**Landslide (brought me down)**

by KeepingTheStarsApart

**Summary**

Harrington's face does exactly what it does every time they cross paths in the hallways, in the locker rooms, on the basketball court, in the showers... Billy has come to find it quite entertaining: Harrington's eyes widen for a split-second with residual fear, before his eyebrows furrow determinedly (and hilariously), he squares his shoulders and meets Billy's eyes head-on, like a challenge.

It's endlessly laughable.

Lucky for him, Billy doesn't feel like picking another fight just now. If Max comes out and finds precious Steve Harrington at his feet, beaten to a pulp (again), she'll lose her shit.

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In which Max is tired of Billy, Billy is tired of being ignored, and Steve might be a damn good babysitter, but he sure as hell didn't ask to be Billy Hargrove's family therapist.

**Notes**

I'm terribly late to this fandom, but now that I'm officially obsessed, I needed to write something to bridge the time until Season 3. This takes place right after the Snow Ball at the end of Season 2 and will be canon-compliant right up until 7/4/19, when Everything
Changes.

Anyway, I really like Max as a character and even though Billy is obviously an asshole, I wanted to give him a little bit of redemption, which he is probably not getting on the show. It's all just pure self-indulgence, people.

This will eventually turn into Harringrove, but it's really a very slow slow burn, so it might need a second work to really get into that. For now, Steve is content with being the reluctant, sometimes drunk voice of reason to Billy's quest of becoming less asshole-y.

Title is, obviously, taken from Fleetwood Mac (as will be the chapter titles, probably) because I just love them as the soundtrack for Billy and Max.

Disclaimers: I own nothing, this is just for fun and also tragically unbeta'ed.

And finally, Some Warnings To Whom It May Concern: There are mentions of and actual abuse of a minor later in this fic, as well as underage drinking, drunk-driving and of course, lots of swearing. I don’t condone any of that irl. Also, the mental and emotional state of several characters is a little fragile at times and there might be very slight allusions to PTSD and potentially suicidal thoughts. It’s not explicit at all, but if you’re sensitive to that, proceed with caution and please take care of yourself.

All right, I'm done now.
Please enjoy :)

See the end of the work for more notes.
play the way you feel it

It's Saturday night and there is a party at Jimmy Tobin's house that Billy can't go to.

Instead of getting shitfaced like he's supposed to, he's very soberly driving his car to Hawkins Middle School, like the respectful, responsible big brother his dad said he was, before telling him to go fetch Max from the Snow Ball. Which is why he's pulling into the school's parking lot at ten p.m. sharp, knuckles white with how hard he's gripping the steering wheel.

His skin is still crawling from the talk his dad gave him when he caught Billy on his way out. No, of course he didn’t forget Max and the Snow Ball, he watched her get ready after all. No, of course he didn’t mind driving over to fetch her. No, of course he didn’t have anywhere better to be.

Susan, standing timidly in the kitchen doorway, offered to fetch her daughter herself, no problem at all, but got shouted down. Why bother, after all, when Billy was on his way out anyways.

On the bright side, the only one to take any hits tonight was the Camero’s poor steering wheel.

Billy's just getting out of the car to stretch his legs and have a smoke until Max shows, when another car pulls up a few spaces over. It looks a lot like Steve Harrington's BMW, and sure enough, it's Harrington who gets out and promptly freezes when he catches sight of Billy.

His face does exactly what it does every time they cross paths in the hallways, in the locker rooms, on the basketball court, in the showers... Billy has come to find it quite entertaining: Harrington's eyes widen for a split-second with residual fear, before his eyebrows furrow determinedly (and hilariously), he squares his shoulders and meets Billy's eyes head-on, like a challenge. It's endlessly laughable.

Lucky for him, Billy doesn't feel like picking another fight just now. If Max comes out and finds precious Steve Harrington at his feet, beaten to a pulp (again), she'll lose her shit. Instead, he leans against the hood of his car and lights a cigarette.

"Well, look who it is," he drawls, before taking a drag, "King Steve."

Harrington sighs. "Hargrove."

