himself he cares nothing about it.

“He already knows,” Steve says after a beat, his voice flat and tired. “As much as I do, anyway. Max wouldn’t tell us anything. But I told him that Jack was your—that you were together. That Max told your dad about it, and he—he killed Jack. But that’s all I know, and it’s not enough to prove anything.” He looks at the cop then, who nods, and continues for him.

“I know some guys at the FBI,” Hopper goes on. “Guys who owe me a favor. They wouldn’t bend the law or anything, but committing felonies in multiple states could fall under federal jurisdiction. And if I happened to ask that they look into a certain situation, they would. Your dad’s case would move up the ladder, no more deals, no more bail. Somebody else’s problem.
But I did a little digging just based on what Steve’s told me, and there’s nothing. Just a missing person’s report for Jack Quincy in Santa Monica, filed by his mother. As far as I can tell, no investigation was ever opened. No body was ever found that matched his description. But maybe if I got a few more details, if I had a better timeline, I could put together a clearer picture of what happened for my guys at the FBI. Do you understand what I’m saying? I’m not trying to solve this thing, Billy. I don’t need a play-by-play from you. I’m not asking you for that. I just need a when, a where, a weapon—if there was one—and who was there. That’s it. If you tell me that, I promise you, you won’t have to worry about your dad again. Not for a long time.”

Billy stares at the popsicle stick Christmas ornament Steve made when he was a kid, probably in preschool or something. Billy’s never really gotten the full story from Steve on his parents, whether they’re good people or why they’re never here. But somebody keeps that ornament safe every year. Probably wraps it in tissue paper or something to keep it from breaking.

“Billy?” says Steve.

Billy doesn’t have ornaments. He doesn’t even have the memory of ornaments, if they ever existed. He has a car he bought with his own money, the shirt he’s wearing and few more stashed in a drawer upstairs. He has textbooks borrowed from school, three second-hand books for English, and a calculator he stole from Paul Brandon, that fucker. Now, he also has a brand-new boombox, tucked safe beside the tree, and the tape inside it, with ten songs written in Steve’s shaky letters. It’s not a lot by anyone’s standards. But it’s more than he had a year ago, more than he wants to lose.

“Memorial Park,” he says. “On Olympic.” It’s so quiet he can hear the cop shift on the couch even from across the room. “There’s these baseball diamonds. The dugout by the furthest one has an old storage room that doesn’t lock. That’s where we were.”

“That’s real helpful, kid. When was this?”

“Eleven, I guess. Maybe eleven thirty.”

“Right. And—the day?”

“October, last year. October 13th.”

“Okay. Was there anyone else with you? Was your dad on his own, or did someone help him?”

Jesus, fuck, this fag’s got some fight. Carter, get over here, help me hold him!

Fuck, no, I’m not touching him!

It’s not contagious, dumbass, get the fuck over here!

Don’t just hold him, boys, make sure he sees this. I want that ungrateful shit to know what happens to fags when they don’t straighten up. Are you watching, boy? Look at me when I’m talking to you, Billy—Billy—
“—Billy? Maybe this isn’t a good idea, Hop, can’t you—”


“Okay,” says the cop, softly. “You knew them?”

Billy nods. “My dad’s old army buddies. They were in a squad together. We used to watch the Super Bowl at Vinny’s. They’re, um. They’re cops. Four of ‘em, anyway. That’s—that’s why there’s no investigation. There’s never gonna be an investigation.”

Hopper’s fingers tighten around the pen he’s writing all this down with. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. Was—was there a gun?”

God—Billy used to wish there was a gun, so he wouldn’t have to hear over and over—then and now, and every bad day—that too-specific sound, bones snapping and breaking through skin.

“No,” he says, “He had a bat.”

Steve inhales sharply and Billy knows he’s thinking about that nail-filled monstrosity he keeps by his bedside. If Billy was feeling more charitable, he might tell him that he’s never minded it, that he knows how hard it is for Steve to feel safe. But he’s not feeling charitable, so he just stares at Steve and tries to make his eyes unreadable. Let him wonder if Billy’s been afraid this whole time. Let him feel like shit.

“Okay,” the cop says, and then he folds the little notebook away in his pocket. “Thank you,” he adds, so stupidly sincere that Billy wants to hit him, maybe would’ve if he didn’t feel so sick. “This is really going to help.”

Then he turns to Steve, who moved at some point to hunch against the wall.

“Walk me out?” Hopper says to him, and Steve nods, spares Billy one more twisted-up look before they both disappear down the hall. Then it’s just Billy and the tick, tick, tick of the clock.

When Steve doesn’t come back for a while, he slumps on the couch and flicks the TV on, so the blare of MTV can keep his ears from filling up with that old sound, and other things.

Feels like hours later when Steve wonders back in, stands anxiously in front of the sofa like he’s afraid Billy’ll bite his head off if he tries to sits down.

“Billy—” he starts.

“Don’t.”

But Steve never knows when to shut up.

“I know you’re pissed, okay?” he goes on, “but I’m not sorry.”

The laugh scrapes out of Billy’s throat before he can stop it, an ugly thing. “You’re not sorry?”

“I mean, I’m sorry you had talk about that stuff, but I’m not sorry I told him.”
“It was none of your fucking business.”

Steve’s jaw clenches shut at that and Billy watches something in his eyes shutter closed.

“You’re my business,” he says, like that makes any sense at all, like that’s some fucking reason for —"

“I’m not.” Billy laughs sharp again, so fucking furious suddenly he can barely see. It’s so much better than the cold and sick empty. His blood is so hot in his veins, his skin feels like it’s gonna steam. “I’m not your anything.” Somewhere outside the mess in his head, he knows that’s not really true. But right now, Steve’s no better than any other asshole off the street who can’t be trusted, so it feels fair and fucking good to watch Steve stiffen when he says it.

Steve looks away to mess with a stray thread on the cuff of his sleeve, and Billy knows by the curve of his shoulders that he wants to leave, to hide away in bed. Distantly, Billy remembers that it’s not a good day for him. It was just an hour or two ago when they woke up and Billy swore to do better.

But his dad’s about to be fucking court martialed or some shit, the cop knows his damn business, and Steve can’t be fucking trusted, so—it feels like days ago, and anyway, promises mean shit, don’t they.

Billy’s pretty sure Steve’s gonna give up right about now, call him an asshole and go to bed, so he’s surprised a little when he just shifts and straightens, meets Billy’s eyes again. “He was gonna kill you,” he says, serious.

“Yeah,” says Billy. “So, fucking what.”

Steve blinks, thrown, and Billy wants to roll his eyes. As if his dad wanting him fucking dead is some big revelation.

“What,” says Steve.

“You solved a giant fucking mystery there, genius, my old man wants me dead in the ground. Big fucking news.”

Steve stares at him that way Billy hates, like he’s a nutcase or something. “He was gonna kill you, Billy. Not, like, hypothetical. Like, actually, kill you.”

“Yeah, and who fucking cares, that doesn’t give you the right to—”

“Who cares?” Steve repeats, louder now, sounding a lot less sorry than he should, and a lot more like that arrogant dick from last year, all fight. “I’m not talking about some—some show, or what we’re gonna eat for dinner. I’m talking about your life. You don’t get to say who cares about your life, to me, okay? Not when we’re...”

“When we’re what,” says Billy, wondering if he’s really gonna say it.

“Not when we’re—doing this, okay? You’re my—my...”

“Your what,” says Billy.

“You’re my best friend,” Steve almost shouts. Somehow in the last thirty seconds he’s gotten a lot closer, the only thing keeping them apart is a foot and half of coffee table, pressed against Steve’s shins. It’s not what Billy was thinking, and it sounds—stranger, almost. He’s never thought about it
like that before.

“I can’t sleep,” says Steve, really worked up now, “when you’re not here, I can’t—you know, with everyone else, I wake up and I know it was a dream and I just think, they’re safe at home, and it was dream and it’s fine. Everyone else—but when I wake up and you’re not here, I don’t know. I know that you’re home, but I don’t know that you’re safe, and I can’t breathe because—so you can’t—you can’t say who cares about your fucking life, okay, because I do.”

He’s practically gasping with all the words tumbling out of his mouth. Billy watches his shoulders rise and fall, feels his fingers itch like they do for a cigarette. The sound of Steve’s hitching breath is some kind of Pavlov thing now, his hands begging to settle on Steve’s skin.

He rocks back on his heels instead. “You don’t get to tell me what I get to say,” he says and means it, even if he’s still thinking about what Steve said a second ago, my best friend.

“How’d you feel if I said it,” Steve shoots back, still pissed and buzzing with it, that manic way he gets, sometimes, when his nerves go wild and angry instead of anxious. “Yeah, like, you know, what’s the point? I’m an idiot, right? I’m never gonna go to college, I have no goals or, or aspirations. I’m probably gonna work for my dad until I go fucking bald. I live in my parents’ empty house, which just means every day I have to look at that pool a girl died in, which, by the way, was sort of my fault. The only friends I have are fourteen-year-olds, and my ex, and the guy she cheated on me with, and this other asshole who just likes to yell at me a lot! So, like, what’s the point. I should just give up, right? Just end it. You think I haven’t thought about it, how easy it would be to—”

“Stop.” If Billy was a different kind of angry, a while ago, he might’ve knocked Steve in the mouth just for thinking about that. “Jesus Christ, Steve, shut the fuck up about that shit—”

“Why,” he says like a fucking douchebag, propping his hands on his waist that way he does. “That’s what you’re saying.”

“It’s not the same thing—”

“Why?”

Because! Because you’re—”

“I’m what?”

“You’re normal!” They got around the coffee table, somehow. He doesn’t remember doing that but he’s all up in Steve’s face now. “Jesus, Steve. You’re gonna have, like, a normal fucking life, okay? You’re gonna find a job you like and get married and, you know, someday your parents are gonna croak and you can fill in the damn pool, or sell this fucking mansion and move to, like, New York or some shit. You’ve got so much good shit that’s gonna come, so just—shut the fuck up, okay? Don’t say shit like that.”

Steve swallows around something in his throat and nods pulls his hands back into his sleeves.

“You really think that?” he asks quietly, and Billy feels like he’s walking into a trap somehow, but he answers anyway,

“Yeah.” He knows it—Steve’s just good in a way Billy won’t ever be.

“So this normal life I’m supposed to have, I guess you don’t—think you’ll be part of it?” He looks at his hands, his socks, the wall. He keeps blinking too fast. “Cause, you know, the only thing I
actually _like_ about my—” he cuts himself off and laughs, a soft sound that twists Billy up inside.

There’s just this quiet then, a heavy thing, mostly cause of the way Steve keeps messing with his sleeves and won’t look at Billy. He starts straightening all the magazines on the coffee table that must’ve gotten knocked around earlier, rights the pillows on the couch, even starts folding the fucking blankets they keep down here on the sofa, all of ‘em. He won’t look at Billy.

“Are you pissed at _me_?” Billy asks when it just goes on for a while, this stupid passive aggressive shit Steve’s so good at. He doesn’t know how in the last five minutes _he_ got to be the bad guy, when Steve’s the one sharing Billy’s fucking secrets with the cops.

“I’m not,” says Steve but it’s short and clipped, which, _Jesus Christ_, he’s such a fucking _girl_ sometimes. And he still won’t look at Billy.

“Don’t do this shit, Steve, just—”

“I’m _not mad._”

“_Jesus_—fine, whatever. I’m still fucking pissed at _you_, so—”

“So, fine!” Steve throws the blanket he’s folding roughly back on the couch. He finally turns, and Billy expects a glare, his pinched, bitchy, _Steve-in-a-mood_ look. But he gets too-wide, glassy eyes, instead, a flush high in Steve’s cheeks, like he’s trying not to cry.

“You’re _pissed_ at me,” he says, “So, whatever, go—go do what you do when you’re pissed at me, just, storm the fuck out and drive away. I’m gonna—I’m gonna go shower, cause I’m fucking _freezing_, and then I’m gonna go back to bed, and—and when I wake up and you’re not here, I’m still gonna know that you’re _safe_. So, be fucking pissed at me all you want, Billy, I don’t _care_. I’m never gonna be sorry for telling Hopper, or making sure that fucking monster can’t _ever hurt you again._” He scrubs his hands over his face. “I’m not mad at you,” he says, quieter, “we just—” He rubs at his elbow again, swallow hard. “I guess we just think different things.”

He walks out of the room and down the hall without looking back. Billy listens to his trudging steps up the stairs, thinks about going after him for all of thirty seconds before he remembers why he’s _fucking pissed_. Steve can act like some kind of savior, or whatever the fuck he wants, but he’s still the one in the wrong and Billy knows it.

He knows it as he flips through shitty daytime soaps, knows it as he scrubs the dirty pans from breakfast. He knows it, but it doesn’t stop him from picturing Steve upstairs, shaking under four layers of blankets, probably crying and barely breathing without Billy’s hands on him. He knows Steve’s panicked breaths so well, he can hear the echo of nights and nights of them in his ears. Somehow, between one blink and the next, he’s standing in the doorway of the bedroom, where Steve’s phantom crying finally dims in his head, drowned out by the white noise of the shower.

There’s not much to do in here alone, so he dicks around—adds forgotten socks to the hamper, empties the tiny wicker trashcan, even changes the sheets. The shower drones on and on, and Steve doesn’t come out. He’ll stay in there, Billy knows, until the water runs cold, which in this fucking palace, could be an hour more.

It’s only when Billy starts taking out an old pair of sweats for Steve to wear that he starts to feel pretty dumb, waiting around like some asshole. _Steve_’s the one who fucked up and Billy’s setting clothes out for him like a fucking housewife. He drops the pants in the middle of the bed and goes to dig around in his backpack, which has sat untouched, slumped by the wall for weeks. He doesn’t
know how it got here, since the last thing he remembers is dropping it in the hall at home, turning
to see his dad worked up already, yelling—

It just got here somehow—which is, whatever, good, since Billy’s got three fucking acts of
Shakespeare to get through before school starts up next week.

Romeo’s waxing poetry about Juliet’s cheeks when the bathroom door finally opens. Billy’s been
waiting so fucking long for it, he almost expects the steam to billow out in clouds, with Steve’s
skin all slick, but it’s not really like that. Steve’s face is red and blotchy, his hair hangs in sad,
damp clumps, and the hot air that fills the room isn’t white, just muggy and over-warm.

Steve stills when he spots Billy on the bed, stands awkwardly dripping water all over the carpet.
Billy’s anger’s been fading already, but the rest of it slips away all at once, cause—Jesus, Steve
looks drained. Billy wants to be mad at him, he deserves it, but he just feels sick to his stomach
with this shit, wants it over with, wants Steve’s soft laugh pressed into his skin.

He doesn’t want to say sorry for things he really meant, so he doesn’t say anything, just nudges the
sweatpants on the bed closer to Steve with his foot. Steve looks at them blankly for a second
before grabbing them, and then just stands there, like he’s not sure he should change in front of
Billy.

Billy clenches his fingers around the sides of the book and keeps his eyes fixed on the pages, not
reading it, just trying to make it clear he’s not gonna fucking peak. When he looks up again
minutes later, Steve’s dressed, sitting at the foot of the bed, one knee tucked close to chest, his
arms wrapped around it self-consciously—which, just—

“What are you doing,” Billy says, suddenly exhausted. He hates this tense, cautious way Steve gets
when he thinks Billy’s gonna—what, hurt him? Leave, or yell, or do something—Billy never
knows, just fucking hates it.

“Thought you were mad,” says Steve to the comforter, messing with his sock for something to do
with his anxious hands.

“Yeah,” says Billy. “And I thought I told you I wasn’t gonna leave. Like, fuck, man, when’s the
last time I did that?”

Steve shrugs, mutters, “I don’t know.”

“Yeah, cause it’s been, like, months. So, just—stop saying that shit. I told you, already—I’m not
going anywhere. Okay?”

“Okay,” says Steve, but he still just sits and fidgets. Billy’s getting pretty tired of it—he never
should’ve told Steve about that not-touching-him-when-he’s-upset shit. Ever since, Steve just gets
like this when things aren’t going easy, like Billy’s gonna flip if he so much as looks at him. Like
Billy’s that much of a fucking wimp, or like Steve doesn’t need so much more than that, so often.

“Stevie.” And Steve does look up then, finally, cause he doesn’t really call Steve that out loud, not
unless they’re doing stuff. “Just—come here.” He tugs at the comforter like he can drag Steve
closer to him if he pulls hard enough. He just might in a second if this goes on any longer. It’s only
like, fucking, noon, but it feels like hours and hours since they woke up together, like days, and
Billy wants a do-over.

Steve’s still for a few more moments before he nods and crawls not-so-gracefully up the bed. He
gets under the ridiculous number of blankets and turns on his stomach to hide his face in his
pillow, keeping plenty of space still between them. Billy tries not to roll his eyes, just reaches over for him. Steve tenses for half a second before gives in, rolls closer to hide in his face in Billy’s neck instead. When he sighs then, it’s not quite his best sigh, his blissed-out one, but it’s a shadow of it, like relief.

Billy buries his nose right where Steve’s hair meets his forehead and feels something like that, too. It’s too fucking easy to block the last hour out, with Steve smelling sweet from his fancy shampoo, his skin still warm from the shower. Billy just wants a nap, a good one, maybe two, three hours of undisturbed sleep, for both of them. But he can already tell it’s not gonna happen any time soon.

“What is it, man,” he sighs into Steve’s hair. He always knows when Steve’s thoughts are going too crazy, whirring around in his head and shit, cause his breath doesn’t smooth out right.

Steve mumbles something against Billy’s skin, too muffled to hear.

“What,” says Billy.

“You think it’s some phase,” says Steve, which—what. Billy tenses mostly out of confusion, but Steve must think something else cause he pulls away and sits up. It takes all of Billy’s willpower not to fucking whine—he’s so tired and he knows Steve is too, knows he’d feel so much better if he just let himself lie down. Instead, he’s still going on about whatever the fuck now.

“—think that just cause, like, I’ve never been with a guy before, that I’m just. Playing some game with you? Like, I’m gonna get tired of it soon or something and go settle down with some girl. Is that really what you think?”

Jesus—“That’s not what I said.”

“Uh, yeah, actually, it’s exactly what you said.”

“I just—” God, Billy is too fucking tired for this right now. “I just meant you got choices. I’m not saying you’re gonna, like, meet some chick tomorrow, but. You know, later, you can choose something else—”

“I can’t, though.”

“Yeah, you can—”

“No, I can’t.” Steve’s all worked up again, his cheeks flushed with anger instead of steam. He’s moved so far away in the bed, Billy could reach his arm out straight and still not touch him. “I don’t get to choose how this works. Do you think,” he says, in that way Billy knows means he’s really in it now, “if I got to pick who I fall in love with, I’d choose this?”

Billy’s breath stalls, but Steve’s in speech mode, which means his mouth runs forever and he blanks out on everything else, doesn’t notice.

“Cause it’s so hard sometimes, Billy—you make me so crazy. You’re such an asshole, and you—you hate my friends, and I can’t talk about you to anyone, and, and sometimes, I think you don’t even see me when we’re together, you just—I didn’t choose this, okay? It just—happened. And, like, you know, even if I could choose, which I can’t—if I could go back and change it, pick somebody else, I wouldn’t.”

Steve’s got his hands over his face, rubbing at his eyes—which is good cause Billy’s not sure what the fuck his face looks like right about now.
“Cause you make me crazy, but like, nobody’s gonna make me feel like this. Like, okay, even when I was with Nancy—I loved her, a lot, I did, but. She didn’t—she didn’t make me laugh like you do.” He looks over at Billy then, still running his damn mouth, his eyes all big and shining. “I couldn’t talk to her like I talk to you, I’d never tell her—and, like, she could never make me feel, how you make me feel. You know, like.” Steve swallows hard, blinks hard. “Safe,” he says. “So yeah, I guess, even if I did get to pick who I love, I’d still choose you, now, and later, and, you know, probably for a really long time. And maybe—maybe that’s not how you feel, and that’s fine—that’s not what I—that’s your business,” he says, and Billy thinks about saying not your business, thinks about making Steve cry.

“But don’t tell me about how I feel or my choices or what my life’s gonna be like. Cause you’re wrong.”

Steve breathes big, heavy breaths then, and huddles around his knees. Billy stares at the hair curling up at the back of his neck. It’s getting so long.

He gives Steve a little longer and then—“Are you done?”

Steve whips his head up, “God—”

“No, I mean it, like great speech, dude, you got anymore—”

“This is what I’m talking about, you’re so—”

“You love me?” says Billy. He was maybe sort of listening to the rest but that’s really the main deal he got from all that.

Steve freezes and his eyes go wide like a cartoon. He’s so dumb looking sometimes, God, he’s so—

“No, I don’t,” he says, too quick.

“Really,” Billy prods, slowly closing the inches between them. “Cause I’m pretty sure you just said it.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Billy raises his eyebrow the way Steve always does. “Pretty sure you said it twice.”

“I—I don’t—” but Billy doesn’t let him finish, just kisses him, slow and deep, the way he’s always thought you should kiss someone when they tell you they love you.

Jack never—they didn’t say it really. They just knew, and Billy never minded, never wondered anything different. It didn’t matter. And he’s heard Steve say it for weeks now in his sleep, so this shouldn’t matter either, it shouldn’t feel so big, but Steve’s awake now and he’s still saying it, all angry too, so he must mean it and that’s just—just—

“Billy,” Steve says, the way he always does, like he loves him, except then he’s pulling away. “You heard the other stuff too, right,” he pants against Billy’s skin, “How you drive me crazy, and you’re an asshole.”

“Yeah,” says Billy, like it matters. He knew all that already.

“Okay, good,” Steve rambles on, “and like, you know, it’s—you don’t have to—I mean, I get it if __”
“What?”