He slams his door shut harder than necessary, leans against it stiffly. Billy grins widely, dangerously. He pushes off the hood of the car and languidly strolls closer. Max might take a nail-covered bat to his balls if he touches a hair on Harrington's head, but that doesn't mean he can't have a little fun.

"Here to pick up the little nerds, Harrington?"

"Only Dustin," Harrington says carefully yet calmly, keeping his distance.

He behaves as though he's talking to a feral, predatory animal. Clever boy.

Billy takes another lazy drag of his cigarette. He's close enough now to blow the smoke right into Harrington's face. He coughs reproachfully, but otherwise just keeps looking over the top of Billy's head, jaw clenching and unclenching. Billy smirks.

"So tell me, King Steve... why do you keep chauffeuring those rugrats around, huh? Didn't peg you
for the motherly type."

Harrington rolls his eyes, but doesn't deign to answer.

"Does it make you feel important?" Billy keeps nagging, "Or is it because you don't have any other friends since the Wheeler bitch dumped you?"

That gets a snarl out of Harrington, but before either of them can say anything else, a voice calls them to attention.

"Steve! What's going on?"

The entire nerd patrol plus Max is jogging towards them, the curly one at the front, shouting Harrington's name again.

"If you talk about Nancy like that again, I'll forget any promises I made and run you over with my car," Steve hisses, then shoulders past him roughly to head the rugrats off.

Billy rubs his collar bone, mildly impressed, then strides back to his own car, ignoring all the accusing looks he gets from the bunch of eight-graders, who are huddled around Steve like he is, in fact, the mother-hen of their cluster.

There is some more huddling and conspiring, or whatever it is they do, until they say their goodbyes with handshakes and awkward waves. Max gives Lucas (the kid Billy kind of wants to pin against another cabinet) a hug that Billy watches from the car through half-lidded eyes. Then Steve marches Dustin to his Beemer, the other boys scuttle off, and Max finally drops into the passenger seat. Her mouth is clamped shut so tightly, it actually looks painful. It's obvious that she really wants to shout at him for harassing their designated babysitter, or something, but keeping up the silent treatment seems to be more important.

She hasn't talked to him since that night at the Byers' place. It's been four entire weeks, and not a single word has crossed the shitbird's lips, whenever they're alone. She's good enough about pretending in front of the parents, things like "pass the potatoes" and "thanks" over dinner, but that's it. As soon as it's just the two of them - read: as soon as they are in the car, which is the only place she can't dodge him - her mouth is shut tighter than Alcatraz. Billy would be impressed with her perseverance, if it weren't so fucking annoying. He's been trying to coax a word out of her, anything at all, because the prickly silence is grating on his nerves, and arguing with Max used to be some kind of outlet for his perpetual anger. But she's not raising to his bait anymore. Something about that night seems to have made her decide that Billy is no longer worth her attention.

When he goes way over the speed limit, tires squealing at every turn, she picks at her nails, bored. When he shouts at her for being late, she looks out the window, bored. When he cranks the music up so loud it starts to hurt his own ears, she taps her foot, bored. One time he nearly ran over a lady walking her cat, but all Max did was lean out the window and yell "Sorry, Mrs. Henderson, my brother is a psychopath!" after they had passed her by about half a foot's distance.

It's driving him nuts.

Billy pulls out the parking lot swiftly, cutting off Harington, who has to hit the breaks in order to avoid collision, and leaves the brightly lit school behind at top speed.
"Had a nice night, huh, Max? Lucas certainly looked like he enjoyed it."

Max's hand twitches on her thigh, but she curls it into a fist and ignores him.

"I thought I told you lots of times already," Billy continues menacingly, "that you shouldn't be seen hanging out with people like him. I thought I told you to stay away."

This time, Max audibly grinds her teeth. Billy knows he's playing with fire. He remembers how crazy Max looked with that nail bat, who close she got to... ugh. He's been keeping clear of the really bad stuff for the past four weeks, reluctantly held at bay by a new-found… respect for Max. He left her friends alone, left Harrington alone (mostly) and only shouted at Max a little, to keep her on her toes. But tonight… well, she's gotta break sometime.

"Looking kinda guilty there, Max. Whatcha do? You didn’t let him kiss you, didya?"

Max closes her eyes and breathes heavily through her nose. Billy is so sick of the silence.

"I sure hope not... cuz then I'd have to break his face."

There's a low growling to his right and he knows he's close.

"Max..." He stretches her name out quietly, dangerously, and knows that this is why she calls him a psycho.

He doesn't see her fist coming, until it connects with his cheekbone in a punch quite formidable for a thirteen-year-old girl.

Billy has taken a lot of punches in his life, so it's not the pain that causes him to jerk the wheel around on reflex, it's the surprise. He shouts out loud as they swerve of the street and manages to emergency brake last second, just before he would have set his car against a tree.

"Fucking hell!"

For the first time, Billy regrets never wearing his seat belt, because a steering wheel to the gut just knocked all the breath out of him. Next to him, Max is already unbuckling. She kicks the door open, but Billy grabs her wrist before she can make it out.

"Where do you think you're going!" he wheezes, sounding way less terrifying than he wants to.

With a strength he didn’t know she possessed, Max yanks her arm free.

"Don't. Touch. Me." Max grits out, finally, voice dangerously controlled.

She slams the door in his face, stalks up to the street and starts walking.

Billy blinks and can’t even appreciate his victory. After a few moments of breathing deeply, Billy pulls himself together and puts the car in reverse. It's a bumpy ride back onto the street, but once he's on solid ground, he catches up to Max in seconds. She's got both arms wrapped around her, it is December after all, but keeps walking determinedly, looking straight ahead. Billy stops to lean over and roll down the window on the passenger side, and has to catch up another ten yards. He feels kind of stupid, rolling along next to Max at walking speed, but she's got that stubborn, Mad Max kind of look on her face, like she's not gonna budge anytime soon.

"Max," he calls, not even trying to keep the fury out of his voice, "Get back in right now or so help me!"
Predictably, Max doesn't get in. She does flip him off, though, without even looking.

Billy curses under his breath.

"Max! You can't walk all the way home!"

At that she snorts, like *watch me*.

"You realize you nearly made us crash?" Billy says, because that's still an issue.

Actually, if Max hadn't gotten out herself, Billy probably would have made her walk anyways. But then again, his Dad will absolutely kill him if he lets Max walk home alone, in the middle of the night in December.

"If you ever punch me again while I'm driving, your ass will be grass, Maxine, because if the crash doesn't kill you, I will. Now get the fuck back in."

Max flips him off again.

"I'll drag you in by your fucking hair!" he threatens madly, and now Max whirls around, face scrunched up with rage.

"WELL GO AHEAD THEN!" she screams through the open window, "TRY IT! SEE WHERE IT GETS YOU! LOCK ME IN THE TRUNK FOR ALL I CARE!"

She must be waking up the little kids and old ladies in all of Hawkins, Billy thinks dumbly, while Max screams her gut out in what must the compressed hatred of four silent weeks.

"I'M SO FUCKING DONE WITH YOU, BILLY! JUST LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!"

She looks like fire, from the way she clenches her fists, to the way her eyes seem to emit sparks, to her flaming red hair illuminated by the street lamp.

Screw it, Billy thinks, and drives off.

Max's small form grows ever tinier in his rear mirror, but Billy forces himself to look straight ahead. He's got no time for guilt. Let her see how long it takes to get home by foot, without the luxury of Billy's driving. Let her see who cold it really gets in *it's-not-that-bad* Hawkins, Indiana. Maybe she'll get a head cold, it would serve her right. He'd get the blame, of course, no matter that Max decided to walk, but his dad can just go fuck himself.

Still, Billy obviously can't turn up at home without Max, so he drives around, aimless and angry, until he ends up at the quarry.

It's quiet out here, no lights except for the nearly full moon, and almost deserted. Almost. Completely unsurprisingly, because that's just his luck, there is already a car there. And not just any car.