“Just, don’t, um. Don’t say it unless you, like, mean it, okay? Please.” It’s the please that makes Billy pull back, far enough to get a good look at Steve, who’s somehow still anxious even tucked under Billy the way he likes, worried, as if he doesn’t know.

“Are you serious?” Billy asks before he can think better of it. It’s just—between the two of them, how could Steve not know? Billy cooks waffles for him from scratch, plays with his hair until he falls asleep, they made gingerbread cookies, for fuck’s sake.

“Um, yeah?” says Steve, staring at Billy’s chin instead of meeting his eyes.

“Dude,” says Billy and then nothing else, like an idiot, but, it’s not like he’s got a lot of practice, okay, talking about shit the way Steve does, speeches for days, saying all he’s thinking all at once.

Steve keeps bunching up Billy’s shirt in his hands like he’s trying to wring it dry. Billy knows he loves him, because this is his favorite shirt, the fabric old and likely to rip, but Steve’s twisting doesn’t make him snap—it makes him want to kiss the smudges under Steve’s eyes until he goes still and easy. He just doesn’t know how to say that or talk about any of the other million things Steve does that are dorky and weird—all the things that make Billy’s heart seize up with this dumb crazy love too big to handle.

So, Billy just says, “Baby,” soft, the way he usually keeps for when Steve is muzzy with sleep and won’t remember. He crowds close to him again and presses his face into Steve’s neck, so he can’t see him when he adds, “I love you, okay? Thought it was pretty obvious, but, like. I’ll be better—I’ll show you better.”

Steve’s fingers are gentle when he slides them through Billy’s hair, the way Billy only lets him when they’re in bed like this.

“You show me fine,” he says, soft too. “I guess I just didn’t want to read too much into it, you know, cause like. You don’t have to. We can do this, without that.”

And they can’t, really, cause that’s not how Billy works, but it’s definitely not the time to try to get into all that, not when Steve is so warm, and Billy is so, so tired. He’s kind of figuring out why Steve likes to fall asleep on him all the time, cause it’s so easy to drift off with the rise and fall of Steve’s chest all even and slow.

But Steve’s never, ever done talking.

“Baby,” he murmurs, and it’s embarrassing, the way Billy’s chest tightens at that.

“Hmm?”

“I’m not gonna leave you for a girl. Okay?”

That really wasn’t what Billy meant, but, “Okay,” he says.

Steve nods, his chin bobbing against Billy’s hair. “I don’t want normal stuff,” he adds, tugging Billy closer and kissing the space above his ear. “Just—just this.”

There’s something in Billy’s throat then, so he can’t say much back, just presses his lips to the pulse in Steve’s neck.

“Love you,” says Steve, and Billy wants to memorize it, the sound of those words in Steve’s real,
waking voice, but he’s asleep before he can try.

*End Part III*

Chapter End Notes

why do they only have serious convos in bed? why are they always falling asleep? idk, that's life with sleepy bitch disease I guess.
Your Love

Chapter Summary

Steve has a pretty great New Year's.

Chapter Notes

Who doesn't love a New Year's chapter in April?

This really got away from me. It's literally just 8k of fluff, so idek.

As always, thank you so much for the comments, they are everything to me. I hope you enjoy, and let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part IV: Steve

It’s just past four in the afternoon on New Year’s Eve, 1985, and Steve’s in that good place, not quite asleep, just letting his whole mind glaze over. With the laugh track from whatever sitcom on TV like white noise, three giant blankets keeping him warm, and his feet tucked snug under Billy’s thigh, it’s just—good. Feels like the kind of day he didn’t think he’d get again, last year, during the worst of it. The whole world outside is cold and foggy with snow, but inside it’s just safe and yellow and slow.

He feels like he could melt into the sofa, maybe float away with the gold-happy filling him up, and he can’t really help the humming sound he makes. When he was younger, and his mom was around more, she used to say he purred like a cat.

Billy huffs a quiet almost-laugh in response and squeezes Steve’s shin. He can barely feel it with all the blankets, but it makes the gold thing inside him grow anyway.

It’s like that forever maybe, or just a long time, and then Billy says, “Steve,” like he’s said it a few times before and Steve didn’t notice.

He tries to say, what, but it comes out more like, “Whum?”
Billy huffs again. “The doorbell, genius. You want me to get it?”

Of course, Steve wants Billy to get it. He couldn’t move right now if the house were on fire. But, while he doesn’t think it’s stayed secret that Billy’s been living here—*nothing* stays secret in Hawkins for long, except for, like, world-altering shit, and even then, just barely—he doesn’t really want to invite all the gossip that might come if Mrs. Carlton from next door drops by with more homemade jam or complains about the drain in her guest bath again.

He knows they’re safer now. Logically, he knows it. It’s just hard to remember, sometimes, and with Billy on winter break, they’ve just been holed away in here, secret and safe. It has to end sometime, but not right *now*, not on New Year’s and with everything so warm.

So, even though he *wants* Billy to get the door, and getting up right now is the fucking worst, he still does it, slipping off the coach and onto the floor with a dull *thump*. He groans into the carpet for a while, just long enough to make Billy laugh for real, and then he stumbles up and out into the hall.

It’s only when he’s a few steps from the door that he remembers the last person to visit. An anxious prickling starts up at his neck. Maybe things went wrong somehow, maybe Hop’s FBI friends couldn’t help them, maybe the bail went through and Billy’s dad is out—

By the time he’s worked up the courage to grip the cold metal of the doorknob, his heart’s beating wildly in his chest, too loud in his ears. He wishes he had another layer on. He holds a breath and yanks the door open as fast as it’ll go on its ancient hinges, but it’s not Hop on the other side, or Billy’s dad.

“Oh,” says Steve, trying to hide his surprise but doing a pretty crappy job of it.

Max stares at him like he’s being a weirdo. “Hi,” she says.

Steve hasn’t seen her since he took Billy home from the hospital, weeks ago. She cut her hair since then, he thinks, not super short, but shorter. It’s hard to tell with the beanie and giant, homemade scarf wrapped twice around her neck. Her breath billows out in clouds as the frosted air seeps into Steve’s bones. He’s lived in Hawkins his whole damn life, and he’s *still* not used to how *fucking* cold it gets in the dead of winter. He wonders how Max can stand it, being from California, which reminds him—

“You didn’t *skateboard* here, did you?” he asks.

Billy and Max have pretty much the same *you’re an idiot* look. Steve is overly familiar.

“Oh, no,” she says and waves vaguely behind her. “Jonathan’s taking me home, but I asked him to stop here first.”

Steve notices the car now, at the end of his long driveway. He can’t really see inside with all the glare off the windows, but he waves at it anyway, wonders if Jonathan’s thinking what the hell Max wants at Steve’s.

He hasn’t really mentioned the Billy-staying-at-his-place thing to Jonathan and Nancy yet, mostly cause he hasn’t mentioned the dating-and-pretty-in-love-with-Billy thing yet, and that’s probably a necessary first step. He just hasn’t really decided how to go about it. Seemed easier to hole up for the holidays and pretend like nothing was wrong or new or different, like maybe it had always been Billy-and-Steve in this big house with no one to bother them.

But the holidays are over now, and Max is on his front stoop, and nothing gets by Jonathan, really,
“Did you want—” Steve starts, but Max cuts him off, shoves something into his chest.

“This came,” she says in a rush. “It looked important.”

“Oh.” Steve’s hands come up instinctively to grab it—an envelope, bulkier and bigger than the ones bills come in. Heavy, too, like it’s got a lot inside. It takes Steve more than a few seconds to realize that the William A. Hargrove written on the front means Billy, but he did just wake up, so, whatever.

It’s only when he spots the seal in the corner that he really figures it out. The letters are all in a circle, some fancy-ass font, so it takes a second for Steve to read it—University of California.

“Oh, shit,” says Steve.

He can’t believe he forgot.

With the whole Jack thing coming out at Thanksgiving, and the nightmare just a few weeks after, he completely forgot about what was supposed to be Billy’s biggest worry during the winter.

He’d been so weird, for weeks, about it in the fall, only giving Steve little hints about how things were going, when they whispered late at night—stuff the counselor said at school, places he might apply. Once, he even mentioned what he got on the SATs, and even though Steve never took them, he knows enough to know that Billy’s scores were good. He’s so smart, it blows Steve’s mind. Like, he has no fucking clue what Billy’s doing with an idiot like him.

The envelope is really official-looking. That, and Billy’s name all spelled out does something strange to Steve’s chest. William A. Hargrove sounds like someone important, like, someone in a suit, maybe, with a briefcase. Not the guy who watches MTV reruns and throws pretzels at the TV when Mark Goodman is too much.

Steve must be staring at the envelope too long, because then Max says, “Okay. Uh, I’m gonna go now.”

“Wait!”

Max stops with one foot already on the bottom step, turning over her shoulder with another familiar look, what now, asshole?

It’s just—suddenly important, that Max doesn’t leave yet, that she comes inside and sees Billy, safe and pretty okay, all things considered. Those horrible bruises are mostly gone, and the lost, faraway haze he gets takes over less and less.

And it’s just—Steve hasn’t been able to forget the silent, furious glares Max sent him the last time he saw her, and all the things she said before that, when she was still speaking to him—how he had no right to talk about Jack, and how none of this would’ve happened again if it weren’t for Steve.

If you’d just listened to me, she’d said the second time he’d gone to see her, right before they let her leave that tiny hospital bed, if you’d just stayed away, then he would’ve been safe.

That probably wasn’t true, since Billy hadn’t been safe at home for a really long time, if ever, but—

Billy cries out sometimes in his sleep, now—he never did before—and nothing Steve ever does
seems to help. Steve thinks about it most then, Max’s voice in his ear saying, *if it weren’t for you.*

So, it’s maybe because of that, a little, that he wants her to see how much better Billy is, most of the time—how good Steve’s taking care of him.

*Don’t you want to see him*, he almost says, before he remembers who he’s talking to. Max and Billy aren’t related, really, but they’re kind of the same in a lot of ways, and Steve’s gotten pretty good at tricking Billy into doing things that are *so fucking lame, Harrington, Jesus.*

“I got you something,” Steve says, all casual, like it’s not a big deal.

“What?” Max asks, suspicious.

“For Christmas—I got stuff for all you guys, but—you’re here now, right? Just come inside for a minute, I’ll go get it.”

She hesitates on the steps, looking back at Jonathan’s car.

“They’re waiting for me. . .”

“I’ll drive you home,” he adds, his casual vibe slipping a little. Billy will never go out of his way to see her, and Max is stubborn, too. They are both so *dumb*, and those stupid skateboard wheels are, like, his only bargaining chip. “Seriously, it’s no big deal. It’ll take two seconds.”

Max wavers a little longer, and then the promise of a present finally wins out, which, *duh.* “Okay,” she says. “But I have to be home for dinner, so, like, *five* minutes.”

“Yeah,” says Steve, “of course, five minutes.”

But then she turns back around and starts down the driveway again. “What are you—”

“My *stuff’s* in the car, Steve,” she says, and he can’t see her face from here, but he knows she’s rolling her eyes at him, he can *hear* it.

He goes after her anyway, mostly to say hi to Jonathan, but also to make sure she’s not just messing with him, planning on getting back in the car and driving away, cause that’s something Billy would do.

“Oh my *god,*” she says, glancing back at him. “Are you *following* me?”

Steve bites back a grin. “I’m just saying hi.” That look on her face is almost as funny as the one Billy gets when he’s being a dick. It kind of makes Steve forget that she hates his guts. “It’s the polite thing to do, you know, or didn’t they teach you guys manners in California?”

“I have manners,” she says, glaring.

“Oh, yeah?” Steve loses the battle against the laugh bubbling up his throat. With her red coat and red hair and red scarf, she looks like a cold, angry tomato. “Are you hiding them in that giant hat?”

“Shut up,” she says. “You are *such* a dork. Like, *worse* than Dustin.”

“Hey,” says Steve, but they’re pretty much at the car, so he doesn’t get a chance to defend himself, or Dustin, who’s kind of a dork, sure, but so is everyone in The Party. That’s what happens when you go around calling yourself *The Party.* Steve accepted that a long time ago.

The passenger side window rolls down as Max clamors into the backseat.
“Hi, Steve,” says Will, waving a little.

He’s grown a few inches the past few months, but Steve thinks there’ll always be something—fragile about him, something that makes Steve feel like he could claw the eyes out of any person or thing that tries to hurt him. It’s a pretty unsettling feeling, but one Steve’s getting used to.

“Heys,” says Steve. He smiles at Will before Jonathan catches his eyes over Will’s head. He raises an eyebrow in a silent question, and—yeah. Steve guesses he’s got about twenty-four hours, give or take, before Jon and Nancy break down his door with the sheer force of their combined curiosity. He’ll—figure it out later.

“So, uh,” he starts, since Max is just standing next to him now with her backpack slung over her shoulder, no explanation offered. “I got Max something for Christmas, and I thought I’d, uh, give it to her now. Since she’s here, and all. I don’t want to keep you guys, though. I can drive her home.”

Will’s face screws up in confusion, and Jonathan looks like he buys about zero percent of that. Whatever. They’re both too nice to call him on it.

“I got you something, too, Will,” says Steve—distraction tactics.

“Oh,” says Will, smiling again. “Can I have it now, too?”

“Uh, I’ll give it to you later.”

“Did you get me something,” says Jonathan, smirking, that asshole.

“Yes, yeah,” says Steve. “I got you both stuff—good stuff, too, but, uh, Max has to go soon, so, I’ll give it to you later, I promise, okay?”

“You can bring it to the party,” says Will.

“Right,” says Steve, and then—“Wait. What party?” Max rolls her eyes again.

“The New Year’s party,” Will says. He frowns and then adds, slowly, “It’s—New Year’s today, Steve.”

Steve pretends he doesn’t hear Jonathan laugh at that, barely resists rolling his own eyes. “Yeah, thanks, man, I got that part. What New Year’s party?”

“Um, the one at Mike’s house? The one they have every year?”

Definitely sounds like something Steve should know. Except, he wasn’t here for New Year’s last year. His mom decided two days before Christmas that what he really needed to get out of this funk you’ve been in, sweetheart, was to spend ten days in Bali—ten miserable days, drinking daiquiris alone on the beach with his mom, cause that definitely cured him.

“Right, I, uh, forgot about that.”

“You’re coming, though, right? Mike’s mom gets this, like, fake champagne so we can toast at midnight.”

“It’s sparkling cider,” says Jonathan. He must sense some of Steve’s panic, trying to come up with an excuse for missing a party with literally every person Steve knows, cause he adds, “We should get going. We’re gonna go early, to help set up.”

“Oh, yeah,” says Will, and does a little wave again. “See you guys there.”
Steve and Max watch them drive away for all of thirty seconds before Steve can’t take the fucking cold anymore. He sprints back to the house with Max laughing behind him, taking her sweet time.

When the front door is finally closed against the wind, he leads Max to the living room, only panicking slightly at what Billy’s gonna think about this sort of ambush. Billy’s gone when they get there, though, the TV still on, but the volume turned down low, like he was trying to listen for Steve after he left.

His book’s still there—that fancy Shakespeare shit Billy reads out loud sometimes to make Steve laugh—and other stuff, too, scattered around, hints of the past few weeks. AP textbooks stashed under the coffee table, vinyls Billy rescued from the basement stacked next to the record player. There’s at least two pairs of socks strewn around from the room, cause Billy’s got this awful habit of taking them off when he’s hot and never picking them up, even though Steve complains about it, like, sixty times a day.

Steve wonders if Max notices the difference since she was over in the summer, if it’s obvious that it’s not just him living here anymore, but him and Billy—all their stuff mixing together. He wonders for the first time if it’s weird for her, not having Billy at home, if it’s quieter, if she likes it better, or misses him.

He tries to get a look at her face under the brim of her hat and that big scarf, but then there’s a clang from the kitchen, and they both start towards it instinctively.

It’s just Billy, his back to the door, messing with something by the stove. Pretty much every pot Steve owns is out on the counters, plus spices, utensils, random vegetables Steve has no memory of buying. He knows Billy can cook—it’s one of those secret things Steve’s learned that makes his heart feel way too big—but Billy mostly doesn’t bother with fancy, from scratch stuff.

Steve would bet every one of his Christmas presents that Billy came to find Steve when he didn’t come back, saw him and Max down the driveway, and retreated to the kitchen to panic, covering it up like he’s planning some big meal. He’s so dumb.

Steve wants to wrap his arms around Billy’s too-tight shoulders and kiss his stupid face until he calms down. But Max is here, and Billy probably wouldn’t like that anyway, so he just coughs and says,

“Hey, Max is here.”

Max shifts next to him, messing with the strap of her bag. Billy doesn’t turn around, cause he’s an asshole like that, just keeps chopping shit. If Billy was looking at him, Steve would throw the envelope at his head to make him swear and call Steve a fucking dick. But his back’s still turned, and Steve doesn’t like doing that if he’s not paying attention.

He gets closer instead, leaving Max hovering awkwardly in the doorway.

“Hey,” he says again. “Look what came, dick face.” He drops the heavy envelope onto the counter next to the cutting board, where it lands with a solid thwack. Billy’s hands still and his shoulders get even tighter. He stares at the front of it—William A. Hargrove—for a long minute and then shrugs.

“That it?” he says, like he didn’t spend actual months of his life agonizing over this exact moment.

“Oh my god.” Steve hates him so much. “Open it, asshole.”

He raises an eyebrow that mocking way he does, making fun of Steve. “No,” he says.
“Max came all the way here just to give you this,” Steve says, really laying it on and trying to be serious, except, Billy looks so stupid like that and it’s hard not to laugh at his dumb face. “And you’re not even gonna open it? Billy, she is dying to know.”

“Uh,” says Max from the doorway. “I’m here for my present.”

Billy snorts and goes back to cutting peppers—which, when did they get peppers? Never mind, the point is—

“Open it.”

“Sort of busy here, Harrington.”

“God, if you don’t—”

“Jesus, man. I’m gonna open it. Just—later. Go get the fucking present.”

And Steve would put up more of a fight, except, then Billy’s wiping his hands with a kitchen towel, and when Steve turns to look at Max, she’s sitting at the breakfast bar eying the fruit bowl, so maybe now is a good time to retreat and let them talk.

“Fine.” He still hates letting Billy think he’s won.

“What’d he get me?” he hears Max say as he wanders back into the living room.

He wastes some time picking up Billy’s gross socks, straightening the records and the books by the coffee table. He gets legitimately distracted by that Brooke Shields ad that’s always playing, and by the time he’s dug Max’s present out from under the tree, it’s been seven, maybe eight solid minutes—plenty of time for bonding and minimal time for fighting.

When Steve gets back to kitchen, Max is chewing on a piece of pepper and laughing. Billy’s got his half-blank, half-smug face on, which means he just said something funny, but is pretending like he wasn’t trying to be funny. Steve doesn’t bother hiding his grin.

“You get lost or something, man?” says Billy when he sees him.

Steve shrugs and says, “That Arrid ad was on,” mostly cause he’s still pissed Billy hasn’t opened the letter yet, and Billy hates the look Steve gets when Brooke Shields is on TV. It’s not his fault he still likes girls, and anyway, even if he only liked guys, he’d still watch it every time. Brooke’s the most beautiful woman in the world, that’s just a fact.

Billy rolls his eyes and goes back to washing stuff in the sink. Max tilts sideways in her stool, looking at him, expectant.

Okay,” Steve starts, handing her the store-wrapped gift. It looks a lot better than the one he wrapped for Billy, with shiny, red paper and a perfectly coiled bow. “I thought it was kind of cool, but I still have the receipt, so if you don’t like it, just tell me and we can totally go back and—”

“Man, shut up,” says Billy, peering at him over his shoulder. “You ever let people open shit without your running commentary, or is that, like, tradition for you?”

“Asshole,” says Steve. He mostly can’t help the way it comes out less annoyed than he’d like. “Do I look like I’m talking to you?”

“Tell you what you look like—”
“Oh,” says Max, getting the ribbon loose enough to tear the paper off. Steve feels stupidly nervous until she smiles kind of small and glances up at him.

“Thanks, Steve,” she says.

“You like them?”

Max rubs her fingers along the clear plastic on the box, where the four red wheels peak out. RAT BONES, says the blue font on the front of each one, which Steve thought was kind of weird, but the guy at the store assured Steve these were the nicest wheels we got, man, they’re straight from California.

“Yeah,” says Max. She slides off the stool and hugs him, there and gone, too fast for Steve to even hug back. She rocks back on her heels. “Really. They’re sick.”

“Sick?” Steve echoes, looking at Billy to share this incredible moment of mocking that’s about to happen, but Billy’s eyes are so soft when he finds them, just—extra blue. It throws Steve for a second, makes his throat stutter.

“No, Steve,” says Max before he can go on, rolling her eyes, back to being too cool, or whatever. “Sorry, did you want me to say it Indiana talk? Aw, shucks, Steve, this sure is swell. Thank you, kindly.”

“Oh my god,” Steve laughs. Max is seriously too much for him, she’s funnier than Billy by half. “Are you hearing this?” When he looks back at Billy, his lips are twitching. “Your sister’s making fun of me.”

“Yup,” says Billy.

Steve quirks an eyebrow the way he hates. “You gonna do something about it?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Uh, defend my honor, asshole.”

Billy stares at him for a beat and the gets a glint in his eyes Steve doesn’t like. “Maxine,” he says, all fake stern. Max’s eyes get big like she’s paying extra attention. “Quit picking on Steve. He can’t help how he was born.”

“How’s that?” Max says, like some cartoon from fifties.

Billy smirks. “A total hick.”

Steve can’t believe this—what was he thinking, getting them talking again? Now, they’re just gonna gang up on him all the time.

“All right,” he says, after they’ve laughed at him for a while. “I get it, you guys think you’re so fucking cool, just cause you grew up with, like, beaches and the sun. Well, whatever. In Indiana, we have the Indi 500 and we make 20% of the nation’s popcorn. So, you know. You’re welcome.”

Max starts giggling again, which sets Billy off, and then Steve has to join in too, even though they suck, because Billy’s laugh is pretty contagious and also the best sound ever.

“Damn,” says Billy, when he’s caught his breath. “I take it back, man. This is clearly the better state.”
“I accept your apology, and you’re right.”

They kind of just grin at each other for a second, which is maybe too much for Max, cause she mumbles something about the bathroom and wanders out of the room. Billy starts filling a pot with water, so Steve uses the moment alone to finally curl around him like he’s wanted to this whole time. Seeing Billy do stuff in his kitchen makes him feel a weird, warm kind of way, probably cause no one’s ever really used his kitchen much before. It’s been mostly for show his whole life.

He wraps his arms around Billy’s middle and tucks his chin over his shoulder, just breathing him in. He smells like Steve’s soap and Steve’s sheets. When it’s been long enough to make Billy huff, Steve loosens his grip just a little and says, “Whatcha making me?”

“Who says it’s for you?”

“Oh, are you doing things for other people now? Besides me?”

Billy shrugs like, that’s fair, making Steve laugh. He presses his cheek against Steve’s and leans into him. “It’s just chicken and rice,” he says.

“Then what’s with all the vegetables?”

Billy snorts. “That’s how you make chicken and rice, dude. Just trust me. I ever make you shit you didn’t like?”

No, he hasn’t, because Billy can cook, but he seriously doesn’t need the ego boost.

“I guess we’ll see,” Steve says. Billy tries to elbow him in the gut, but he’s pretty predictable so Steve’s already shifted away, laughing. He catches sight of Max in the doorway, who’s got a weird look on her face, like maybe she saw them just now—probably not so great for his big plan to get her to like him again.

“Max,” he says, “You want to, um, stay for dinner? Billy’s making chicken.”

“That’s okay,” says Max, “I mean. Thanks, but I have to eat dinner with my mom, before the party. It’s the only way she’s letting me go.” She tugs at the scarf around her neck for a beat and then adds, “Are you gonna come?”

Steve can feel Billy’s curious stare at the back of his neck, but he doesn’t turn around. “Nah,” he says, trying for casual and mostly succeeding. “I, uh, got other plans.”

Max nods like that’s what she figured. She comes into the kitchen only far enough to grab her bag and then starts to shift backward toward the door again. “I sort of have to go.”

“Right,” Steve says, trying not to feel too bummed. Billy and Max talked for eight full minutes, even laughed. No one yelled or cried, and Max liked his gift. That’s pretty good for something Steve didn’t even plan ahead of time.

He follows her out, stopping in the doorway for one last look at Billy before he leaves. He’s already busy doing stuff, grabbing something green from the counter, like some kind of actual fucking herb. He must not know Steve’s still watching, cause he brings the leaves up to his nose and breathes in deep, eyes falling closed with how good it must be.

Why that makes Steve so warm, he doesn’t know, but he feels it all over, tingling his skin, filling his lungs. He tries to play it cool and starts down the hall, where Max is at the door already, shoving her feet hurriedly into her boots. He makes it about five steps in her direction before he
can’t handle it.

“Hey,” he says, “I, um.Forgot the keys in the kitchen. You go ahead, just—meet me by the car?”

Max stares at him for half a beat before she rolls her eyes, not believing him for a second. “Two minutes,” she says as she tugs the heavy front door open.

Steve waits until it bangs shut behind her, then races back up the hall, his socks sliding a little on the hardwood. Billy must hear him coming cause he looks expectant when Steve steps back through the doorway.

“What now?” he says.

“Nothing,” says Steve.

Then he crowds Billy into the counter, cups his face with both hands, and kisses him, hard and deep. Billy makes a soft, startled sound but recovers soon enough, dragging Steve closer by his hips.

It’s just so good—Billy’s steady warmth, and the perfect, heavy press of his hands slipping under the back of Steve’s sweater to rest on his skin. The joy curling hot inside of Steve is a wild, aching thing he never wants to lose.

A long, angry honk sounds from the driveway, and Billy pulls back to laugh, quick and breathless. His hair’s all messed up, even though Steve hasn’t touched it, and his eyes are bright with amusement, so blue it should be illegal.

“Man,” he pants, still close enough for Steve to feel the air against his lips. “What’s up with you?”

“Nothing,” Steve says again, the word muffled by the thumb Billy presses to his grin. Steve kisses it, mostly to make Billy roll his eyes. “I’m just... happy.”

Billy’s smirk dims to something smaller, softer. “Yeah?” he says, more surprised than Steve likes, as if he doesn’t know how much better Steve is, every day, cause of him. Steve’s gonna have to work on that.

But another loud honk blares then, so Steve doesn’t have time to come up with something nice and smart to say about all this love that feels too big to fit inside him.

So, he just says, “Yeah,” definitive, hoping Billy will use his mind-reading power to sort out the rest.

Billy swipes his thumb over Steve’s lips one more time and then pushes him towards the door. “You better go before she blows out that horn.”

“I don’t think that’s how horns work, dude.”

“Oh, man, what?” says Billy, stricken, making his eyes all big.

He’s so goddamn dramatic. Steve laughs and backs towards the door. “You gonna have dinner waiting for me when I get home, baby?” he says, to piss Billy off and to see the way he gets all red when Steve calls him that.

Billy flips him off with one hand and wipes at his face with the other, like he can hide his blush that way—what a dork.
“Fuck you,” he says.

“Maybe later,” says Steve and then he darts out of the kitchen just in time to avoid whatever Billy tries to throw at him.

Steve’s grin’s still in place when he slams the car door, even with Max glaring at him like an angry, red thundercloud.

“Find your keys?” she says, dead flat. Steve just smiles wider.

“Yup,” he says and twists the keys in the ignition to prove his point.

He watches the mirror as he backs out of the driveway, but he can still feel Max’s stare. When he gets on the road he glances at her just in time to see her shift her gaze out the window.

“You have something on your face,” she says.

Steve wipes at his cheek until he feels something stuck to it. He tries not to laugh when he sees what it is, because maybe Max is actually mad at him for making out with Billy instead of driving her home, like, that would make total sense. He can’t help it, though. He’s in too good a mood.

He shows her the tiny dot on his finger. “Pepper seed,” he says and then flicks it at her. It’s small enough to disappear instantly, but Max presses her body against the door anyway, trying to dodge it.

“Ugh,” she scowls and then turns wholly toward the window, crossing her arms over her chest.

They don’t speak for a while after that, but Steve’s not bothered. The silence doesn’t feel stuffy or mad, just normal. Still, he’d rather put something on, and maybe letting Max pick the music would get her to loosen her tight grip on her arms a little.

“Do you—” he starts, but Max chooses that moment to speak, too.

“I wanted—”

After a minute of them both just waiting for the other to start, Steve says, “You go first.”

Max keeps her eyes locked out the window and hugs her backpack to her chest, fiddling with the zipper. “I wanted to say sorry,” she starts, awkwardly. “For that stuff I said, at the hospital. I guess—I don’t really think that. I know it didn’t really happen because of you. I mean, Billy—he would’ve got hurt anyway.”

Steve waits a beat to make sure she’s done and then says, “I’m sorry, too.” He keeps his eyes on the road, but he can tell by the blur of red in the corner of his vision that Max turns to look at him. “I’m not sorry I told Hopper, but I’m sorry that I tried to make you do it. I should’ve just told him from the start. You shouldn’t have to get mixed up in this again.”

“What do you mean?” Max asks, and when Steve risks a glance at her, she looks genuinely confused. “I am mixed up in it. It happened cause of me.”
Steve’s bright mood slips away at that. He remembers suddenly the way Max had phrased it before she got mad at him—her panicked, shaking voice that awful night saying, *if it weren’t for me.*

“I know it feels like that,” he says, trying not to sound *so after school special,* but not knowing how else to put it. “But, Max, it’s no one’s fault but Neil’s. Okay? I know it doesn’t seem like it, but you’re still a kid. And you were *definitely* still a kid when this all happened. You didn’t know. You *never* would’ve told if you’d known what was gonna happen, right?”

“No,” says Max, “I *never* would’ve—I didn’t think it was such a big deal. Billy always said—but he’s so *dramatic,* and he lies *all* the time. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah,” says Steve. “That’s what’s important, okay? And. . .” Steve trails off, wondering if this is gonna push it too far. But he knows that, out of all the people who matter, there’s only him and Billy and Hopper who know just how Max was involved. Steve can’t imagine them saying this, and someone has to.

“If Jack was here,” Steve goes on, trying not to make it obvious how weird he feels saying that name out loud. “I don’t think he’d blame you. I know Billy said all that shit about him not being your friend, but you know how Billy gets when he’s mad—he always seems to know, like, the exact last thing you’d ever want to hear.

“And—he’s told me about California. Not a lot, but—Jack did stuff with you guys all the time, right? Like—you went to Disneyland?”

Steve glances at Max in time to see her head whip up from staring at her lap. Her eyes are wide with disbelief.

“He *told* you about that?”

Steve’s smile is small and brief. “Sort of, I mean—he never said Jack was there, but he’s told me that story about a hundred times.” Steve shrugs, thinks about the way Billy pauses in weird places, the way his voice gets rough and low. “I can tell when he’s leaving stuff out.”

Max stares at him for a long time and then looks out the window again without saying anything.

Steve thinks maybe he’s gone too far, but he also can’t really stop himself when he’s got more to say. It’s kind of a curse. “Anyway, I just mean—I think Jack *was* your friend. I think he knew you’d never hurt him, or Billy, not on purpose. I don’t think he’d *ever* blame you, not in a million years.”

Max is quiet for a while longer, and then she says, almost too soft to hear, “Billy blames me.”

It cuts at something deep in Steve’s gut, because—yeah, that’s probably true. She’s just a kid, and she didn’t know, but Jack was Billy’s *whole world.* It might be years before he’s ready to accept that it wasn’t Max’s fault.

Instead of trying to explain all that, Steve says, “Billy loves you,” because it’s true, even if neither of them will admit it. Max scoffs, like he figured she would.

“I’m serious. Look. Billy—he’s an asshole, okay? He doesn’t give a shit about people. Like, just, general people, strangers, whatever. But, you’re his sister. Maybe not by like—blood, or whatever, but he calls you that all the time. He wouldn’t do that if he didn’t love you.”

Max is staring out the window again and blinking too fast. Steve really needs to shut up, but he never knows how. “He’ll get it, Max, eventually. He’s just—he’s still really mad, and—hurt, I
think. But. He’s getting better. I know you don’t see him that often anymore, but. I really think he is.”

Max says nothing back, and the only sound the whole rest of the way is the Carly Simon playing on 95.1, so sad and slow it makes Steve want to switch it off, but silence would probably be worse.

When he pulls onto Old Cherry Road, he slows down about thirty yards from Max’s house before he remembers there’s no real reason to anymore. But even after he parks right by the driveway, Max doesn’t get out, just sits and messes with the strap on her backpack.

It’s seems like a really long time before she sniffs and says, “I don’t—get it. How he can be with someone else, so fast. But, I guess. If he has to be with somebody in Hawkins, I’m glad it’s you.”

Weirdly touched, Steve says, “Thanks;” but that sounds dumb, so he adds, “Me too.”

Max smiles at that before she finally pushes the passenger side door open. Steve watches her get in okay before he heads back home.

It’s hard to not to speed as he gets closer, wanting so bad to get rid of the heavy sinking in his chest, thinking about all this again, Billy grieving somebody he loved so much. Steve tries to imagine it for a second, how it would feel to lose this warm, gold thing for good, but it’s barely a moment before he has to shake the thought away, too terrible to think about.

When he finally gets back, he stands in the hall for a minute, leans against the front door and tries to call up some of the happy he felt before—he really, really hates how quickly he loses it.

Sometimes, it feels like it takes days and days of nice things in a row to build up a mood that good, and then it all slips away with one conversation.

After a few more minutes with no real luck, he drifts toward the kitchen, following some amazing smell and the faint sound of music that means Billy’s got the radio on.

Steve recognizes the song before he gets there—Billy’s got such stupid taste when he thinks nobody’s listening—and he opens his mouth to mock him before he’s even through the door, but the sight in the kitchen distracts him.

If it was a mess before, it’s a war zone now, with three steaming pans on the stove, the sink running, and every inch of counter space covered with dirty towels, mixing bowls, and all the stems and shit that comes from using real vegetables.

And then there’s Billy, in the middle of it all, swaying and bopping his head, moving from counter to stove to sink, and back again, like he’s cooked here for years, instead of just the last few weeks.

And it’s so dumb, that Steve even bothered trying to pull it together alone, cause all it takes is one second of watching Billy make a giant fool of himself to spark that warmth again, so easy.

The song hits the chorus, and Billy starts using the spatula he’s got in his hand like a mic. It’s only when he turns that he catches sight of Steve in the doorway, but he doesn’t stop like he might’ve a month or two ago, just smirks and dances toward Steve, grabs his hand to pull him closer.

“You know I’d do anything for you,” he mouths along, gripping Steve’s hips and making him match Billy’s moves, “Stay the night but keep it under cover.”

“You are such an idiot,” Steve says loudly over the music, but Billy just scrunches his face in mock confusion and shakes his head, like he can’t hear him, keeps singing,
“I just want to use your love tonight.” He shifts his hands lower down Steve’s back, like he’s so slick or something, and it’s too much. Steve laughs in his face, but Billy doesn’t seem to care. He presses the next line into Steve’s lips, “I don’t want to lose your love tonight.”

Steve makes sure he can’t sing the rest, because it’s embarrassing, and also cause there are seriously better things he can be doing with his mouth.

At the table later, when Steve’s finishing his second helping of seriously crazy good chicken, Billy kicks at the leg of his chair and says, “So, what party?”

Steve’s got his mouth full, so all he manages back is, “Hmm?”

Billy raises his eyebrow, and Steve doesn’t know anymore, if he does that to mock him or if he’s picked it up for real. “The party Max was talking about.”

“Oh, um, it’s nothing.” Steve shrugs and scrapes at the last bits of rice on his plate. “Just this New Year’s thing at Nancy’s. I honestly, like, completely forgot about it.”

Billy doesn’t say anything, and when Steve looks back at him, his jaw is tense and he’s scraping at his plate too, even though there’s really nothing left.

After a weird moment of silence that rubs wrong at Steve’s skin, Billy says, “We don’t have to spend every fucking second together, Harrington. I’m not gonna, like, fall to pieces if you go out.”

Steve stares at him for a minute, waiting for a catch that doesn’t come, and then says, “Are you serious?”

When Billy finally looks up, he’s glaring. “Yeah, asshole, I can last one night without you, but thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Steve rolls his eyes at him and stamps down on the annoyance buzzing at the back of his brain. For someone so smart, Billy can be so dumb sometimes, even with his mind-reading thing—which must not be working tonight.

“I know you can, asshole. I meant—you really think I want to spend New Year’s at the Wheeler’s? Instead of here?”

Billy shrugs, like he couldn’t care less either way. “You don’t have to pretend they’re not your friends just cause they don’t like me, man. I really don’t give a shit.”

“Oh my god. Seriously?” When Billy just stares blankly at him, Steve sets his fork down and holds his hands out like he’s weighing shit, because clearly Billy is so dumb he needs, like, visuals. “Let’s see—I could spend New Year’s at my ex-girlfriend’s house with her whole family—who’ve never liked me, by the way—and baby-sit, like, six preteens, hopped up on sugar and up past their bedtimes, while every adult I know gets shitfaced, Or—” Steve lifts the other hand. “I could spend it in my own home, where it’s nice and warm, and watch the ball drop on my giant TV and make-out with my hot boyfriend all night.” He juggles the invisible weights for a second. “Really tough one there, I don’t know.”
Billy just stares at him, so Steve drops his hands with a sigh and says, “Seriously, dude. I don’t want to go to the party, okay. I really did forget about it, cause I was, you know, looking forward to just—hanging out with you. And, like, finally kissing someone I like at midnight.”

Of course, that’s the part that gets Billy’s attention. He smirks a little and says, “You never kissed anyone at midnight?”

“Oh, okay, I’m not a loser.” Billy raises his eyebrow again, and this time it’s definitely mocking. Steve rolls his eyes. “Shut up. Of course, I have. Just—never anybody important, you know?”

“What, Wheeler didn’t give it up last year?”

“I wasn’t here last year, for New Year’s, and we—broke up by then.”

Billy nods and then gets weird again, fiddles with his fork. For some reason, Steve flashes back to Max sitting in the passenger seat, toying with her bag and not looking at him. “Whatever,” says Billy, “You don’t have to stay here, but like. That’s, uh. That sounds good.”

Steve’s torn between teasing him some more or kissing that stupid, careful look off his face. It’s not that close a contest, though. Messing with Billy is too much fun. “Oh, yeah? I got permission to leave, huh?”

“Yup.”

“Oh, well, in that case.” Steve shoots up like he’s gonna make a run for the door, and he gets as far as the kitchen island before he feels Billy’s arms around his waist, his face in the back of his neck. “You’re so fucking stupid,” he mumbles into Steve’s skin.

“Youre the one in love with me,” says Steve, his skin flushing hot at being able to say that and know it’s true. “What does that make you?”

Billy twists Steve around in his arms. “An idiot,” he says. But then he’s kissing Steve really, really soft, like how they used to back in summer, when they were just sort of figuring things out. It makes something burst open in Steve, something so bright his eyes start to burn with it, which doesn’t really make sense, and he’s not going to cry, it just feels like it. “Love you,” Steve pants when Billy finally lets him go, and he can’t really shut up because it’s all he can think, just the one thought lighting up his brain over and over, “Love you, love you, love you.” He presses it each time into a different part of Billy’s dumb face.

“Jesus,” says Billy after too long of that. “I get it, you loser, get off me.”

Steve lets him pull away and just watches him sort out the kitchen for a minute or two, before he flicks the radio on and joins him.

At three minutes to midnight, Steve is yellow and hazy and warm. Literally nothing in the world could bother him right now—except for whatever is fucking poking him in the face, what the fuck. “Harrington,” it says, sounding a lot like Billy. “I can’t fucking believe this. Dude, are you
seriously gonna miss this fucking ball drop after we’ve sat here for, like, hours watching this thing —Steve.”

“What,” says Steve.

“Oh my god. Man, wake up. Do you want to fucking kiss me or not?”

Steve blinks harder at that, cause the only thing better than sleeping is kissing Billy. But when he can finally focus, Billy’s glaring at him, which doesn’t seem promising.

“Twenty seconds, dude. You are cutting this so close.”

The volume on the TV is down real low, but if he.strains, Steve can just hear the faint sound of people cheering seventeen, sixteen, fifteen—

“Come ‘ere,” Steve mumbles, making grabbing motions at Billy’s face, cause he’s too far away and Steve’s too tired to go to him.

But Billy just squints at him. “You awake for real?” he says.

“God, Billy. Shut up and kiss me, we’re gonna miss it.”

“Well, who the fuck’s fault is that, man—”

The voices on the TV get a little louder, chanting six, five, four—

“Billy,” says Steve.

—three, two—

Billy finally huffs and lets Steve pull him closer.

He doesn’t think they miss it, but once Billy’s lips are on his, warm and soft and perfect, it’s really hard to tell if time is passing at all.

They kiss forever, until Billy whispers, “Happy New Year, baby,” into Steve’s mouth and Steve hums back, just awake enough to murmur, “Love you,” one last time before he drifts back off.

Chapter End Notes

All happy, all the time - half the reason I wrote this fic was so I could write bits like this. Unrealistic? Perhaps. Catch me caring
How Soon Is Now

Chapter Summary

Big News all around.

Chapter Notes

Okay, this one is a doozy.

I really want to thank you guys in the comments for pointing out that Steve and Billy needed to clear things up in terms of how much Jack is still hanging over the relationship. I guess because I love hurt/comfort, this was how my mind decided to do that. In 13k words, because at the end of the day this fic is self-indulgent, and I wanted to keep everything in, so I did.

Thank you to everyone who has been reading/commenting/kudos-ing, whether from the beginning or just now—I love all of you! This is the first long fic I've ever written, and all your encouragement helps more than you can imagine!

This will be the last real "chapter," as the next one (should be) an epilogue. I think it will likely be a bit longer before the next update, since I'll probably linger over the ending forever. But, like I've been saying, expect more from this universe in the future.

In terms of Warnings for this chapter — in the scene at Jonathan's house, there is reference to a relationship that is borderline non-con because of age difference (I don't condone it, but the character doesn't see it that way). If you think this could be difficult for you to read, you can skip from "Always?" to "It is the point." and I'll summarize in the end notes.

I hope you enjoy! Let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's January 4, 1986, Saturday—the best day of the week. It used to be Sundays, the only mornings Steve ever got to wake up with Billy, got to see him all golden in the early light, and grumbly, rubbing his face into his pillow like a kid.

But now that Steve gets Billy every morning, Saturdays mean waking slow and easy, with no alarms threatening work or school, and the whole day stretched out in front of them with none of
that almost-Monday stress.

Today stands to be one of the best ones yet, with Billy’s rough, *so good, baby*, kissed into Steve’s neck and his big, warm hands pressing him into the shower tiles after that—but when Steve finally makes his way down to the kitchen and sees that *fucking envelope* still sitting on the countertop, unopened, after three *full* days, his good vibe is sort of ruined.

Billy’s at the stove making omelets, so Steve restrains himself from throwing it at him, hops onto the counter next to him instead and shoves it in his face.

“What’s with this,” Steve says.

“Uh, rude?” says Billy.

“Billy,” says Steve, not in the mood. “Seriously. How is this not driving you crazy?”