Billy thinks about turning around - after all he's already had to deal with Harrington once today - but then again. Now might be a good time to pick that fight.

Harrington’s huge pretentious vehicle is parked right up by the edge of the quarry, as though he barely hit the brakes in time. Billy haphazardly parks behind it to the side and wastes no time getting out. His hands are itching to get rid of all the pent-up anger Max has caused.
Billy strides up to the Beemer and finds Harrington sitting on the hood, legs dangling, nursing a bottle of beer. Billy leans his shoulder against the driver’s door and clicks his tongue in greeting.

“Hargrove,” Harrington sighs in exactly the same tone of voice as half an hour ago. “Long time, no see.”

Harrington’s face doesn’t even do the amusing wide-eye, furry-brows, shoulder-square routine, which is a pity. He must have heard him coming. In fact, he doesn’t really pay much attention to Billy at all. He’s too busy drinking beer and staring over the edge into the moon-lit quarry.

Billy doesn’t do well with being ignored.

“Well, well, pretty boy,” he goads with a sharp grin, “What’s a model citizen like you doing out here all alone?”

"What's it look like, asshole?" Harrington says, waving his half-empty beer at the row of still full ones next to him. "I'm getting drunk."

"Why?" Billy finds himself asking, and wants to kick himself, because what kind of stupid question is that?

Harrington looks at him like he's thinking along the same lines, and doesn't deign to answer.

Billy clears his throat. "Where's your little nerdy sidekick, then?"

"At home, duh? Do you think I would bring an eight-grader with me to get drunk?"

Harrington sounds a little more aggressive now, which is great if they're gonna fight, but something makes Billy hold back for now.

"Where's your little sister, then?" Harrington mocks him.

"Step sister," Billy growls, and mocks back "At home, duh," because he'd rather not the local Number One babysitter find out he left Max to fend for herself, lest Harrington drive off to go save her.

That seems like some shit Harrington would pull in his endless concern for the rugrats, and Max does not deserve a ride home right now.

"You look angry," Steve notes mildly, "are you here to beat me up?"

Yes, Billy wants to say, try to plant your feet this time, but something irks him about how Harrington sounds so deeply unconcerned about being beaten to a pulp yet again. The last time was barely a month ago, and Harrington's pretty face has only just returned to its former glory. Would be a shame to mess it up again, really, but there's no one else around to fight, and Billy is craving a good fight right now more than anything. Maybe if he feels something break under his hands, he'll feel less like breaking on the inside.

Something comes flying his way and he reflexively catches it before it can hit him in the sternum. It's one of Harrington's beers.

"You look like one of those oxen that they fight in Spain," is the comment that comes with it, "and I don't have a red flag."

Billy promptly forgets his original train of thought. "Are you talking about bullfighting? And
"Sure, yeah. Those guys."

"Well watch what you call me," Billy says sharply, "unless you want me to ram you off that fancy car of yours and have another go. And maybe afterwards, when I knocked you out, I'll push the fancy car over that edge into the lake, what d'ya say? Sounds like a plan?"

Harrington seems decidedly unbothered by Billy's elaborate threat. "You do whatever you want. Just remember, Max knows her way around a baseball bat."

Billy would lie if he said that that particular memory doesn't rankle. With Max and now Harrington, they'll dangle that nail bat over his head forever, quite literally.

"So your best defense is a thirteen-year-old? That's pathetic," Billy spits nastily.

"At least I don't beat people up for the fun of it. That's psychotic."

With a roar, Billy kicks a big, nearby rock. It just so misses the front left headlight of the BMW and flies into the quarry, vanishing from sight way beyond the edge. Billy's foot hurts, but it was a great fucking kick, if he says so himself.

Harrington whistles. "Impressive," he says like he doesn't mean it at all, and keeps drinking his stupid beer on the hood of his stupid car with an air of absolute tranquility.

Billy thinks he must be on drugs.

Harrington nods to the beer Billy is still clutching. "Drink. Maybe you'll feel better."

"I don't want to feel better!" Billy snaps, and realizes he sounds like a tantrum-throwing child.