Billy shrugs, his *I don’t want to talk about it* shrug, which is not quite his *I have no fucking clue* shrug and tighter than his *I couldn’t care less* shrug. Steve’s gotten pretty good at reading his shoulders, but that doesn’t mean he gets the bigger stuff, like why Billy wouldn’t want to know already.

Especially cause, and Steve’s no expert, but this envelope is fucking *heavy*. There’s no way any school would send a whole *file* of papers for a rejection letter. Steve’s, like, 95% sure that means Billy got in, and if Steve can figure that out, Billy definitely can—so he just *doesn’t get it*.

“What if I open it?” Steve asks, already working a finger under the glue. Billy snatches it from him before he can do more than that, which was sort of the point. He waits for him to open it instead, counting on Billy’s need to *always* be first for *everything*, but he just tosses it on the breakfast bar and goes back to cooking.

“What the fuck,” says Steve, but Billy stays silent.

The quiet gets heavy, then, and too-full, even after Billy pulls two plates down from the cabinet and divides the giant omelet between them. He shuffles around the kitchen grabbing napkins and silverware and ketchup for Steve, even though he thinks it’s disgusting (*seriously, dude, ketchup on eggs, are you a fucking heathen?*), but he doesn’t look at Steve once. It’s hard not to feel like shit, a little, at that, because usually Billy laughs when he cooks, and dances, and steals kisses from Steve whenever he can, and now he’s not even *looking*.

They only get two breakfasts a week, like this, now that the holidays are over, and Steve’s fucked this one up in the span of thirty seconds—so, it’s like a record, or something, and it *sucks*.

Billy sets everything carefully at the table and only spares Steve a glance when he finally sits down, raises an eyebrow at him, like, *coming?*

So, Steve sits, too, and tries to eat, but his stomach feels like knots. And it’s so *stupid*, because he *knows* that Billy’s probably not even mad, that the air can’t *possibly* be as thick as it feels, pressing on him, weighing down his lungs.

“Hey,” says Billy after an hour, or maybe just five minutes, but it’s hard to tell. When Steve looks up from his plate, Billy’s got his *confused eyebrows* on. He looks at Steve for half a second before he sets his fork down and reaches to cradle Steve’s face with one hand, rubs his thumb at the edge of Steve’s jaw.

“Not mad you,” he says slowly, cause he’s a mind-reader about 80% of the time, at least. “I just.
Don’t want to open it yet.”

“Okay,” says Steve, because yeah, that was pretty obvious, and Steve needs to learn how to, like, let things go. Leaving things alone is not his strong suit, but he needs to get better at it, cause Billy’s so good about all Steve’s weird, fucked-up things, and Steve could do, like, the least by giving him this—space, or whatever. “Sorry.”

“Okay. Make it up to me by, like, eating your fucking breakfast. I slaved over that stove, you know, you could, like, appreciate it.” But he’s grinning when he says it and it’s so easy to fall into their normal again.

“Was it, like, exhausting?” Steve asks. “All ten minutes it took you?”

“Oh, you think you could do it? That’s pretty big talk for Steve ‘Burns-Campbell's-Soup’ Harrington.”

“Okay, asshole, that was one time, and—”

“Yeah, one time, cause I banned you from soup after that. Banned you from toast, pasta, eggs, definitely cookies—man, you got anything left?”

“I guess I wouldn’t know, cause I got my own personal chef now.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, I mean, he’s an okay kisser, I guess, but the food’s the only reason I’m keeping him arou —” Steve cuts off with a laugh when Billy throws his crust at him. He catches it just before it bounces off the table and stuffs it in his mouth, chewing obnoxiously at Billy until he laughs, too. Steve eats the rest of his omelet as Billy goes on about how Steve would be hopeless without me, man, like pizza five times a week, or starving, his ankles knocking against Billy’s under the table.

Billy might not want to open the envelope right away, but Steve definitely got him thinking about it again, cause Steve catches him glancing at it the rest of the morning. He keeps finding excuses to go back into the kitchen—cleaning dishes, getting snacks, one time bringing Steve a glass of water even though he didn’t ask for it and basically never drinks water unless forced.

When Steve wakes from his post-lunch haze to find Billy’s spot empty again, he stumbles into the kitchen, leans against the doorway, and watches with bleary eyes as Billy just stares and stares at the letter. His back’s to the door, so he doesn’t notice Steve shuffling over until he wraps his arms around Billy’s waist and presses his forehead to Billy’s neck.

He wants to try again, to say, I’ll open it for you, or you’re so smart, baby, or if you didn’t get in, you can stay here with me. But he did learn something from this morning, so even though it’s killing him watching Billy worry so much over some stupid paper, he keeps quiet and just holds him.

Billy leans back into him and puts a hand over Steve’s, but he doesn’t talk, so Steve doesn’t either. They just stand like that, for long enough that Steve starts to feel like he’s falling asleep all draped
around Billy, which can’t be comfortable. So, after maybe twenty minutes, he kisses Billy softly, just once, at the base of his neck and goes back to the couch for a post-nap nap.

When he wakes up again, the sun’s going down, the carpet littered with golden squares of light from the windowpanes. Billy’s got all the lamps on already—he’s so good like that—and he’s rubbing Steve’s feet absently, watching some football game on low.

Steve stretches a little and sighs, and when he looks at Billy again, he’s looking back, smiling at him kind of weird, like a dope.

“Hey,” says Billy, and something about the sound of his voice all low and full makes Steve want to kiss him. There’s nothing stopping him but gravity and the sweet, warm pull of the couch, so Steve fights both, struggles up until he’s sitting—halfway there. Just when he’s about to reach over and get Billy to close the last few inches, he catches sight of something white on the coffee table. The letter—opened and scattered, all however-many pages spread out, sort of curled up from being folded so long.

Steve snaps his gaze to Billy, but he just looks back, frustratingly silent, so Steve reaches slowly towards the paper.

“Can I . . .?”

Billy nods and Steve snatches the letter so fast he almost gets a paper cut, but he’s been waiting days, and he’s so done with being patient. He doesn’t read the whole thing, because that would take forever, but he catches pleased to inform and class of 1990 and looking forward to, and that’s enough for Steve to get the gist of it.

He knew already, he really did, so it’s kind of crazy, the rush he gets reading it for it real—Billy got into college, a good one, too, in California, which Steve knows he misses like crazy even if he never says so. Steve wants to laugh or maybe cry, but he does neither, just tosses the letter hastily on the table and crawls over all the blankets to get to Billy.

He climbs clumsily into Billy’s lap, grabs his face, and kisses him—on his cheeks, on his nose, on his eyebrow, everywhere he can reach. For once, he can’t even speak, too overwhelmed with loving Billy so much he might burst from it.

Billy huffs like he’s annoyed, but his hands on Steve’s hips are steady, pulling him closer. Steve breathes into his Billy’s neck for a minute, trying to center himself, before he leans back just enough to meet Billy’s eyes. He cups his face, thumbs over his cheeks.

“I’m so fucking proud of you,” Steve says, and he can’t help how it comes out, rough with tears, and he’s not crying, but he might in a second, so what.

Billy’s eyes get kind of wide, like he’s not used to hearing that, which Steve guesses he wouldn’t be, wonders at the last person who told Billy they were proud of him, if anyone ever has. That doesn’t make it easier to fight the burning in his eyes, so he just kisses Billy again, soft and quick, what else can he do.

“I mean it,” he goes on, helpless with it and needing Billy to know. “You’re so smart, and you deserve this so much, like, more than anybody, and I love you so much. I’m just—” losing it, basically, is what he’s doing, but Billy doesn’t seem to mind. He rubs his hands up and down Steve’s back and when Steve has to hide his face in Billy’s neck again, he presses a kiss to Steve’s temple.
When Steve gets a hold of himself again, he sits back in Billy’s lap, braces his palms against his chest and says, “We should celebrate.”

Billy squeezes his hips, but counters with, “Thought you had plans tonight,” which, Steve does—with Nancy and Johnathan, but he doesn’t want to think about that now, and also—

“No for hours,” he says, smirking a little. “Like, hours and hours. I can think of some things we can do.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes. Like, anything you want.”

“Anything?” says Billy. Then, he sort of tilts Steve to the side to get a better look at the TV and adds, “Cause, like, the Rams are up by three and—”

“Billy.”

But then he’s pushing Steve off his lap and into the sofa cushions, moves to follow him down, except there’s stuff getting in the way.

“These fucking blankets,” he mutters under his breath as he tries to untangle them from Steve’s legs and throw them off to the side.

It shouldn’t be so funny, but Steve’s half-hysterical already, so he starts laughing and can’t really stop, until Billy finally wins against the Italian cashmere throw and kisses him quiet.

Later, after their second shower of the day, they’re back on the couch, waiting for the new Miami Vice to start, when Steve thinks maybe he should ask Billy that thing he’s been meaning to ask. Now’s as good time a time as any, with Billy all relaxed and still happy from the letter and stuff—and also cause Steve has to leave in an hour, so he can’t really put it off anymore.

He steels himself for a minute and then nudges Billy’s thigh with his toe and says, “Hey, um. Can I ask you something?”, trying to sound like maybe he just thought of it and not like he’s been rehearsing it in his head for the last two days.

Billy looks over at him, expectant, so Steve goes on, “I was just thinking—and like, you can totally say no, and that’s completely fine, I would never say anything without asking you first, and, like, it’s gotta be a mutual decision and everything, so—”

“Oh my god, dude, what?”

“Sorry, okay. So. How do you feel about. If I—um. If I told Nancy and Jonathan, about us.”

When Billy just blinks at him with no reaction, Steve starts rambling, “Just cause, like, they know something’s up with me, I’ve been kind of, just, missing, for weeks, you know. Not like—I mean, I wanted to be here, with you, I just—I’ve been making excuses, but not really good ones, and also Jonathan dropped Max here the other day? And that was probably really weird, like, all of a sudden, and I know they’re gonna ask me about it tonight, and I don’t really know what I can say
“Steve,” says Billy, “Man, stop. Are you even breathing?” Steve’s not sure. Feels like maybe not.

He waits for Billy to say, *fuck no, to say, are you crazy? Do you want us to die?* But Billy just messes with the blankets covering Steve’s feet and stays quiet.

After *forever* of that, just endless, heavy silence, Steve can’t take it anymore, “Sorry, forget it, like. I shouldn’t have even asked, it’s okay, I’ll come up with something—”

“*Dude,*” says Billy, exasperated. “I’m not—saying no, okay. I’m just—thinking. Some people, you know, *think* before they talk.”

Which, shouldn’t, like, *sting,* or whatever, because Billy’s just *thinking,* but it feels *harsh.* Like, they tease each other all the time, but Billy’s not actually *mean* to him anymore, and it kind of feels like that.

But Steve needs to just shut up and let Billy *think,* so he nods and swallows and tries to pretend like maybe he didn’t say anything, like it’s ten minutes ago and he’s still glowing warm from the echo of Billy’s hands on him.

But only a minute or two later, Billy sighs loudly and nudges Steve with his foot. “Come over here,” he says, which—

“What?”

Billy rolls his eyes and tugs at the blanket like it’ll bring Steve closer. “If you stay over there, you’re just gonna get all in your head or whatever. I just gotta—think about it for a minute, but I can *actually* do more than one thing at once. So, like, put your dumb show on and come *over* here.”

So, Steve makes sure the channel’s right and then *goes*—it’s easier than breathing, stretching out between Billy’s legs, lying on his chest just right so he can still see the TV. Billy’s hands go to Steve’s back automatically, slipping under his shirt, and they don’t do this too often, cause Billy’s legs go numb, but it’s kind of the best, definitely good enough to make Steve mostly forget that Billy is *thinking.*

When the show cuts to commercial about halfway through, Billy taps his fingers against Steve’s back purposefully, and says, “Okay.”

Steve twists to face him and props his chin up on his hands. “Wait, so. *Okay,* like—okay?”

Billy rolls his eyes and tugs at a stand of hair that’s fallen into Steve’s face. “Yeah, idiot. Okay, like okay.”

“I can tell them,” Steve says, just, *really making sure.*

“Yeah,” says Billy. He smooths more of Steve’s hair down. After a beat, he adds, “They’re your friends.”

Steve’s kind of really in love with Billy. Feels like he maybe doesn’t say it enough, but if he said it right now Billy would just roll his eyes again and grumble, so he presses closer instead and kisses Billy as deep as he can like this.

“Okay,” he breathes against Billy’s lips.
“Just, uh,” Billy says when Steve pulls back. “Make sure they don’t, you know. Spread it around.”

“Of course,” Steve says quickly. “No, yeah, of course. They can totally keep a secret. Like, I’ll make sure. No one else will find out, I promise.” Out of the corner of his eyes he can tell the show’s back on, but it doesn’t matter, cause he has to add, “I just—really love you, you know. Like, that’s sort of the biggest part of my life, right now, and I just want them to know.”

Billy’s smile starts small and real, but then turns into his dumb, joking grin before long. “Dude, I get it. You wanna brag about bagging the hottest guy in Hawkins. I don’t blame you.”

It startles a laugh out of Steve. “Yup,” he says, grinning back. “That’s exactly it.”

“Knew it.” Billy nods towards the TV. “Show’s back on.”

“Yeah,” says Steve, pressing forward again, more interested in feeling Billy’s smile against his. “Don’t really care right now.”

“You don’t care about Miami Vice?” says Billy, just shy of Steve’s mouth. “Wow, you must really have it bad.”

“Yeah,” Steve says again. He does.

It’s just past eleven at Jonathan’s place, and Steve still hasn’t done it yet. It’s only after their third drink each, when they’ve migrated onto the floor of the living room and Nancy’s sort of humming to whatever niche, indie thing playing, that Steve feels ready enough to try to say something. He still feels like he might puke, but Jon ran out of beer a while ago, so that might just be his last vodka cola mixing badly with the Miller.

“So,” he says, and waits for Jonathan to glance over and Nancy to make a questioning sort of sound before he goes on, rolling one of the empty bottles between his palms for something to look at, “I know I’ve been kind of, uh, weird, lately. Like, not hanging out with you guys as much.”

Nancy’s been lying flat on the ground, but she uses Jonathan’s arm to pull herself back up, maybe guessing at Steve’s tone that this is important. She leans against Jon’s side and nods at Steve, like, yeah, we know.

Steve takes a breath. “Yeah. So, the thing is. I’m—with someone. Like, uh. We’re together.”

There’s a beat where they just stare at him, and then Nancy starts to smile. She elbow’s Jon, saying, “I knew it,” grins up at him, smug, “I told you.”

Jonathan laughs. “I know,” he says, “I agreed with you.”

“Oh,” says Nance, “Right.” She looks at Steve, still smiling. “We figured,” she says, like he didn’t just see that whole thing. “You’ve just been—happier. Secretive and weird, but happy.”

Which is kind of nice. Some of the stress fades for a second before Steve remembers that he hasn’t really even gotten to the Big News, and then it’s back full force, his fingers almost going numb from the nerves. Nancy’s still saying something, though—
“—just couldn’t figure out why you hadn’t said anything about her yet. I mean, is it someone I’m friends with? Is it Maddy Deidrick? It is, isn’t it. You know, I don’t care, Steve, really. I’m just happy for you.”

Steve sets the empty bottle on the floor so he can wipe his hands off on his knees. He really wants to do this—nobody’s asking him to—Nancy and Jonathan didn’t even ask, even though it’s looking like they knew he was hiding things. He wanted this, he just has to, like, get through it, which right now seems like one of the hardest things he’s ever done, right up there with wandering demodog-invested tunnels and watching Billy’s skin turn black and blue.

“Yeah,” he says, and his voice catches weird, comes out kind of shaky. Nancy’s been messing with something on Jon’s shirt, but she turns back to Steve now, concerned.

“Um.” This is so much harder than it was supposed to be. Jonathan’s barely-touched drink is still on the coffee table, so Steve grabs it and downs it before he can think about it, so quick it sloshes over his chin.


But Steve has to literally say this right now, with the too-sweet, acid taste still in his throat, or he won’t get it out at all.

“I’m seeing a guy,” he says in a rush, clenching the now-empty cup in his hands.

“Oh,” says Jonathan.

“That’s why I didn’t say anything,” Steve adds.

“Oh,” says Nancy.

Steve watches their dumbfounded expressions for ages, just waiting for it to settle enough that they actually say something.

“I mean,” Jonathan starts awkwardly, glancing at Nancy and then Steve and then Nancy again, who’s still sort of gaping, blinking her eyes real big like maybe she thinks she imagined it. “That’s. Uh. Cool?”

“Cool?” Steve echoes.

“I mean—that’s great, Steve. Really. It’s uh. We didn’t think—but that’s great. I’m glad that you’re, uh, telling us that and also that you’re—happy, now?”

“Oh. No,” says Steve. “I’m not—I still like girls, and everything.” He looks over at Nancy, who’s still staring. “That wasn’t. I mean, Nance—” she meets his gaze, her eyebrows all squinched up. “When we were together—I mean that was real for me, it’s not like I was faking that or anything. I like girls, I still do, I just. Like guys, too.”

“Have you,” Nancy starts, slowly, like she’s choosing her words really carefully, “always liked guys, too?”

Steve picks at a fraying string in the hem of his pants and shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe? I guess, I just, didn’t notice, before.”

“Well,” says Nancy, and then she nods, just once, and crawls over the few feet between them to settle next to Steve, takes one of his hand in both of hers.
It’s probably the first time their hands have touched at all since they broke up—and Steve doesn’t know what he expects to feel, but he’s kind of relieved that it’s mostly nothing, just, noticing that her hands are cold, kind of clammy, and strangely small.

“We love you,” she says. “And we accept your—whatever it is. Your liking guys, too. If it’s making you happy, then it’s good, right?”

“Right,” says Steve, warming again. They’re his friends, of course, they don’t think it’s weird. Why did it seem like five minutes ago this was the worst thing he could imagine doing? That’s so dumb. They love him.

Except, then Steve remembers again—this isn’t even the worst part of what he has to say.

Nancy’s dropped his hand already and is heading toward the kitchen to make more drinks, guys, this is a big deal, we have to celebrate, and Steve’s not about to stop her, because he’s really going to need another two or three more to get through this next part.

Luckily—or maybe not—he’s not the one to bring it up again, because after Nancy doles out their drinks and settles back down, she starts right away with, “So—this boy. What’s his name? Was he in your year? Or do you know him from work. Oh my god,” she gasps. “Is he older? Steve. How much older than you is he?”

Jonathan’s kind of smiling into Nance’s shoulder as she talks but he looks questioningly at Steve, too, and—right. Okay. This is why it was the worst thing he could imagine doing.

“Oh my god.” Nancy glances back at Jonathan, like she wants to make sure he’s hearing this. “Who?”

Jonathan stares and stares at Steve like he’s waiting to be corrected, but there’s no correcting to be done, so Steve just stares back. Finally, Jon says, “Billy Hargrove.”

And Nancy does this kind of snort laugh that means she’s pretty past tipsy and well into drunk. “Sure,” she says, “Okay. And I bet it’s that science teacher Dustin’s in love with. No—wait. That
old janitor, you remember? Dickens or something. Philip. Phiggins?” She goes on listing names, cause she thinks it’s a game they’re playing, but Jonathan won’t quit staring, cause he knows it’s real.

“Nance,” Jon says softly.

She snaps her fingers. “Higgins!”

It’s only when she looks up, waiting for them to laugh, that she notices the serious sort of look on Jonathan’s face. Steve has no idea what his face looks like, but it can’t be good, cause he feels like he might be sick, all hazy and overwarm, like his blood’s too thick. Jonathan won’t stop looking at him.

“What,” says Nancy. “Did he say who it was?”

And Steve doesn’t want to do this anymore, actually. This was so dumb. He could’ve just made something up about planning Max’s birthday or something, but, no, he had to go and tell the truth, like some idiot.

Steve finishes the rest of his drink in one go and heads to the kitchen, to get more and also to hide, maybe forever, because he doesn’t want to see the stupid, disappointed look on Nancy’s face when she figures it out.

Ten minutes and three more shots later, Steve ambles back to the living room because seriously, what the fuck does it even matter. Like. Okay, so if Nancy’s mad or disappointed or thinks he’s making bad decisions or whatever, like, it’s not even her business and he can do what he likes. And, also, Billy’s the best guy in the world—the hottest, duh, but also the funniest and warmest, with the best laugh, so. It doesn’t matter.

Steve falls over the back of the couch and lands with a fwoomp on the cushions, face first, but it smells like beer and sweat, so he turns sideways, curls his arm under his head and gets his first good look at the room since the Bigger News. The Biggest.

Nancy’s leaning against the armchair, staring at Steve, her eyebrows all scowly again. Jonathan’s sitting cross-legged on the chair itself, picking at the stitching and pretending like he’s not staring at Steve, even though he keeps glancing up—not really slick.

“What,” says Steve.

“Billy Hargrove?” says Nancy, and he can tell by the way it comes out, too loud and too fast, that she’s been holding it in probably this whole time. “What are you thinking? Steve, he’s psychotic. He beat you to a pulp, just a few months ago. That doesn’t bother you?”

It really doesn’t, because that was over a year ago, and this morning Billy kissed Steve’s eyelids and called him sweetheart. But he can’t tell Nancy that, so he says, “No. It doesn’t. Jonathan beat me up too,” he adds, throwing an arm out haphazardly in Jon’s direction, “and I’m still friends with him.”

“That is not the same thing,” says Nancy, and Steve doesn’t get why she sounds so furious.

“I know he’s hot, Steve,” she goes on, which, good, because he is, the hottest. “But there are plenty of hot guys in Hawkins, okay, and every single one of them is a hundred times better than Billy Hargrove.”

“Shut up,” Steve says, cause he’s really sick of it now, like, it’s not even funny, it’s just mean.
“I mean it,” says Nancy, “You can do so much better. I know you probably think there aren’t that many—homosexuals—in Hawkins, but anyone is better than Billy.”

“You don’t even know him.” And Steve doesn’t know how they got to this point, Nancy all angry and saying awful things about the guy he’s in love with, saying things like homosexuals, just—god.

“I know enough.”

“You don’t,” says Steve with a bitter kind of laugh. “You seriously don’t even know him, like, at all, and if you did, if you knew how he was, with me, you wouldn’t—you wouldn’t even think that.”

That seems to stop Nancy short for a second. She stares at him for a while and Steve thinks maybe she’s giving up, finally coming around, but then she starts shaking her head.

“Steve,” she says, “tell me you don’t actually like him. You guys are just fooling around, right? You’re not actually—you don’t really like him, right?”

“So, what,” says Steve, “Yeah, I love him, so, what.”

Nancy gets up on her knees, right in his face, and grips the sofa cushions, hard, like she wants to strangle him, but is taking it out on the couch instead. “You always do this,” she says, furious again. She gets so mad at him when she’s drunk. “You always fall in love with these people who hurt you, Steve. And you don’t deserve that.”

“Always?” says Steve, cause, like, that’s not even fair. “Just cause you dumped me doesn’t mean, like, always.”

“What about Laura Sherwin?” Oh, Jesus. Nancy was always throwing that in his face.

“Oh my god, why are you so obsessed with that? Laura was, like, five years ago, I don’t even care anymore.”

“You should care, cause you just keep letting people take advantage of you.”

“Who’s Laura Sherwin?” says Jon, and Steve maybe forgot about him, but there he is, like a little gargoyle perched on the chair above them.

“She dated Steve when he was a freshman,” says Nancy, glaring, like it’s still his fault, all these years later.

“Why don’t I know her?” Jon needs to butt out, okay, it’s not his business.

“Because she was a senior,” says Nancy, “She graduated before we even got to Hawkins High.”

“That’s not weird,” says Steve, for what feels like the millionth time. Nancy got so upset, back when he told her about Laura, like off-hand or whatever, when they were talking about first times, cause that’s what couples do. You’re not supposed to bring it up when there are other people around, but Nancy’s always such a bitch when she’s drunk and also mad at him.

“It is weird,” says Nancy, her usual response, “because she was held back a year, and was nineteen. You were fifteen, Steve. Don’t you see how fucked up that is? That would be like—like you dating Max, now.”
“What the fuck, no,” says Steve, because, gross. “It’s not the same—Max is just a kid, she’s, like, fourteen.”

“Oh, okay, so, what? You’d date her in, like, three weeks?”

“No.”

“You were a kid, too, Steve.”

“Shut up.” He hates it when she says that. “Why are we even talking about this, it’s not even the point.”

“It is the point. Cause you just keep doing this, you keep letting people take things from you. Billy doesn’t love you, Steve, he’s using you, just like Laura and just like me.” She’s sort of crying, Steve realizes, which makes him feel sick again. It’s really, really cold in here.

Nancy won’t stop saying things, “I shouldn’t have kept seeing you once I knew how much you loved me, when I didn’t feel the same way, because that’s not fair, okay? You just—you love people so much, Steve. You love people so hard, and you deserve somebody who’s gonna love you with their whole heart. Do you really think Billy Hargrove can love you like that?”

And—Nancy can’t possibly know about Jack or how much Billy still loves him, or about all the times Billy goes quiet and still, and his eyes get hazy, like maybe he’s pretending Jack’s still alive in Steve’s place. She can’t know about that, even if she is a mind-reader, cause Steve doesn’t think about it, ever, can’t stand to.

But that’s not fair to Billy, either—it’s not his fault he can’t give Steve his whole heart, and Steve doesn’t even care, it doesn’t matter—all he needs is some of it, just a piece.

Nancy must see something in Steve’s face that isn’t so good, cause her voice gets softer when she says, “I just don’t want you to get hurt again.”

And Steve doesn’t want to tell her about how impossible that is, how loving Billy is just a part of him now, like breathing, and it’s not gonna go away, not ever, even after Billy gets tired of him, or mad at him, and leaves. Steve’s gonna get hurt no matter what, so why shouldn’t he get to enjoy this good part, the mornings when Billy calls him baby and holds him like he means it.

He can’t tell her that, so he says, “Too late,” which is kind of the same thing.

She looks at him really, really sad, with her cheeks all red and wet still from the tears. Then she hands him another drink from thin air, knocks it against her own, and says, “Fuck him. We’ll find you someone better, okay?”

Steve doesn’t want to toast to that, at all—there’s no one better—but he could really use another drink. He’s so close to the point where he’ll just forget this whole fucking night, and that sort of seems like the best way to deal with all this. So, he downs it and holds the cup out for more.

Steve’s cold in a distant way, like wearing two pairs of socks and getting the outer one wet, not freezing, just weird. It’s getting colder, though, worse, and he feels really bad, like, he might be
sick, or maybe he just was sick, and now this is the awful, shaky part that comes after.

Something pulls him up too fast, like, way, way too fast, like, it should slow down a little, hold some horses.

“I don’t have any horses, but we’re almost to the door, okay? You think you can make it, or do you need to puke again?”

Steve is the champ of not puking, like, maybe a king, or something. Like, that’s his name.

“Yeah, I know, King Steve. Keep it together for ten more steps, okay?”

Sounds like Jonathan. Good old Jonathan, counting steps, keeping count. He’s so smart, but not as smart as Billy. If Billy was here, he’d find, like, the square root of the steps, cause he’s in calculous, like a big nerd.

Steve leans against something sturdier than Jonathan or calculous, like a wall, a cold, rough, wall. It’s so, so dark. Steve’s trying to feel his fingers and his socks and his eyeballs in his head to distract from the dark that’s all over everything, but then part of the wall opens up with sunlight, and Billy is there, of course he is, he’s got all the sunlight in the whole world inside him.

“Baby,” says Steve, or he tries to, but he’s moving at the same time and it’s hard to do both. He just needs to lean against something sturdier than the wall, something like Billy’s chest.

Then there’s a hand in his hair and an arm around his waist, and the spot where he always tucks his nose smells just the same.

“—gonna let him stay on the couch, but he was pretty, uh, insistent on coming back. So, I guess, just, make sure he drinks water, and doesn’t, like, drown in his puke?”

“—plenty of experience taking care of lightweights. Uh, thanks for—”

Oh, that’s Billy.

“Billy.” Steve pulls back to see his pretty face but miscalculates—he’s so bad at math—almost trips down some steps, but Billy’s got strong arms and big, warm hands, which reminds him, “Billy, it’s okay, Jon knows.” He tries to wink, cause he’s slick, but his head gets kind of dizzy, so he decides to just close his eyes instead.

“Easy, man. Yeah, I, uh, got that part.”

“Okay, so. You look like you—got this handled, so I’m gonna go—”

And then the wall closes up with Steve on the other side, the warm, gold side, with Billy’s hands still on him, which is the best thing in the world.

“Jesus, Harrington. How much did you drink? Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of keg master?”

“King,” says Steve into Billy’s neck, cause that part’s important. Also, it’s not his fault—“It’s the vodka,” he tries to explain, “That’s not resolutions, it’s, it’s cheating.”

“Yeah,” Billy laughs, the most amazing sound ever. “I hear ya, man. Let’s go to the kitchen, okay. Can you walk?”

Steve can walk, Steve is a master of walking, sometimes he can even run. He pulls away from
Billy to show him, but Billy likes holding him too much or something, cause he keeps his arm around Steve, even though he totally doesn’t need to.

Then Steve’s sitting, which is kind of better than the walking and the standing. He can get back to that in second, he’s just taking a break, just a little nap, and then he’s gonna show Billy how good he can walk and also how much he loves him.

The table is so nice, like, smoother than he would’ve thought, and he’s almost getting to the hazy part before he drifts off for real, but then there’s a hand in his hair again and Billy’s soft, tilty voice saying, “Hey, Stevie, come on. Don’t sleep yet, okay. Come on, sit up and drink this.”

Steve blinks and blinks for a while, just to see what there is to drink, but it’s just water.

“Gross,” says Steve, trying to bat the glass away, missing a little.

“Hey,” says Billy, closer than before, and when Steve looks over, he’s right there, sitting next to him, and he’s so beautiful—Steve maybe needs to be in his lap, right now.

“Stop,” says Billy when Steve tries to shift toward him, so Steve stops, cause, like, it’s important to listen, and also Billy doesn’t say that often, so Steve’s probably being bad.

“Drink this,” Billy says again, shoving the water right under Steve’s nose, but, like, it’s a free country and also Steve’s house, so if he doesn’t want to, he doesn’t have to.

“Yeah, but you’ll feel so much better, dude. Don’t you trust me?”

Steve trusts Billy more than anybody, even more than he trusts himself, but that’s not the point, the point is water is gross and tasteless and bad, and Steve already feels kind of sick and water would just make it worse.

“No, man, it’s gonna make you feel better. Just drink it, okay. Come on, Stevie. Be good for me,” Billy says that last part softer, the way he does when they’re doing stuff, and like, that’s not even fair. That’s like a trick, and mean, because now Steve has to do it, or he’ll feel like shit.

He tries to glare at Billy for pulling that right now, but his eyes maybe aren’t in his head anymore because it doesn’t work. Still, he wants to be good, so he sips at the water forever and ever until it’s gone, and he can show Billy the empty glass like a prize. Now, he’s supposed to get other prizes, like sitting in Billy’s lap, and kissing. Except, he still feels kind of bad, so maybe kissing later, but the lap part now.

But when he reaches for Billy, his hand hits open air, like Billy’s disappeared. Steve’s heart drops low into his feet, and he’s about three seconds from losing his shit, before another full glass is on the table and Billy’s back, saying, “One more.”

“No,” says Steve, which Billy’s supposed to listen to, but he just frowns.

“Baby,” he says, slow, like Steve is dumb—which he is, but he hates when people talk at him like that, cause he’s not a complete moron, okay, just bad at lots of things.

“Don’t you feel better?” Billy is saying, lowly. “Come on, one more, and then you can lie on me in the living room. Okay?”

And, yeah, that sounds like the best thing in the world right now, but Steve already did the thing once, and he’s supposed get good stuff now, not after more things.
“I did,” he says, in case Billy missed it while he was disappeared.

“I know,” says Billy. “So, do it again. Then that’s it, I promise.”

So, whatever, so Steve drinks more water, like, maybe a whole fountain, or an ocean or something else big and full of water. It takes a long time, long enough for all the hazy, good part of the vodka to go away, leaving him with a headache and a sore throat, and an awful, empty feeling in his stomach, because he’s not being good enough. Also, he doesn’t remember, but he thinks Nancy’s mad at him, and also Billy doesn’t love him enough.

“Hey,” says Billy after a hundred years.

Steve’s head is on the table again even though he doesn’t remember putting it there. Billy’s rubbing one finger down the side of Steve’s face and up again, back and forth, like he’s a cat or something, but it feels so good, Steve doesn’t mind. He could be cat if he wanted, it’d probably be so much easier than all of this. His head wouldn’t hurt so bad.

“You want to lie down?”

Steve wants to lie down more than he wants to kiss Billy, which is really saying something. It’s hard to get up though—he doesn’t feel sick anymore, but his body is so heavy, full of sand and sadness, and Steve feels like in a minute or two he’s gonna cry—which is exactly what he knew would happen if he drank that stupid water, and now look. That’s what he gets for trusting Billy and trying to be good.

“Come on,” says Billy and then he’s pulling Steve up with his warm hands, and they’re so big and perfect, so much better than Nancy holding his hand before, saying dumb, mean things about how Billy doesn’t love him—as if Steve doesn’t know already.

It takes them days to get to the sofa, and when they do, Billy just stands there, looking at Steve. It’s too hard to think, so Steve waits for the couch to decide who to sit on, so he doesn’t have to.

“Want to lie on me like before?” Billy asks finally, real soft. And duh—but even though Steve wants to, he feels like if he lies down right now he might not ever get up again. He wants to be in Billy’s lap and hide his face in Billy’s neck, like they did ages and ages ago, when Billy got into college and Steve was proud of him.

That’s too many words to put together, so Steve shakes his head slowly—too fast and his brain might fall out—and says, “No, you sit.” Billy sits, and then Steve, so, so carefully, sits too, right on top of him. Except his body’s not listening, so he ends up more sideways, half leaning against the sofa arm and half against Billy’s chest, but that’s okay. His head fits perfect on Billy’s shoulder. Billy’s hair is like an angel’s, soft and pretty. It smells so good.

Billy curls one arm around Steve’s back and uses the other hand to rub Steve’s legs, like he’s trying to warm him up. It’s really nice—it’s so nice that it starts to feel awful, because Steve doesn’t deserve it, and also he can’t stop thinking about that thing Nancy said.

Steve’s whole body feels better just by being so close to Billy. His heart feels warm despite all the sand weighing it down. But maybe that’s just cause he loves people too much, and Billy doesn’t feel the same. This whole time Steve’s been thinking that, even though Billy misses Jack, he’s still getting something good out of this thing they have, but maybe not—maybe Billy doesn’t feel light and gold and safe when he’s with Steve—and if that’s true, it’s about the worst thing in the universe, in any universe.
“Hey,” says Billy, suddenly. “You okay?” There’s a hand trying to get at Steve’s face, but Steve presses closer to Billy’s neck and won’t budge. “Baby, are you crying?”

“No,” Steve mumbles, but that’s lying, which isn’t good, so he adds, “Sorry,” also cause he’s probably making a mess of Billy’s shirt.

“Don’t be sorry.” Billy’s voice is so soft and perfect. If Steve was crying, it would probably make him cry even more, so it’s a good thing that he’s not. “What did they say to you?”

Steve doesn’t want to think about that, but he can’t stop hearing it all again, Nancy’s voice on a loop—he’s using you, just like Laura, and, do you really think Billy Hargrove can love you like that? And—Steve realizes suddenly, Billy’s a mind-reader, which means he’s probably been hearing it too, this whole time, which is just awful.

Steve lifts his heavy head and paws at Billy’s face till he can see him in focus. He looks so sad and worried, and it’s all Steve’s fault.

“It’s okay,” Steve says, because he’s not sure Billy heard that part, about how Steve doesn’t mind, how he’ll take anything Billy can give him. “I don’t care, it doesn’t matter.”

Billy cups Steve’s face in his perfect hands. “Sure, it does, baby. They’re your friends, and it matters if it’s making you sad.”

Who cares if Steve’s sad now, that’s just cause of the water—he’s happy most of the time, even with only some of Billy’s heart, Billy has to know that.

“It’s not your fault,” he says, wrapping his fingers around Billy’s wrist so he can steal some of his warmth. It’s getting so cold again, even with all the lights on. “If you don’t love me so much—it’s okay. I mean, I don’t mind.”

Billy’s eyebrows get all squinted. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s not your fault,” Steve says again, because that’s the important part. Does Billy get that?

“Steve—I love you. I told you that.”

“I know,” says Steve, “But you don’t love me how I love you.”

“What does that even mean?”

“I—” It’s so hard to think right now, and to try to remember how Nancy put it, that he loves too much, too hard, too often. Steve wishes there was a bigger word than love, because it’s not enough, it’s too short and small to cover everything Steve feels for Billy, the overwhelming, joy-bringing, warm-gold thing that comes over him every time he even sees Billy, let alone what he feels when Billy touches him, when he calls him baby.

He tries to think about how he can say all that to Billy, who’s so smart, who has so many words in his head that would probably work better, if only Steve knew them. And then he remembers—

“You’re my whole word,” Steve says, trying to quit crying long enough to make sense. “And it’s okay, that I’m not yours—I don’t care.” Billy goes stiff beneath him, so Steve rushes on, making sure he gets it—“As long as you love me even this much,” Steve holds his fingers up to show him the tiny bit, cause Billy needs visuals sometimes, “then, it’s okay. That’s—that’s all I even need.”

Billy doesn’t say anything for a long, long time, long enough that Steve is really sure he fucked this
up. He’s so stupid. He should just stop talking, he’s always ruining things, cause he never knows when to shut the fuck up.

“Billy?” says Steve when the silence feels like it might really choke him. His voice sounds like someone else, small and scared.

Billy’s hands settle on him again, nudging Steve’s head to his normal spot, tucked against Billy’s neck. Steve goes easy—he’s so, so tired.

“Let’s not talk about this right now,” says Billy, his voice like gravel, like how it is after his panic freak-outs—Steve did that.

“Sorry,” he says, fighting a fresh wave of tears. All he does is hurt Billy when he’s trying not to. “I’m sorry.”

“Jesus,” says Billy, and if Steve didn’t know better, he’d think Billy was crying, too. “Don’t be sorry, sweetheart. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but I’m gonna fix this, okay? Just, not right now. You should go to bed. You still feeling sick?”

Steve shakes his head against Billy’s shoulder. “Want to lie down,” he says. He might not make it upstairs, but Billy seems to get that, cause he slips carefully off the couch and helps Steve lie down right there. He piles all the blankets over him, even tucks in the edges so they won’t fall off, but he doesn’t try to sit back down, or lie next to Steve, which feels like a knife twisting, hot and horrible, in Steve’s gut.

He tries not to be such a baby, but he only lasts maybe three seconds before he says, “Don’t go,” kind of panicked. He can’t help it. He doesn’t sleep without Billy. He hasn’t in months, doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to again.

Billy’s back in an instant, kneeling next to him, pushing his hair off his forehead. “Just getting you some water,” he murmurs. “But I’m right here, okay? I’m not going anywhere.” He rubs his thumb softly over Steve’s eyebrows, his cheeks, his eyelids when they fall closed.

“Love you,” Steve whispers, like he does every night—it’s important, that it’s the last thing he says before he falls asleep, just in case he never wakes up.

“I love you, too,” says Billy, but he sounds so sad. “I love you so much. And I’m gonna love you better, okay?”

Steve wants to tell him, again, that he doesn’t care, that it doesn’t matter what Nancy says—a little bit of Billy is so much better than a whole lot of somebody else. But he’s too tired and warm, and Billy’s hand’s in his hair now, so he can’t do much but drift off.

Someone is nailing something into Steve’s head, with a jackhammer, or a saw. And why is it so fucking bright in here?

He tries to lift the blanket up over his head, which works for a little while, but then he can’t breathe, which is so dumb, like who even invented that? Breathing, or blankets you can’t breathe under—god.
Then somebody is *screaming*.

“Steve,” says Billy, for maybe the third or fourth time before Steve finally unsticks his gross, chapped lips enough to say,

“Shhh. Why are you *yelling*?”

Steve has to blink a few times before the blur of yellow and blue finally clears up. Billy’s sitting just on the edge of the sofa cushion, a warm spot next to Steve’s thigh. He shakes something *loud* and *awful* in Steve’s face.

“What some?” he says.

“Stop. God, you’re such an *asshole*, leave me *alone*.”

“Oh, *sorry*, dude. Thought you’d want some aspirin but I guess I was wrong.” He starts to shift like he’s gonna get up and Steve reaches clumsily for him, hangs onto to his sleeve.

“Wait, never mind, I love you, come back.”

When Billy sits again, he presses a tiny pill into Steve’s palm, waits for him prop himself against the sofa arm, then passes him a glass of water. Steve swallows as fast as he can and flops down, squishing his face into the back of the couch.

“Leave me to die,” he says, muffled against the fabric. There’s a light touch on his hair and then the couch creaks, and Billy’s warmth is gone. Steve turns back to the room, frowning, cause he didn’t *really* mean it, Billy’s supposed to come and coddle him some more. The room is empty, but Steve’s too tired and sick to go after Billy, so he closes his eyes and lies as still as he can until exhaustion takes over.

The next thing to wake him is the smell of cookies baking, so sweet and sharp in Steve’s memory that he jolts up, convinced for half a second that he’s not at home, but at Nana’s, until his vision rights itself. He’s still in the living room, with its same off-yellow carpet, its same dark walls, but the smell sticks around—so *that’s* not a dream.

It takes him more tries than he wants to admit to stagger off of the sofa and shuffle slowly into the kitchen—and what a goddamn *sight*.

*Everything* is covered in flour. Steve doesn’t think his kitchen ever even *saw* flour before Billy started living here, but they must have sacks and sacks of it now, because it’s coating *every* surface, including Billy’s shirt, the back of his pants, and—when he turns at the sound of Steve showing up—almost the entire side of his face.

Steve’s not totally convinced he’s awake. “What are you *doing*?” he says, his voice shot from sleep and whatever cheap shit he was drinking last night.

“Making cookies,” says Billy, like *that* makes sense. He turns back to the counter before Steve can send him a truly suspicious look, so Steve wanders over, presses against Billy’s back, and peers over his shoulder.
That really is cookie dough, with chocolate chips and everything, but it still doesn’t explain the sheer amount of flour, until Steve starts slowing taking in the rest of the room. The oven light is on, so Steve sees the two trays already cooking, plus there’s at least three full cooling racks spread around the counters, and two Tupperware containers stacked near the breadbox, with little round blurs inside.

“Do you have... a bake sale, to get to?”

Billy snorts but doesn’t say anything, so Steve adds, “Seriously. What’s going on?”

Billy shrugs, bumping Steve’s chin up and down. “What, I can’t make cookies if I want?”

“Um. Sure? You can. But, this is a lot of cookies.”

Billy shrugs again, and it’s hard for Steve to get a good read on him, like this, but it’s feeling a lot like shrug number four, don’t fucking talk to me, which is a tighter, rarer shrug Steve hasn’t seen in a while.

Steve’s arms fall away, and he steps back before he can think about it. Billy hasn’t always liked Steve touching him—he has to remember that.

He pretends like he’s checking out the cookies in the oven to retreat a few more feet, and then he says, “I didn’t, uh, say anything stupid last night, right?”