"Alright, well, maybe you'll feel less murderous, and that would make me feel better."

Billy uncaps the bottle and waits until Harrington looks at him again, before taking a provocative sip.

"How do you know alcohol won't just make me more aggressive?"

Harrington rolls his eyes. "I'll take my chances. But please, feel free to leave at any time. I really didn't come here for the company."

Billy takes another sip and walks past Harrington's car to the edge of the quarry. It's a long fucking way down.

"Then why are you here?"

"Why are you?" Harrington retorts, but doesn't sound like he cares at all.

Why would he?

Billy stares into the depths of the lake, hundreds of feet below him, and wonders what would happen if he lost his balance. Wonders if anybody would care.

"Anyone ever dare you to jump?"

"Dare away. Chief Hopper says the water turns into concrete and you break every bone in your body. Imagine what I'd look like. Ain't gonna traumatize Dustin and the kids like that."
Billy snorts. "Always so concerned for the little rugrats."

"Yep," Harrington says, popping the p, "that's me. Selfless Steve."

Billy thinks he sounds kind of exhausted with himself, which is terrible because now Billy can relate to Steve Harrington, of all people. This day just keeps getting worse.

Billy downs his beer in one go, grinds his teeth when Harrington starts slow-clapping behind him.

"Look at the New King of Hawkins High chugging his beer like a champ. That skill's gonna make for a highlight on your résumé one day."

Billy wants to punch his face in. With practiced self-assurance, Billy turns slowly on his heel and raises his eyebrows at Harrington.

"That sounds an awful lot like a challenge, King Steve. Wanna try to earn your throne back?"

Harrington raises his eyebrows right back at him, a little cockily, and Billy smells blood. He walks closer.

"One bottle, no setting down, no spilling. Whoever finishes first gets to be king of Hicksville High."

"I don't care about that shit anymore. Be king all you want. See what it gets you."

"Well, pretty boy, what do you want, then?"

*For you to get lost,* Billy expects, but Harrington surprises him.

"An answer. To any one question I have."

Billy laughs. "You sound like a girl right out of a cheesy rom-com. But sure," he agrees, because there is no way in hell Harrington will win, "as long as I get the same treat when I inevitably beat you."

"Deal," Harrington says, "on three."

Harrington wins.

Billy can't even begin to understand how Harrington outdrank him, but when Billy lifts the bottle off his lips and brings his head down triumphantly, Harrington is already wiping his mouth smugly. It's not possible.

"You cheated!" Billy accuses, but is rudely ignored.

"Why do you hate your sister so much?" Harrington wastes no time claiming his prize, but this is definitely not the kind of question Billy would have expected.

Maybe something like *How many girls did you fuck?* or *Why did you beat me up?* or even *What kind of hair product do you use?*

This one, however, is dangerous territory, especially after tonight.

Billy snarls in Harrington's face, which doesn't even twitch. "She's not my sister!"
"That was not the question."

"How would you like a snotty little brat who you have to cart around all day and gives you nothing but trouble?"

"Come on, Max is not that bad. I think you'd make a great team, if you both weren't so stubborn."

Harrington doesn't elaborate on why on earth Billy would want to make any team at all with Max, and Billy doesn't ask. He's got bigger problems. There is no way Harrington gets to ruin his reputation.

Billy snatches up another bottle. "Do-over, Harrington. Dumb luck is not going to get you very far in the great big world."

Now Harrington laughs, but it's a very depressed laugh for someone with such a fancy car. "In this town, dumb luck is the only thing that gets you through the day."

But he does take another beer from the ever dwindling line of full bottles, and clinks his against Billy's. Apparently they now say cheers before chugging.

Of course Harrington would stick to his good-boy manners even during a chugging contest in the middle of freaking nowhere.

Two hours later - and Billy has literally no idea how this happened - they are lying on their backs, next to each other, on the hood of Steve's Beemer. There are empty beer bottles littering the gravel around them and Billy is definitely frozen to the car. The most concerning thing, however, is that Billy's brain has officially exchanged Harrington for Steve.