Billy just shrugs again and makes a dismissive sound. Steve must’ve though, cause the last he remembers seeing Billy was just before he left for Jonathan’s, when Billy was spread out on the couch all soft and sleepy, letting Steve press a dozen kisses into his face before he pushed him off, told him he was gonna be late.

So, Steve said something dumb last night, probably, when he came back—something mean, or shitty, or just stupid—which is so classic, and now Billy’s fucking stress baking about it. God. And of course, Steve doesn’t remember shit, doesn’t even remember if he went through with telling Nancy and Jonathan about them. It seems like such an incredibly important thing that he would have to remember. But if it went badly—that’s just the sort of thing Steve would cure with more drinks than he can handle.

There’s only one way he can think to check, so he mumbles something about a shower and leaves Billy to his cookies.

He makes sure the bedroom door is closed tight and even turns the shower on in case Billy comes upstairs. Then he grabs the phone and dials from memory. It only rings twice.

“Hello?”

“Dude, it’s me,” says Steve.

“Hey,” says Jonathan, and Steve has a bad feeling already, just from the awkwardness in that one word.

“So.” Better lead with the facts. “I don’t remember last night.”

“Yeah,” says Jon, “That—makes sense. You were in pretty rough shape. I wanted you to stay over but, uh. You wanted to go home.”

“Okay,” says Steve. “Did I, uh. Did we. Talk about—anything, in, um, particular?” He feels like
banging his head against the side table—maybe that would shake his memory loose, or at least put him out of his misery.

“Yeah,” Jonathan says again. “You told us about—uh. What you’ve been up to. And who, um. Who you’ve been hanging out with.”

“Will’s right there, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” says Jon.

“Great. Cool. Okay, so I’m guessing, it didn’t go over well?”

Jonathan pauses for such a dramatic amount of time before he says, “We love you no matter what, you know? It’s just—Nancy’s just worried. She says you don’t always think straight about this stuff. But. I don’t know. I . . .”

“What,” says Steve.

There’s a shuffling sound, like Jonathan’s moving the receiver to his other ear, trying to get further away from Will. He goes on even quieter, “I dropped you off, you know? And I saw—not much, really, but. Enough, I guess. You looked really happy, man, and I just think, maybe, this time, she’s wrong.”

Steve laughs, just barely. “Had to happen sometime, right?”

Jon laughs too. “Yeah. Are you okay?”

“I mean, my head feels like it’s full of angry lumberjacks,” says Steve, pressing his knuckles to his temple. “And I think I said some dumb shit last night that I don’t remember. There’s enough cookies in my kitchen to feed a fucking army.”

“Cookies?”

Steve sighs. “Billy likes to bake about his feelings, or whatever.”


“Yeah,” says Steve, feeling kind of warm despite everything. “That’s Billy.”

“You’re really together, huh,” Jon says, softly. “Like, it’s serious?”

Steve really fucking wishes he could remember how much he’s already said, but, “Yeah. As serious as it gets, I guess. I mean, unless I fucked it up last night.”

“Nah,” says Jon. “I think you’re fine. Like I said, I uh. I think Nance was wrong. She was just surprised, you know? Just give her a few days. I bet she already feels terrible about it. I mean, she also just feels terrible, cause you guys were pretty much trying to out-drink each other.”

“Great,” says Steve, cause his drunken conversations with Nancy always end well. “Look, I better go.” Better see if there’s anything left of the kitchen, under all that flour. “Thanks, man.”

“Yeah,” says Jonathan. “Anytime. And, hey, I know you don’t remember, but—we do love you. Okay? Like, always.”

“Thanks,” says Steve, trying to soak that in so he has enough strength to face Billy, all hurt and angry downstairs. “Love you, too.”
Steve takes a shower in the end, because it would look pretty suspicious if his hair wasn’t wet, and also, he needs a little longer to figure out a game plan. If it was anything else, he would just leave Billy alone, let him get all his broodiness out in the kitchen before talking to him again—that’s just what he needs sometimes, space. But—

This time it’s Steve’s fault. And how can he just sit and do nothing when Billy might be waiting on him, for an apology or something.

After almost an hour, he hasn’t really settled on a decision, so he heads back down—maybe Billy will be better already, maybe it was just a passing thing.

When Steve gets to the kitchen, Billy’s packing a tray of cookies into a container, and Steve can tell just from the set of his shoulders that he’s not better, sending off pretty clear don’t fuck with me vibes, so Steve switches course to the living room. Even if Billy wants him to apologize, it wouldn’t do any good right now. So, he just has to wait, like that’s easy, or something. God.

Another hour goes by before Billy wanders in, holding a plate stacked so high with cookies, it looks like a Jenga tower. He sets it on the coffee table and then just kind of stands there for a second. Then he says, “Hungry?”

“Oh,” says Steve.

He’s starving actually, but he’s been too afraid to bother Billy in the kitchen. If it went on any longer, he was going to risk it, but he also doesn’t even know what there is to eat—Billy always gets things for him, snacks and meals and stuff. Steve can’t remember the last time he had to fend for himself, which is—disconcerting, and also embarrassing.

Billy nods at the plate, like, take one, and Steve doesn’t need more convincing. He takes a bite, and just—holy shit. He makes a truly obscene sound.

“Oh my god,” he says, words mumbled from the cookie he still can’t stop eating. “This is amazing.”

Billy’s lip sort of twitches, the first hint of a smile Steve has seen all day. “Yeah?”

“Holy shit, dude. Just—” Steve reaches for another one before he’s even finished chewing. “How the fuck do you do this? Do you even follow a recipe? Oh my god.”

Billy’s manages a shadow of a smile before it wilts. “I can make you something else,” he says, which makes no sense. Isn’t he listening? Steve never wants to eat anything else for his entire life but these cookies. “If you want, like, lunch stuff.”

“Dude,” says Steve, starting on his third one. He’s pretty sure there’s chocolate all over his face but he doesn’t care. “This is the greatest thing I have ever put in my mouth.” He glances down at Billy as obvious and dumb as he can, smirks and adds, “Seriously, man. I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

That gets a laugh, finally, but it doesn’t last long. Billy coughs and sits on the arm of the sofa, a good four, five feet from Steve. He starts messing with the ends of his hair, which he only does when he has to do something but really doesn’t want to. It sends an anxious spike through Steve’s gut.

“So, listen,” says Billy, staring at the TV, which is playing some dumb daytime soap Steve’s mom used to watch. “We have to talk about something.”

And that—doesn’t sound good. The cookie in Steve’s mouth gets heavier, harder to swallow. He
has to cough a few times before he can choke out, “Okay.”

What the fuck did he say last night? Billy keeps staring at the TV like he’s hyping himself up, and Steve’s mind races, trying frantically to think of what could be so bad to make Billy say we have to talk—like, everybody knows what that means, right?

The only thing Steve can think is that maybe he said something about Nancy? Something that made Billy think he still likes her, which is just—not true at all. Steve has to fight back his instinct to explain that, because it’s just a wild guess and he needs to, like, think, before he talks but. It’s so fucking hard, with Billy looking so grave and sad and nervous.

Steve tries to be patient, he really does, but the minutes drag on and on with Billy just staring at that stupid show, one crazy dramatic close up after the next, and Steve can’t take it anymore.

“Is that what the cookies are for?” he asks, just for something to say, to break this awful, spreading quiet.

Billy looks over at Steve, there and gone, and shrugs—a new one Steve doesn’t recognize.

“Wanted to make you something,” he says, which should make Steve feel better, but just makes him feel worse, because, what could they possibly have to talk about that requires hundreds of cookies to soften the blow?

“So, they’re apology cookies,” Steve jokes, because he’s an idiot who can’t shut up, and also maybe he’s starting to freak out a little.


And okay, sure, that’s fair, that’s fine—

Steve knows it’s nuts, that there’s no proof and he’s just spiraling into crazy like he does sometimes—but the only conclusion he can come to is that Billy’s breaking up with him.

He’s stares at the plate of towering cookies, and then at Billy’s pale, unreadable face, his tight shoulders, and thinks, this is it, I’ve really lost him. The staggering weight of that thought is almost enough to make him gasp, but he holds it in. His thoughts scatter out, scrambling for something to say right now, something to stop this, because Billy’s going to leave, and Steve will be alone, and this house that was so big and empty before is going to feel like an endless, freezing cage without him. Steve can’t let that happen.

“You know you can stay here,” he says in rush, and he barely recognizes his own voice, so weird and panicked. “No matter what, like, it doesn’t matter.”

Billy looks away from the TV, his expression blank with surprise. “What?” he says.

Steve can’t think about the words, they just tumble out, “I just mean—I don’t want you to feel like you have to go back to—that house. You can stay here no matter what, like. It’s okay, even if you don’t want to do stuff, with me, anymore. I mean, you’re still, like, my best friend, and there’s the guest room. Like, you can just stay.” God, Steve is the most pathetic person in the whole fucking world. He knew that before, but now he really knows.

Billy stares at him for a long, long minute, and then he says, “Do you think I’m breaking up with you right now?”

“Uh,” says Steve, because he doesn’t know what he thinks. He feels kind of light-headed, like his lungs aren’t working right.
“Jesus,” Billy mutters and then he slides down the arm of the couch onto the cushion, gets that much closer to Steve before he stills, grips at the blanket. “I don’t—” he starts, and swallows hard. “I’m not breaking up with you. I love you. And I don’t get why you don’t—I just. I can’t touch you right now, but—I love you, like, a lot, and I’m not breaking up with you. Okay?”

“Okay,” says Steve. He feels like his ears are ringing. He has absolutely no idea what’s even going on right now, but, yeah, it’s good, to hear that. “Sorry, but, then, like, what’s with this?” Steve asks, gesturing with the half-eaten cookie in his hand to the plate of at least twenty more.

Billy runs a hand through his hair, messing with it. “I just need to tell you something,” he says. “And you need to let me. I don’t, like, ramble and shit like you do, so it might take me a while, and if you butt in all the time I’m gonna like—lose my fucking nerve, okay? So, like, every time you feel like you need to say something—” Billy nods at the plate, “just eat a fucking cookie.”

Which is just—the weirdest, dumbest thing Steve has ever heard, like the level of planning for this—Steve should probably be offended or something, but instead he’s trying hard to stamp down on the laughter bubbling up his throat. The wound-up, heavy curl of anxiety in his gut loosens, because Billy is so stupid, but he’s, like, Steve’s favorite idiot in the whole world.

“That’s why you made so many,” Steve says, unable to hide the humor in his voice.

Billy shrugs and smiles kind of rueful, “Yeah, well. What can I say, man, you like to talk.”

Steve laughs then, and it seems to settle Billy a little. His shoulders dip and he stops touching his hair so much.

“Okay,” says Steve, more curious now. “I’m listening.”

“I mean it,” says Billy, “No talking.”

Steve mimes zipping his mouth closed and locking it, but instead of throwing the imaginary key away, he hands it to Billy, who rolls his eyes but takes it and pretends to put it in his pocket. Steve skims tickles with muted laughter—he’s pretty sure he’s Billy’s favorite idiot, too.

“Okay,” Billy starts, blowing air out of his nose. Steve can’t help the tingle of his nerves at seeing Billy so worried, but all he can do is hold his breath and wait.

“So—okay. I didn’t—I never had crushes, when I was a kid, right?”

Steve doesn’t know what he was expecting, exactly, but it wasn’t that. He nods encouragingly anyway, because, sure, okay.

Billy flicks his gaze away from Steve, back to the TV still playing that dumb show, but he goes on, “I just never got it—what everyone was talking about. I could tell when people were hot, like people in movies and shit, and I liked looking at them, I guess. But I never saw anybody and thought, like. I want to fuck them, you know? Or even like kiss them or whatever. And the idea of people touching me like that—”

Billy cuts himself off and shifts awkwardly on the couch, and Steve’s trying, like, really hard not to jump to conclusions, trying really hard not to feel like shit, because he’s been touching Billy this whole time when he doesn’t even like it. But why wouldn’t he say something—didn’t he say it was good?

Billy just stares at the TV for another minute, and Steve guesses he’s just thinking about what he’s gonna say next, but yeah. It’s impossible to sit here and watch him think so much and not say
something.

Steve reaches for a cookie and stuffs in his mouth in one bite. Billy turns at the movement, smirks a little at Steve’s obnoxious chewing. Steve gives him a thumbs up, because there’s got to be some way for him to say, you’re doing great, baby, without talking. Billy rolls his eyes, but then takes a breath and goes on,

“I thought, like, maybe it just happened to people when they got older, you know? Like, I kept thinking, maybe one day I would wake up and just want that. But it never happened, and everyone was, like, getting girlfriends and shit, and trying to spy on chicks at the beach, and I just—” he shrugs, “didn’t get it.” Billy clenches his jaw and doesn’t look at Steve when he says, “Thought I was broken or some shit, but. People do dumbass stuff when they’re, like, in love or trying to get laid or something. So, I just thought, who the fuck needs it, you know? Like, whatever. Everyone pisses me off anyway, so. Why would I want to fuck somebody when I don’t even like them?”

“But then—” Billy tugs at his hair and stares at the far wall, “then I met Jack.”

Oh, Steve thinks. So, this is that conversation. He doesn’t feel like he can eat another cookie right now, thinks it would probably get stuck in his throat and choke him, but he reaches for one anyway, watches the chocolate melt all over his fingers and tries not to lose it.

“Didn’t even meet him,” Billy goes on, “I just—I had to change schools halfway through the year, and I fucking hated that, everyone staring at me cause I was fresh meat, or whatever. But Jack, like, he didn’t even care.

“He was the most popular guy in the whole fucking school. He just—he could just look at somebody and know exactly what they wanted. He made you feel like you were the coolest shit around, you know? People would get so fucking dumb around him, just like, vying for his attention and shit. He was hot as fuck, but it wasn’t even that. It was just his vibe.”

Steve keeps nodding, mostly cause he’s not sure what the fuck else to do. Feels like a million tiny needles sticking in his chest, hearing all this about some other guy Billy loves, but it’s okay, cause Billy needs to tell him this for some reason. It’s fine.

Billy finally looks over at him, and Steve’s doesn’t know what terrible look is on his face but Billy swallows, kind of guilty, and says, “I’m not—I’m just trying to explain cause like—the first time I saw him, he didn’t even notice me—and I just. I couldn’t breathe. It was like, I was just hot all over, like my skin. I’d never felt anything like that before. And I was fifteen, okay, it wasn’t like I was some kid. And it wasn’t like some fucking awakening, like, then I just wanted to fuck people after that. It was just him.

“So, whatever, we—started hanging out and. He was always talking like we’d be together forever.” Billy stares at the wall, and Steve wonders how much longer this is gonna go on before he can make some excuse to go fucking cry, but he can’t ask because he’s not allowed to talk. He eats the melted cookie in his hands for something to do.

“But I always knew,” says Billy after a minute, “that like, if we ever stopped—if we ever broke up, or whatever, I’d never find anybody else that made me feel like that. It was, like, once in a lifetime bullshit or something.”

If Steve blinks really fast, he can keep the burning in his eyes to a minimum, at least for a while. He might never be able to eat chocolate chip cookies again, though.

“And then he—” Billy’s voice is so rough, Steve has to look over. He’s eyes are sort of blurry, so
it’s hard to tell, but it sort of seems like Billy’s might be, too.

“He died,” says Billy, his teeth clenched so hard, Steve wishes he could rub his thumb over his jaw. But that’s not a good idea right now—or, maybe ever again, he’s not sure. “And, uh,” Billy clears his throat and rubs his knuckles into his eyes. “I just knew, that was it, you know. I’d never get that again.”

It’s weird, how Steve keeps thinking it can’t hurt any worse than it does, and then Billy keeps going, and it turns out there’s just—endless ways his heart can twist and burn and break. And he still can’t stop nodding.

“And I’m just telling you this,” says Billy, in a desperate kind of way that makes Steve want to hold him, despite everything. Billy looks at Steve and clenches his hands in his lap like he wants to reach out but can’t. “I’m telling you, so you’ll have, like, fucking context, okay? Because, then I got to Hawkins, and—I saw you.

“You didn’t notice me—you were, like, talking to Wheeler and just—laughing at something, and you were so—I couldn’t breathe, okay? And I just felt so fucking sick with it, because what kind of fucking piece of shit feels like that for someone else after—sixteen days. That’s it. Like—” Billy scrapes a hand through his hair again, rubs at his face. Steve feels like he might not be breathing, he’s so lost, does that mean—

“I hated you so much, for making me feel like that. And I wanted you to hate me, too, cause I thought, if you couldn’t stand the sight of me, then you’d never smile at me, and then maybe it would stop. But it didn’t—you hated me, and I just kept wanting—and then, after that shitty night—” He glances guiltily at Steve’s forehead and the scar from the time Billy cracked a plate over his head. It’s probably a sign of how fucked up Steve is, but he doesn’t mind it so much—if anyone was gonna leave a permanent mark on him, he’s glad it was Billy. “I don’t know,” Billy goes on, “You were, like, indifferent, which was so much worse.”

“I was kind of obsessed with you, I guess,” he adds, lowly, as if Steve is going to mind. “That’s why—I just started looking for you wherever I went and—” he shrugs. Steve guesses that’s why Billy started showing up at his doorstep every other week, grinning with blood in his teeth.

“I’m telling you this,” Billy says again, shifting to sit facing Steve, who’s about ready to explode, needing to touch him, to tell Billy he loves him until his voice gives out, “so, you get it, okay? Like—I can’t believe you’d think that you love me, more than I love you. That’s such bullshit. I love you so much. And I’m not with you because I need to be with someone, because I want to kiss someone or fuck someone—I don’t need that shit, okay. And—and I know I should’ve said this before, I guess, about Jack—but, baby.” Billy shifts on the couch, not touching Steve, but closer.

“There’s no better or worse, okay?” he says softly, his eyes flicking over Steve’s face like he’s making sure the words land right. “I didn’t—love him more than you—it’s just different.”

He goes on, soft but firmly, “You are my whole world. And like, that wasn’t always true, cause I didn’t even know you before. But, right now, you are. Do you get that? I really need you to get that.” Steve nods again, his fingers clenching in the blankets so he doesn’t do something dumb, like grab Billy’s face and kiss him.

“Okay,” says Billy, and then he lets out a really big breath, tugs at the blanket covering Steve’ legs. “You can talk now. Thanks for—being quiet. You were really good.”

Steve tries to let that ground him, and it helps a little, but not enough—“Can I touch you?” he says, his throat weirdly sore. He’s not sure how long they’ve been sitting here, maybe years.
Billy hesitates and then shifts closer, their knees knocking together. “Let me, okay,” he says, and Steve nods quickly—he’ll take anything he can get.

Billy cradles Steve’s cheek with one hand and rubs a thumb under his eye before reaching for the nape of his neck. He guides Steve’s head to his shoulder, and it’s kind of awkward with them facing each other like this, but Billy lets Steve scooch closer, one leg curled under him, the other stretching out behind Billy. He rests his forehead on Billy’s shoulder and just breathes him in, feeling weirdly shaken—feels like the morning he lay there watching Billy sleep—all these new things swirling inside him.

He doesn’t really know what to do with it all. Last time, he just kept quiet and that didn’t really feel good, so—

“Thanks for telling me,” he says softly. “I, uh. I don’t really remember what I said, last night—but, I’m sorry if I hurt you? Or, like, made you sad, but I’m glad I—know this stuff, now. Also—I love you, like. I know I said, but—I love you, like that, too.”

Billy plays with the hair at the back of Steve’s neck, which is super long now—he really needs a haircut—then Billy says, “You said you didn’t mind, that I didn’t love you that much, which—” He tugs at Steve’s hair lightly, but with purpose, until Steve lifts his head and meets his eyes again.

“Don’t say that, okay?” Billy’s gaze is firm. “You deserve, like, the fucking world, so just. Don’t, like, settle for shit.”

“Not settling,” says Steve, tugging at the bottom of Billy’s shirt cause he’s not allowed to kiss him. Except, maybe Billy’s a little better already or something, cause he leans forward just enough to brush their lips together, barely, before resting his forehead on Steve’s.

It must be four or five already, so Steve’s gone almost the whole day without touching Billy and it’s just—so good. But it reminds him, again, how much he hates not knowing if—

“You gotta tell me, somehow,” Steve whispers, not wanting Billy to pull away, just needing him to know. “If I’m not supposed to touch you. Like, we need some kind of signal, or something, cause I’ll just do it, without thinking, and I don’t want to—I don’t ever want to make you feel bad, like that. Okay?”

Billy’s quiet for a while, but it’s okay—Steve’s starting to get it—he’s just thinking.

“Ohay,” says Steve. “I’ll come up with something.”

“Okay,” says Steve.

They sit there for a really long time, and then Billy says, “You are covered in chocolate.”

“Well,” says Steve, “Who’s fault is that? You could’ve made sugar cookies.”

“Guess I thought you could eat like a grown-up. I’ll get you, like, a bib next time.”

“Fuck you,” says Steve, but he’s laughing before he even finishes. “Also, we have so many fucking cookies now.”

“Yeah,” says Billy, sort of embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to make that many. I just couldn’t really stop.”

“Maybe you should start a bakery. No—set up a stand! Like the Girl Scouts. “ Steve grins. “Pretty
“face like yours, you’d get a lot of business.”

“Oh, you think so, smartass?”

“Yup.” He’s just starting to laugh some more when Billy leans forward again and kisses him before he can.

“Love you,” says Billy against his lips. When he pulls away, Steve follows after him on instinct, but Billy stops him with a hand on his chest, meets his eyes. “I’m gonna tell you more. Okay?”

“You don’t have to,” Steve mumbles, cause like, what kind of needy asshole is Steve if he makes Billy say it like ten times a day, just cause that’s what he likes to do.

“I’m gonna,” says Billy resolutely. “Cause I don’t think you really believe me.”

“I do,” says Steve, he does.

Billy shakes his head, presses a thumb to Steve’s bitten lips. “Not enough,” he says. “But, you will. I’m gonna say it, like, so much you’ll get sick of it.”

Not possible, Steve almost says, but that sounds really dumb, so he just nods and waits for Billy to decide if they’re gonna kiss again.

He does, and they do.

End Part IV

Chapter End Notes

RE: the Warning: Nancy brings up the fact that Steve dated a 19-year-old girl when he was 15, which Nancy has a problem with (understandably). Steve doesn't see this as an issue, but also doesn't like to think about it.

In terms of other end notes, I just wanted to briefly comment on Billy's sexuality, in case it comes off as confusing or unexpected. I tried to hint at it earlier in the work, but
basically I think Billy could be considered grey-aseual or potentially demisexual? I modeled his experience with attraction from my own, which is pretty much as he described. I don't label myself in that way, so I don't know exactly what the "correct" label is, but please let me know if you feel one way or the other about Billy's character (I'd be happy to add tags, etc). If anyone has any comments or questions, I'm always open to talk about it! Just wanted to make clear that I'm not trying to misrepresent any identities! Just writing what I know.

Hope you enjoyed!
Take on Me

Chapter Summary

Max turns fifteen, and the strangest thing is—it might just all be okay.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the longest update in the history of this fic. Figuring out how to end this story was beyond hard, especially because, honestly, I've been sorting out the sequel in my head for months at the same time.

I'll have a longer note at the end, but thank you, always, for reading this, for liking and commenting, and for coming with me on this journey.

I hope you enjoy and let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue: Max

“Man, Dustin, move your fat ass! You’re sitting on the remote.”

“My ass is not fat, Lucas!”

“Oh my god, move—you’re gonna fuck up some preset and we’re gonna miss it!”

“It’s not on for thirty minutes!”

Max rolls her eyes and shifts to swing her legs over the side of the armchair. It’s a good thing she got here first and claimed it, otherwise she’d be stuck on the couch squished between those idiots. She catches Will’s eyes where he’s curled up on the floor, and they share a secret sort of grin, happy to not be dealing with the mess of elbows and farts and tangled blankets that is Steve Harrington’s sofa right now.

It’s January 11, 1986, three days since Dustin came panting up to them before the first bell, making a whole big scene till he finally caught his breathe to tell them The Party’s new plans for Saturday—watching Nightmare on Elm Street at Steve’s on some fancy, pay-tv channel. Steve really lives large and all that. The guys were thrilled, and Max hadn’t been able to come up with an excuse to get out of it.
Not that she has a problem with Steve still, really, it’s just—*weird*.

It’s weird that Steve’s inviting them over, when Billy basically *lives* here—*weird* that the rest of The Party doesn’t know, that only Max notices the out of place textbooks under the coffee table, the worn-out boots by the door. When Max first sat down, Billy’s old Dodgers sweatshirt was scrunched up between the cushion and the arm of the chair, like he’d thrown it there and forgotten. He’s always doing that, leaving clothes around. Her house has been *so clean* these past few weeks, and now Billy’s stuff is at Steve’s place and it’s just *weird*.

She keeps getting these sweeping bursts of panic in her stomach, thinking that the guys might find out somehow, that they’ll put together the clues—or worse, that Billy will come through the door, suddenly, to find them all crowded in Steve’s living room.

Max sees it in her head like one of those dumb screwball comedies her mom likes—the guys staring at Billy, Billy staring at them, a laugh track going as everyone realizes how crazy it all is, then the whole scene falling apart with screaming and shouting—and that’s when it kind of burns away like old film catching fire, cause Max can’t even imagine how it would end—if Billy would get loud and wide-eyed, threaten them all to keep quiet, or if he would go still and silent and storm out with the vicious rev of the Camaro echoing down the road.

She’s still thinking about it when the guys start going on again about snacks and what’s taking Steve so long—

“It’s been, like, *fifteen* minutes—you think he’s burning the popcorn?”

“God, Dustin, why don’t you go check if you’re so worried—”

“What, so you can take my spot? I don’t fucking think so—”

"*Why* would I want to sit in all your fat-ass farts—”

“My farts aren’t *fat*, Lucas!”

“I’ll go check,” says Max, mostly to get away from their stupid shouting, and also cause—what if Billy’s in the kitchen, and that’s what’s taking Steve so long? She *knows* it’s dumb, to even think that—there’s no way he’s here, with Steve planning this and all, but the stupid, crazy thought forces her towards the kitchen anyway.

When Max pushes the swinging door open, there’s no angry Billy ready to storm in on their movie night, and no fiery ball of popcorn either—just Steve, sitting on the counter, talking on the phone. He doesn’t notice Max at first, too busy twirling the cord around his fingers and laughing.

“No, he *did* not,” he’s saying, grinning wide at the wall. “What’d you *say*?”

Max spots the popcorn bag, still flat and half-folded, forgotten by the microwave. She thinks about just going over and starting it herself, cause there’ll be a mutiny soon if the snacks take any longer. But it’s still Steve’s house and Steve’s popcorn, so maybe that would be rude. She wavers by the door long enough for Steve’s absent gaze to sweep over her. His smile dims, but only for a second and then he’s grinning again. He holds up a finger and mouths, *hold on*. And then,

“Shut the fuck up,” he says, rolling his eyes at Max, like she’s in on it, too. “There’s *no way* you—yeah, whatever—*hold on*.” Steve cups his hand over the bottom of the receiver and raises his eyebrows at Max.

“How much pizza d’you think you guys can eat?”
Max pauses long enough for the faint sound of Dustin’s low-blood sugar screaming to filter through the walls.

“A lot,” she says.

“Yeah,” says Steve, “that’s what I thought.” He puts the phone back to his ear. “I told you, get three—yes, large, god. We can eat the leftovers later, but there’s not gonna be any, trust me. Yeah—I don’t—whatever you want, man. But I swear to god, you get pineapple on my pizza, you’re sleeping in the garage.”

He laughs at something then, this crazy honking sound that makes Max jump with how loud it is, and then says, “Shut up—I can’t—I gotta go, okay? Max is spying on me.” He shoots a grin at her when he says it, and he looks like he might finally hang up and start the popcorn. But then his cheeks flare red like a tomato, and he twists towards the cabinets to hide his face.

“Shut up,” he says, “Yeah, I know—you too, or whatever. Shut up. Bye.”

Steve jumps off the counter to hang up the phone and when he turns to look at Max again, his face is still kinda pink.

“Are they driving you crazy?” he asks, tipping his head towards the living room, where the screaming has reached a pitch only dogs can hear.

Max doesn’t answer, though, because, duh. Instead she says, “Is Billy coming here?” cause she’s not an idiot. Steve has four friends who aren’t in this house right now, three who he’d maybe swear at, but only one he’d tell to sleep somewhere else.

Steve tugs at the cuff of his sleeve and shifts on his feet. “Yeah,” he says. “But, don’t worry, he can—he can give me the pizzas and sneak in through the basement. He can hang out down there till you guys leave.”

The twisted knot of panic in Max’s stomach uncurls a little. “Okay,” she says.

But Steve doesn’t look like it’s okay. He looks like he did before he gave her the skateboard wheels, all keyed up.

“Yeah, um. Except—that was maybe gonna be Plan B?”

“Plan B?”

“I just—” He pauses to take a deep breath and blow it out. “I was thinking,” he starts again, calmer, like he planned what to say already and just remembered. “I was thinking about telling the guys about us—me and Billy.”

The panic doesn’t twist again, just spreads and numbs her limbs. Her skin feels hot and red with it.

“Why,” she asks, cause it doesn’t make sense, and it’s not fair. Why can’t she just worry about her high scores at the arcade or whether she’ll ever be able to look at Lucas without her insides screwing up—why do they have to keep talking about this?

“Because,” says Steve. He leans against the island and stares at the Tupperware containers stacked inexplicably high on the counter. “This is where we live. And I want Billy to—he shouldn’t have to hide in the basement every time you guys come over. You know? That’s not—how it should be.”

“I thought it was supposed to be a secret,” says Max, because that’s what started this whole thing.
The awful, terrible thing, and everything that came after, was all cause Max told a secret she wasn’t supposed to.

“Yeah,” Steve agrees. “It is. I mean, out there.” He nods at the window, where the snow’s gone yellow and dewy in the dimming light. “But this is, like, the one place we don’t have to hide. And —” He swallows hard, loud enough to make Max look at him, but he’s not looking back. He’s staring at the ceiling and blinking too fast.

“It’s really hard, Max,” Steve says roughly. “I’ve been keeping this thing a secret for, like, less than a year, and it really fucking sucks. There were so many times I wanted to tell Nancy, and Jon, not even about the serious stuff, just dumb things, like, some joke Billy told me. And I couldn’t. I hated it. So, I can’t even imagine what it’s like,” he finally looks back at her with big, sad eyes, “for you.”

“Me?” Max stutters.

Steve rubs the end of his sleeve over his face and nods. “Yeah. You’ve been keeping bigger secrets than this, for even longer. That sucks.”

“They’re not my secrets,” says Max. It just—feels like it sometimes, or it used to. It used to make her feel heavy and small, in the backseat of Billy’s car, or at night in the dark, when things shattered—the weight of all the hidden moments she had to pretend not to see.

Steve shrugs. “Maybe not the thing with me and Billy,” he says. “But—what happened in California, or last month—that’s. That happened to you, too, Max. You should get to tell people about it, if you want to.”

Steve’s so dumb and earnest, with the sleeves of his sweater tucked over his hands and his stupid, anxious eyes—but just cause he’s older doesn’t mean he gets it. How can she talk about any of this, with anyone, when it makes people go crazy, when it gets people killed? And Steve’s an idiot if he tells The Party—they’ll let it slip in, like, less than a day, without even meaning to—they’re so loud.

But the idea of other people knowing, of her friends knowing, so she’s not alone with it anymore—it tugs at something greedy inside her, and suddenly, she wants it more than anything, no matter how stupid it is. Except—

“What about Billy?” He’ll never let them tell, not in a million years.

Steve scrunches up his eyebrows. “What about him?”

“Won’t he be mad?”

Steve’s lips quirk at the edges. “No, it’s okay. I’d never say anything without asking him first. He said it was fine.”

“He said it was fine?”

Steve huffs a laugh, the way Billy does. “Yeah, Max. I told Jonathan and Nancy last week, too.”

“You did?”

“Yup,” he grins again. “Seriously, I wouldn’t do it if he wasn’t okay with it, and I wouldn’t do it without, like, knowing he’s okay with it, no matter what he says, you know?
Max knows. Neil always says, it’s ten-to-one, if the words falling out of Billy’s mouth are true.

“So, what do you think?” Steve asks, like he really cares about the answer. He always talks like that, all honest—Max would think it’s a midwestern thing, but the idiots in the next room aren’t like that, so it must just be Steve.

“I guess,” she says after a beat, trying not to sound like it matters. “It’s up to you.”

“Oh, okay,” says Steve, “I think I will. I think it’s, like, a good time. Also, because—it’s your birthday thing next weekend, right?”

Max nods. Her mom was, like, really sorry, or embarrassed or something, about not being home when all that happened last month, so she said Max could do anything for her birthday, even throw a party, which she hasn’t done ever in her whole life. She’s renting out half the roller rink at the mall, which Max thought was pretty lame compared to the pier and Disneyland and a million other things they have back home that they don’t have here, but Dustin swears it’s the best thing ever, really, they let you pick the songs!

“Yeah,” says Steve, “So, I was just thinking, I mean. Once the guys know about us, it wouldn’t be as weird, if Billy came.”

Max can feel her face getting that mean way it does when she’s confused but doesn’t want to show it. “Why would he come?” she asks.

Steve looks away and starts tugging on his sweater again. “Well, it’s just. Billy was saying you guys always used to do stuff on your birthday, like—together.”

Max opens her mouth to say that’s not true—cause they definitely didn’t last year, but. The year before that was Disney, and the year before that they went to the pier, and Billy let her go on rides all day even though they had to keep buying more tickets. When she turned eleven, they took a bus to Manhattan Beach just to see the aquarium, and the year before that, they went to some old theater that was playing the Muppet Movie, and Billy sat through the whole thing even though he kept saying he wouldn’t.

But—that’s not—Steve doesn’t get it. He doesn’t have any siblings, so he doesn’t know how it is. It’s not cause he likes me, Max wants to say, it’s just cause he has no friends.

But it’s like Steve can hear her thinking or something, because then he says, “I think, if you said it was okay, he’d come. I mean, all his friends are gonna be there.”

“All his friends?”

“Yeah,” says Steve, grinning again. “You’ll be there, and I’m going, so,” he shrugs, “that’s all of us.”

It makes Max laugh even though she’s trying not to. The more she thinks about it, it would almost be worth the total disaster of having Billy around The Party, if she got to see his awkward, terrible skating again. They’ve only been to a rink once—Billy fell about fifteen times, and they never went back.

The hilarity of it, and the way Steve keeps looking at her all nervous and hopeful, makes her sigh loudly and say, “Whatever, he doesn’t have to come, but, like. If he wants to, I guess that’s okay.”

Steve’s grin fades to something smaller, and he laughs, soft and sudden, like he didn’t really mean to.
“I’m gonna hug you,” he says and then he does.

“Uh,” Max mumbles into his sweater. It only lasts a few seconds, but it’s still pretty weird.

“Sorry,” says Steve when he pulls away. “You guys are just so—” but Dustin starts screaming before he can finish,

“Steve! Lucas spilled soda on your carpet!”

“It’s your fault, asshole, you jostled me—”

“I didn’t jostle you! I’ll jostle your head off if you keep poking me—”

“That doesn’t even make sense!”

Steve glances at her, his eyes real wide, and then they’re both laughing, that breathless, out-of-control kind of way that leaves you warm after.

“Come on,” says Steve a minute later, still smiling. He grabs the popcorn bag and finally sets it in the microwave. “Let’s feed these animals before they destroy my house.”

Five minutes later, Steve’s standing in front of The Party holding a giant bowl of popcorn, shifting on his feet, but not saying much. Dustin cranes his head to see around him.

“Steve, you’re blocking the TV.”

“Yeah, I uh, wanted to talk to you guys for a second.”

Max watches from the armchair, which was still miraculously empty when she came back in, probably because the view’s not as good from here, and Will’s too shy to steal it. She’s glad, though. It’s a better angle to see all the guys’ faces when they flip out.

“Right now?” Dustin whines, like Steve’s his actual mom or something. “The movie starts in fifteen minutes!”

Steve rolls his eyes and hugs the bowl tighter to his chest. “Exactly,” he says. “So, you have fifteen minutes to freak out about this, and then that’s it, okay? We don’t have to talk about it anymore.”

That sounds serious enough to finally get through Dustin’s thick head. He sits back against the couch and frowns. “Are you moving,” he demands, then frowns harder. “Are you sick?”

Steve’s face softens. “No, Dust. It’s not bad news.”

“Is this about your secret girlfriend?” says Mike, and Steve barely has a chance to look surprised before Dustin whirls on Mike, furious.

“Shut up,” he hisses, “Are you an idiot?”

“What?” says Mike.

Lucas leans around Dustin to whack Mike in the head with a pillow. “You’re ruining the terms of the bet.”

“What bet?” says Steve.
“God,” says Mike, “That was, like, forever ago. Don’t you guys just want to know?”

“No,” says Dustin, “That was the deal, and some of us are very confident in our guesses.”

Oh, right—Max vaguely remembers them mentioning something about a bet they made about Steve, back in September, when they weren’t really talking to her. She never knew it was about this, though. She brings her knees up and curls over them to hide her grin. They’re gonna freak.

“Steve,” says Dustin, overly sincere. “If this isn’t about a certain mystery lady, who may or may not exist, you don’t have to tell us about that, just because Mike can’t keep his stupid mouth shut.”

Steve opens his mouth, probably to get things back on track, but then Lucas cuts in,

“I don’t know, though. I think that part of the bet’s already forfeit, now that he knows about it. He should just tell us.”

“You can’t force him to talk about his love life, Lucas!”

“Look at him!” Lucas flings an arm in Steve’s direction and they all turn their heads in sync to stare at him. Steve looks pretty strained at how this is going down, but Max doesn’t know what he expected.

Lucas goes on, “He’s clearly about to tell us something. What else could it possibly be?”

“Tons of things, okay? Steve is a man of mystery!”

“Okay,” says Steve. “Thanks, Dustin, I think. But, I guess, since we’re on the topic of my, uh, love life, I am actually seeing someone.”

“Congratulations,” says Dustin, without a hint of sarcasm. When Mike starts to slow clap, Dustin hits him with the other pillow. “Stop being an asshole,” he says viciously. “You’re just jealous that’s Steve’s had two girlfriends since we’ve known him, and you can’t even get El to go on a single date with you.”

“I thought you and El were dating?” says Steve, distracted.

“It’s complicated,” says Mike.

“Who is it?” says Lucas, who already knows about Mike’s dumb drama with El and clearly just want to win the bet. “The girl you’re seeing, I mean.” They all turn to look at Steve, too.

“Uh, that’s sort of the thing,” says Steve. He shifts and then finally seems to remember he’s still holding the popcorn. He sets it down on the coffee table before pulling his sleeves over his hands again. “I’m not seeing a girl, exactly. I mean—I’m not. I’m seeing a guy.”

He lets out a breath after, and it sounds loud in the sudden quiet. Max’s breath feels loud, too—the silence goes on and on, and she starts to think maybe she read this all wrong, maybe they won’t think it’s cool or funny, maybe they’ll just get mean—

“Fuck,” says Lucas. “That pot was so big. Did anyone put money on this?”

“Did we put money on a guy?” says Mike, incredulous. Dustin is still staring at Steve.

“Well, I don’t know,” Lucas adds defensively, “It was months ago.”

“I think you’d remember a guy,” says Mike.
“Steve,” says Dustin, in an anguished kind of way. Then he gets up and walks straight into Steve’s chest.

“Hey, man,” Steve wheezes as Dustin wraps his arms around Steve’s middle and squeezes. Maybe there are more hugs going on around here than Max realized.

“I’m sorry,” Dustin wails, like he’s really going to cry—and, god, he might just be the only person on the planet more dramatic than Billy. “I wasn’t there for you,” Dustin goes on. “I stereotyped you.”

“Oh my god,” Lucas mutters.

Steve pats at Dustin’s messy hair. “It’s okay, man. I didn’t even really know.”

“You didn’t know?” Dustin pulls back to look at him.

Steve shrugs. “I mean, I didn’t really know I was into guys, until—this.”

Dustin screws his forehead up, “But I thought you were born gay?”

“Dustin!” Mike yells.

“What? What!” Dustin twists to look at them, his face a perfect mix of outrage and confusion.

Max is too busy watching them to notice Will, and it’s only when Steve’s gaze flicks down at him that she even remembers he’s there. He looks frozen, and scared, like he wants to disappear into the sofa. It makes Max frown—out of all of them, she never would’ve guessed Will would be weird about this. He’s so—nice.

Steve lets Mike and Lucas yell at Dustin about appropriate questions, man, like, seriously, while he comes to sit on the edge of the coffee table and peer down at Will, who’s still curled against the base of the couch.

“Hey,” Steve says, softly. “You okay?”

“Are you really—” Will swallows, and then whispers, like it’s a swear he’s too afraid to say, “gay?”

“Not exactly,” says Steve, as the yelling dims around them. “I still like girls, too. So, I guess, it’s like, half-gay?”

“That’s called bisexual,” says Dustin. When they all turn to stare at him, he glares. “What, I can’t know things? My uncle is gay, okay, I know things.”

“I—guess that’s what it is then,” says Steve. He sounds kind of baffled, which sets Dustin off again.

“Steve, I could have helped you through this.”

Steve’s shoulders shake with a laugh, but he manages to hold it in. “I appreciate that, man, but I’m pretty—through it.”

Will doesn’t look through it, Max thinks. He looks like he might faint.
“Not that this isn’t, uh, great,” says Mike, “but are you gonna actually tell us who you’re dating? Cause the movie starts in five minutes.” He taps at the digital watch he got for Christmas, the one that makes him look like a total dweeb.

Dustin glares again. “Don’t rush him!”

“It’s okay,” says Steve and then he shuffles back on the coffee table to put some space between them. They’ve all automatically gathered around Will, an old instinct. Max doesn’t even remember moving, but she’s on the sofa now, so she settles on the arm of it and waits. This is where the real fallout happens, she knows, and it suddenly doesn’t seem as fun anymore. So far, it’s been good, and if it shifts to something uglier, now, it’ll just feel worse.

“Okay,” says Steve. “So, remember, that means you have five minutes to freak out about this.”


Then it’s Mike’s turn to hit Dustin with a pillow and he does, hard. “Jonathan’s dating Nancy, you asshole.”

“I know that,” says Dustin, “but he just said he likes guys and girls, right?” He looks at Steve for confirmation. “Are you dating both of them?”

“God, dude,” says Lucas, and Max can’t tell if he’s grossed out by that or awed.

Steve’s got his face in his hands now. “No, Dustin,” he says through his fingers, and then he sighs and lifts his head again. “I am not dating Jonathan or Nancy—they’re in their own, two-person relationship, completely separate from mine.”

“You don’t have to be weird about it,” says Dustin, “That’s a thing people do, you know.”

“I don’t know,” says Steve, “I’m not sure I want to know how you do.”

“I told you, I know things.”

“Dude, maybe you should try to know less,” says Lucas.

“Four minutes,” says Mike.

“I’m dating Billy,” says Steve. There’s a long beat of quiet before he coughs and adds, “Billy Hargrove. Just—to be clear.”

After the longest ten seconds in history, Lucas says slowly, “We have four minutes, and you want to make jokes?”

“Not a joke,” says Steve. They all just sit and stare in the silence, with Steve looking paler every second.

Then, Mike says, “It’s really not a joke?”

Steve doesn’t answer. He looks around for a second, grabs one of the textbooks under the coffee table and hands it to Mike, who just holds it, bewildered, until Steve sighs and flips the cover open for him. Inside, there’s a list of names from the last ten years, probably—all the students who’ve loaned out the book. The last one, in familiar, neat cursive, says, *Billy Hargrove.*
“Holy shit,” says Mike.

Dustin grabs the textbook from Mike like he needs to inspect it for fraud.

“You’re dating Billy Hargrove?” says Lucas, his voice high and shocked.

“Billy Hargrove is in AP Lit?” says Dustin, in the same tone.

“Yes,” says Steve, drained. “I’m dating Billy, and yeah, he’s a giant nerd. Mike—time?”

“Two minutes,” says Mike, dazed.

“Great,” says Steve. “Any more questions?”

“How long have you been—uh?” Dustin asks.

“Since the summer,” says Steve. “But we were—friends, for a while, before.”

“Did you know?” Lucas asks, but he’s looking at Max.

Her instinct is to lie, always, but that’s not what this is about. “Yeah,” she says.

“Since when?”

“October.”

“You knew for months and you didn’t say anything?”

“Hey,” says Steve, Max guesses because of Lucas’s tone, a sharp, furious thing. “Don’t be mad at Max, okay? We asked her not to say anything.” They hadn’t really, Max doesn’t think. But that’s just what you do, with a secret like this. You keep it in and in and in, until Steve hugs you and says you don’t have to anymore.

“You told Max before you told us?” says Dustin, but Max knows he wants to say, before you told me? Steve must hear that, too, because the casual, confident mask he’s been faking softens a little.

“We didn’t tell her, Dust, she just—figured it out.”

The boys look at her like they want an explanation, but what’s there to say? “It wasn’t hard,” she says, “You guys are stupid obvious.”

“Thanks, Max,” Steve says dryly, but he’s smiling again, so he might really mean it.

They sit in silence for a few more seconds before Mike’s watch beeps on the hour.

“Movie time,” says Steve.

The doorbell rings just when Nancy Thompson’s banging the crucifix onto her wall, and Dustin jumps about six feet in the air, spilling the leftover popcorn kernels all over the floor.

“Dude!” Mike shouts.

“Oh, sorry if I’m scared during a horror movie, Mike, that’s kind of the point!”

“Guys, shut up!”
“It’s just the pizza,” says Steve. He gets up unsteadily from the floor and taps the back of Max’s chair as he walks by. “Max, help me carry ‘em in?”

Max doesn’t really want to help carry them in, but contrary to what Steve thinks, she does have manners, so she follows him out into the hall. The bell rings a second time just as Steve’s yanking the door open, and then there’s Billy, leaning against the porch railing, smirking like a douchebag.

“Pizza delivery,” he says.

“Hey,” Steve says in a weird voice, and Max has to roll her eyes, because it’s, like, embarrassing, for him. No one should sound so stupid about an asshole like Billy.

Billy’s spots Max over Steve’s shoulder when he hands the pizzas over, she can tell cause he gets all stiff. Steve nudges the door open wider with his shoulder to let him in, but Billy doesn’t move. He coughs instead, tucks his hands in his back pockets, and asks, “Want me to go ’round back?”

“No,” Steve says, drawing out the sound out and glancing at the doorway he’s left wide open. “Come in.” Billy quirks an eyebrow but follows them in.

“What kinds did you get?” Steve asks as Billy wipes his shoes on the mat and hangs his jacket on the coatrack. Max knows she’s staring, but she can’t help it—Billy’s never hung up his jacket a day in his life or wiped his gross boots on a mat. She wonders wildly if something in Hawkins could’ve done this, made him so normal—something from the lab, maybe, or something in the Indiana air.

When Steve holds out two of the pizza boxes for Billy to take back, he does without even complaining about it, just stands there with them as Steve opens each one to examine the toppings. Billy’s face does something weird, like he’s holding in a laugh, but not in a mean way, more like Steve’s telling the best story in the world and he doesn’t want to make a sound in case he ruins it. He doesn’t look at Max once.

So, whatever, so maybe it’s not the lab or the air. Maybe it’s just Steve and the strange, happy sounds he keeps making at the sight of all that cheese.

“Okay,” Steve says decisively a minute later. He takes two of the boxes and gives them to Max. “You take this one,” he says to Billy, handing him the last box. “You better save some for me, though, that’s the best.” He points at Max’s two pizzas and catches her eye, adding, “The guys are gonna destroy those in about thirty seconds, so, good luck.”

Max shifts her hold on the boxes, to carry them better, and also for something to look at when she says, “You’re not coming back?” Not that she cares, just—Dustin’s gonna flip.

Steve was looking at Billy, but he snaps his gaze back to Max and says, quickly. “No, no, I am. I just, uh. Gotta talk to Billy, for a second, so. Tell the guys I’m getting napkins or something? I should get napkins,” he mutters the last part more to himself, and Billy finally laughs out loud, even though it wasn’t funny. When Max looks at him, he rolls his eyes at her, kind of like Steve did on the phone, like they’re sharing the joke between them.

“Okay,” says Max and makes her way back towards the living room before things get weirder. She can hear the low, suspenseful music coming from behind the door, but just before she goes to open it, something makes her stop.

The staircase hides this part of the hall from the front door, so Steve and Billy won’t know she’s still here. She doesn’t even care what they’re talking about, really, except—what if it’s more about
her, or her birthday? That’s her business, anyway. So, she stops and holds her breath to listen.

“—think it went okay,” Steve’s saying. “I mean, no one cried, which I’m pretty sure happened the first time.”

“Always good,” says Billy, and then, in a softer voice Max has to strain to hear, “You okay?”

“Yeah,” says Steve. “I’m glad they know, and I’m glad it’s over. Also,” he starts, his tone shifting suddenly, “we’re going to Max’s party next week.”

“Oh, are we?”

“Yup,” Max can hear Steve smiling, which is so weird, but also just the way he talks. “So, we should go to the mall tomorrow to get presents.”

“Wow, so you’re just filling up our schedule, now? What if I had plans?”

“Do you have plans?”

They just talk like that for a while, bugging each other, long enough for Max to get bored, for the pizzas to get heavy in her arms. She’s just about to call it and go back to The Party when Steve says,

“—sure you don’t want to watch with us?”

“Yeah, man. I got shit to do.”

“What, you’re still writing that essay? It’s been, like, two days.”

“And?”

“And that’s, like, two days longer than I ever spent on anything for school.”

“Yeah, and, uh, how did school go for you, again?”

“Fuck off, dude.” Steve says, but laughs anyway. “Whatever,” he adds when he’s caught his breath. “Sorry you have to hide upstairs.”

“I really don’t care.”

“Well, what if I care?”

“What, you gonna miss me too much?”

Steve must make some face or something, because then, in the absolute worst voice Max has ever heard—and she’s had to listen to Mike and El all year—Billy says, softly, “I really don’t mind, baby.”

He says something else after, but Max doesn’t hear it, can’t hear anything over the terrible shame that shoots through her, heating her face—cause it’s awful, it’s so awful, hearing Billy say baby, like that—like he actually means it—and to Steve, who’s whatever—nice, and honest, and says things like, don’t be mad at Max.

And she doesn’t know why her eyes are stinging suddenly or why she can’t stop thinking about Joni Mitchell or sorry, Max, or how the lights on the pier look from the backseat of Billy’s car at night.
It’s just *too much*, and then there’s a creak on the floorboards behind her, and she doesn’t check to see if it’s Steve, she just pushes the living room door open, hard, and flicks the lights on. She drops the pizzas on the coffee table and lets the chaos of hungry, teenaged boys drown out everything else.

Steve comes in a moment later with a mountain of napkins, but Dustin’s already bugging him about the *toppings, man, where’s the pepperoni?*, so Steve’s too busy to talk to her. He looks over at her, though, four different times before they turn the lights off again, but she doesn’t look back.

On Saturday, January 18, 1986, Max throws her first ever birthday party at the just-opened *Starcourt Mall*. Everything is brand new and shiny, and even the roller rink is nicer than she expected. There’s plenty of space, at least, with a bright red rope splitting the rink in half, keeping the crowd of random, noisy kids on one side, and her smaller, but not *less* noisy, group on the other. A banner towards the back of the room reads, *Happy Birthday, Max!* and the table below it is slowly filling with presents as the guys arrive.

“What d’I tell you, Max,” says Dustin, smiling wide, “Pretty cool, right?”

It *is* actually cool, in a dinky, Midwest sort of way. The lights are low and colored purple, blue, and pink, giving everything a disco feel. And even though the music over the speakers is Top 40s Pop, it’s not loud enough to give her a headache, so that’s okay, too.

Even though it kills her staring at Dustin’s smug grin, Max admits, “Yeah, whatever, it’s not so bad.”

Mike shows up then, the last of *The Party*, and immediately starts bickering with Dustin about some book or other he was supposed to give back and didn’t. She leans against the table to watch them fight it out, more amused than usual, cause it’s her birthday, which means cake and presents and all her friends in one place at one time.

A bark of laughter cuts through the music then, loud enough to make her look, and there’s Steve—hunched over by the concession stand, his shoulders shaking and both hands covering his mouth to smother the sound. Next to him, Billy’s grinning, not his usual asshole smirk, more like something—happy.

“It’s weird, right,” says Lucas. Max didn’t notice him come over, but when she turns to look, he’s beside her, staring at Steve and Billy, too. “Don’t you think it’s weird?” he asks, switching his gaze to her.

Max shrugs. If it’s weird, it’s not cause they’re both guys, or whatever Lucas is thinking. It’s cause Billy is sharp and dangerous, and Steve *isn’t*—he uses women’s hairspray and thinks Dustin is actually funny. She doesn’t get why Billy wouldn’t hate him like he does everything else that’s cheerful and harmless and kind.


Lucas nods, like, *fair*, and shifts to face her more. “Hey,” he says in a different tone, one that means he’s gearing up for something. “We’re good, right? You and me?”
“Yeah,” she says, ignoring the twist of whatever in her stomach, anger or affection or something stupid in between. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

“I don’t know,” says Lucas, “I guess I never said sorry, for bringing up—your past, or whatever. It’s just that, you never tell us anything, Max. We trust you, and you don’t have to, but you could tell us stuff, if you wanted.”

“I know,” she says. And it’s not like she’s going to, because where would she even start? But it’s nice, or whatever, for Lucas to say it. “Thanks.”

“Course, man,” Lucas says and then winces, like he realizes how dumb that is. Max rolls her eyes but smiles.

“Sure, dude,” she says. And when Lucas smiles back and laughs, it’s just normal friend stuff, and not anything to make her stomach flip over, so it doesn’t.

The cake finally comes a half-hour later, and everyone sings a mortifying rendition of happy birthday. They do presents, and then Dustin begs the guys to do some kind of roller-dance routine they came up with in fifth grade, which Max is dying to mock. They go off to ask the DJ to play their song, leaving Max and El at the table.

Max is just trying to come up with something to say, when El goes, “Oh.” And then, “I’ll go now.”

“Okay?” says Max, and, like, great—El was probably poking around in her head again and overheard her thinking something mean or rude or—

“Hey,” says Billy.

Max whirls around, and he’s standing behind her, looking more awkward than she’s seen him in years.

“Here,” he says after a beat, holding out a present wrapped in polka-dot paper. Max makes a face at the sparkly pink bow on top, and Billy rolls his eyes. “The store wrapped it, Maxine. Just open it.”

She smirks but doesn’t want to push her luck, so she opens it without a word. Her smile dims, though, when she sees what’s inside.

It’s a cassette player, one of those portable ones Dustin’s got with the headphones, three times smaller at least than the stupid Fisher Price one stuffed in her closet. Max rubs a finger over the buttons, the red border on the sides.

“Sorry,” says Billy, not really looking at her, “about the last one.”

The last tape deck Max had was sleek and silver, small enough to carry in her backpack but not in her pocket. She brought it everywhere—on bus rides, to the park, especially to the pier, when Jack and Billy would sneak off and leave her with nothing to do.

Two days after the worst thing Max ever did, when Mom and Neil were out getting moving stuff, Billy found her curled up in the corner of her slowly-emptying bedroom.

“Get up,” he growled, the first words he’d said to her since he’d come home red, red, red.

When Max didn’t get up, when she sat and stared and tried not to remember how he’d been shaking, how he’d cried—Billy ripped the tape deck out her hands and marched it to the curb, threw it, hard, into the dumpster where they’d been putting all the things they couldn’t take with
them.

She didn’t even scream at him. She followed him out but didn’t cry or call him an asshole. She just stood in the cool, October sun and watched Billy throw away the last piece of Jack she’d ever have.

She thought about it like that—the last bit of Jack’s voice, probably in the whole world, trapped inside a broken tape that would end up in a garbage heap somewhere—and she thought, *that’s not good enough.* So, she heaved herself over the side of the dumpster to find the pieces, thinking maybe she’d bury it, or maybe she’d keep it, for ever and ever, her own secret.

“It’s okay,” says Max, four-hundred and sixty days later. “I’m sorry, too.”

Billy sighs through his nose then, tugs at his hair and looks like he’s gonna say something serious, but then Steve’s rolling over on bright red skates, with a smile too big for the moment.

“Did you give it to her?” he says to Billy. And then, since it’s pretty obvious he has, Steve smiles and adds, “Billy spent, like, an hour picking it out.”

“Okay,” says Billy, losing some of the tension in his eyes, “I picked that thing out in five minutes, you’re the one who spent an hour grilling the sales guy about all the fucking functions.”

“It’s got auto-stop,” says Steve, like that’s some big deal, “And graphic equalizer.”

“Do you even know what that is?” says Billy.

“Um, yeah, actually? I spend too much time with Dustin not to know what EQ is.”

“So, what is it, genius?”

“Um, waves?” says Steve, more like a question, flicking his gaze at Max like she’ll have the answer. “And, like, frequencies?”

Billy rolls his eyes and looks back at Max. “It plays tapes,” he says. “‘S that good enough?”

“Yeah,” says Max, and adds, mostly for Steve’s sake, “Thanks. I, um, I love it.”

“Cool.” Steve grins and elbows Billy like they pulled off something great.

Then someone screams like a banshee, and they all turn back to the rink in time to see Dustin charge at Lucas like a bull on roller skates. The two of them crash into the side and fall in a heap of cursing and kneepads. Steve sighs like middle-aged mother of six.

“That’s my cue, I guess. Happy birthday, Max,” he says, for the third time today, but she doesn’t really mind.

Max and Billy watch in silence as Steve hobbles towards the rink and then sets off to deal with the mess of tangled limbs. Even over the music, Max can hear Steve’s raised voice saying, “Don’t make me do this, Dustin—you assholes are gonna dent my hair!”

It surprises a laugh out of Max, and when she looks back at Billy, he’s smiling too. It’s not big or anything, but it’s still weird. Not wanting to spoil it, Max says, “He’s such a dork,” knowing that Steve is a *safe topic,* guaranteed to keep Billy from messing with his hair again.

“Yeah,” Billy agrees, his gaze still on the rink.

She should just say thanks, again, for the cassette player and head over to the guys. But—
It’s just that it stings and sinks something inside her, still, watching Billy watch Steve—like she’s the only one still hurting from all of it, the only one who bothers to remember.

It’s just that she’s been fifteen for two whole days, she’s fought demodogs and survived eighth grade—so she’s brave, now, more than she’s ever been. Brave enough to ask, even though she knows she really shouldn’t, “Do you even miss him?”

Billy stiffens but doesn’t turn to look at her, just keeps his gaze on the brawl still breaking out. “What do you think, Max?” he says, roughly. “Of course, I fucking do.”

“It doesn’t seem like it,” she prods, because she’s brave, and also because Billy probably wouldn’t kill her at her own party, not with Steve only yards away.

Billy glares at her then, but it’s not so bad. Or maybe it’s just that Max isn’t scared of him like she used to be, now that she’s older and she’s heard him say baby like a dope.

“What do you want me to do, Maxine?” Billy goes on. “Wear black and cry all day in my fucking room? It’s been a year, over a year, and, it’s not like—”

He cuts himself off when, over on the rink, Steve falls on his ass, hard, and Dustin trips over him, goes flying. Billy waits until they both roll onto their backs, laughing like idiots, before he says, “People die, Max. They’re just gone and you’re not, and you have to just—keep going. Because if you let it—” He breaks off again, digs his knuckles into his eyes.

After a minute, he goes on, rough and low, “He’d kick my ass. Like, if that was even possible, if he knew I was just wallowing and shit. He hated that, you know—people feeling sorry for themselves. He—” Billy looks at her then, finally, and it’s so weird, because he’s not furious or dead inside—he just looks normal. He looks like her brother, Billy.

“He wouldn’t want that for you either, Max,” he says, and it shocks her so much, the niceness of it, that she wonders, briefly, if Steve put him up to it, gave him words to memorize. He looks so awkward, though, like he can’t believe he’s saying it either.

Max has no idea what she’s supposed to say back, except, I don’t know how to live without it and who’s going to remember him, if we forget?

But Dustin’s fight must’ve ended sometime between her being brave and Billy being nice, because then Steve rolls back over to them, a brand-new Hello Kitty bandage taped to his knee.

“Hey,” he says, panting, and he must catch something in Billy’s face, because adds, “Everything okay?”

“Nice band-aid,” Billy says, instead of answering.

Steve glares at him but doesn’t stop smiling “Don’t mock my battle wounds, man.” Then he holds out a small, neatly-wrapped box and says, “Forgot to give this to you, Max. It’s my part of the present.”

She takes it and tears the paper off slowly, glad for the distraction.

“I just thought you liked her,” Steve’s saying before she’s even unwrapped the whole thing. But she doesn’t need to, to recognize the tape cover, a woman shadowed in blue light. Joni Mitchell’s face is as sad as her voice. Max’s eyes start burning, because she knows the tape so well, she can hear the music just by looking at it.
She’s supposed to say thank you, she knows. She’s supposed to smile at Steve and say thank you and be happy, because it’s her birthday and her party and all her friends are here. She’s supposed to trust Billy when he says, *he wouldn’t want that for you*, and listen to him when he says, *keep going*.

But it’s not that simple. It *doesn’t matter* that Billy loved Jack more than she did, and that Billy’s better already and she’s not. It’s not that *easy* for her, because Billy has Steve, but Max has *nobody*, nothing, not even—

“Max?”

Steve’s face—when Max can focus on it through the dumb, stupid tears—is worried, bordering on freaked. “It’s okay if you don’t like it,” he says, anxious, “I have the receipt still, you can change it for something else.”

Max stares at the tape in her hands again, wondering if she’ll ever be able to listen to Blue without waiting for Jack’s soft laugh and, *sorry, Max*.

“Max?” Steve says again and reaches out to put a hand on her shoulder. The touch breaks through the ringing her ears, pulls her back to the rink, to the mall, to Hawkins, Indiana.

She wants to cling to it suddenly, this place, so she doesn’t have to think about the whole mess again, all the terrible things she started. She just wants to be in this day—January 18, 1986. She tracks the details of it all, to ground her—Steve’s nervous eyes and Billy next to him, frowning—not mad, she thinks, just confused.

On the rink, Mike is pulling El along in wobbly figure-eights, and beyond that, the rest of the guys are arguing with the DJ about something, trying to get a song to play. Just then, a familiar, upbeat synth blares from the overhead speakers, and the guys throw their hands up in frustration, not happy with the choice.

If you asked her four-hundred and sixty-two days ago what she thought *fifteen* would be like, she would’ve said *none of your business*, and then, if you pushed, she would’ve said *miserable* and *hopeless* and *lonely*.

She never could’ve predicted this, how cold and harrowing and *supernatural* it would be, but also how magical and wild and *good*. She never would’ve guessed that she’d have her own Party, more friends than she’s ever had in her whole life—or that Billy would be her brother again, and not just a keeper or a bully or a ghost.

“Max, seriously, are you okay?”

Steve’s got both hands on her shoulders now, kneeling as best as he can in skates, trying to get a better look at her. His face is so worried and goofy-looking, and she’s overwhelmed with it suddenly, how *not-mad* she is at him—and how lucky it is, that he cares about them, her and The Party and Billy.

She throws her arms around his neck, and he stumbles with the sudden weight of it, rolling backwards unsteadily as he struggles to still them. She laughs into his shoulder as he puts his arms cautiously around her.

“Thank you,” she breathes, and his grip tightens.

“You’re welcome,” he says, just as soft. He pulls back gently, so they don’t fall over, and his eyes when she finds them are bright.
I'll be stumbling away, sings the voice over the speakers, slowly learning that life is okay.

“All good?” he says, just jokingly enough to settle her, and if she wipes at her face with her sleeve, there’s no one to see but Steve and Billy, and they won’t tell. They’re good at secrets.

“Yeah,” she says, “I’m okay.”

Fin.

Chapter End Notes

** Before I get all sappy about ending things, I just want to say that, obviously, liking guys and girls does not automatically mean you're bisexual, and polyamory is so valid — these are just dumb kids in the 80s who are trying their best.

Now the sappy stuff: in all sincerity, thank you so much for reading this and getting this far, whether you've been reading from the day I posted this months ago or you just binged it all in one go. This is the longest thing I have ever written, and it's also the only multi-chapter fic I have ever finished, and that is 100% because of the wonderful comments and support from all of you.

I wanted to write this fic because it's the story I've always wanted to read (talk about self-insertion lmao), but if you saw yourself in Billy or Steve or any of the characters, or if this story made you feel seen or helped you discover something about yourself—that is just the beyond what I could've imagined for it. Also, I love you.

So, thank you, again, and if you love these boys as much as I do, be on the look out for more fics in this series because there will be more (eventually).

End Notes

thank you for reading! you can find me on tumblr
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!