Also, conversation-wise, they have moved on from insulting each other's hair, clothes, cars and basketball techniques, and are now debating the merits of silent Max versus talking Max, and how the silent version is driving Billy crazy. Three hours ago Steve was threatening to run him over with his car, now they're lying on said car, looking at the fucking stars, while Steve is giving him what can only be called parenting advice.

It's absolutely mental.

If it weren't for the pleasant, beer-induced buzzing in his head, Billy would have long since jumped down the quarry just to end this madness.

"You know," Steve is saying just now, "as far as Max tells Lucas, who tells Dustin, who tells me, you yourself are not actually trying to talk Max at all. You're only shouting and insulting and nearly killing her with your crazy driving."

Steve vaguely shakes his hand at Billy's car. He might be more drunk that Billy had assumed.

"What else am I supposed to do, then, Harrington? You're the top-notch babysitter around here, aren'tcha? The local kid-whisperer?"

"I'm not a kid-whisperer. They're all way cleverer than me. I just think, you know, if you want Max to talk to you again, which I think you really do, even though I dunno why, because don't you, like, not like her? At all?"

"She already talked to me a bit, earlier," Billy remembers, mostly ignoring Steve, "I just didn't like what she said."
He has literally no idea why he just admitted that.

"Yeah, well, okay. I still think if you wanna, like, make up, you should probably start with, maybe, apologizing? That could work." Steve's face scrunches up at that point, looking troubled. "No, no, it wouldn't. It wouldn't work because you're you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Billy snaps, offended.

Jesus, why is he offended? Who cares what Harrington thinks?

"Just that, you're probably really bad at apologies."

"I don't do apologies. Max is a little bitch, she can just go screw herself."

Steve waves his hand at him. "See? That's what a mean. Also," he tags on belatedly, "don't call your little sister a bitch."

"She's not my little sister!" Billy says through his teeth.

Steve waves his hand again. "Of course she is."

"Fuck you."

"You, too," Steve agrees mildly. Then he stands up all of a sudden. "Get off my hood, would ya? I'm going home."

"What?"

"I can't feel my toes. I'm going home."

"But you're drunk."

Billy wants to slap himself. What does he care if Steve drunk-drives? It's not like he's not about to do the same.

"I've been drunkener," Steve shrugs as he gets into his car.

Billy slides off the hood, watches Steve reverse sloppily and then his taillights disappear into the forest.

Billy checks his watch. It's well past midnight. Chances are good his dad is asleep and won't notice when he slips in through the window.

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That Sunday, Billy doesn't see Max at all except for at dinner.

She spends the whole day at the Wheeler's place, playing some weird game with dragons and shit. Billy only knows this because Max complains about it loudly to Susan over her pork chops. Apparently she is a Zoomer, whatever that is, but she keeps holding up the game because her friends can't agree on what kind of powers she should have. His dad cuts in at that point, stupidly asking why, if that game already has dragons in it, she couldn't just be a princess. Max gapes, offended, and Billy thinks that, princess his ass, Zoomer fits her perfectly. Whatever that is.
Max's fork promptly clanks against her plate, but only when she stares at Billy like he grew a third head does Billy realize he just said that out loud.

He considers the day over and done with, after that, and takes a bottle of cheap vodka out to the quarry. He's certainly not disappointed when Harrington doesn’t show up with more bad advice.

He's not.
the sound of your loneliness

Chapter Notes

First of all, thanks to everyone who has read/kudo'ed/commented on the first chapter!

I'm very glad to post the second one now, because even though I've got the whole story mapped out, this part was really difficult to write. So I hope you like it!

Warnings and disclaimers of the previous chapter apply.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Only one week of school left.* Billy thinks to himself Monday morning, as Max stalks past him on her way out the door with her nose up in the air. He’s got no choice but to follow, because he is still driving her and his dad gives him a *look*.

Billy is still waiting for the other shoe to drop on the whole leaving-Max-behind-on-the-side-of-the-road debacle. It’s worth at least a black eye and a split lip, in his dad’s book, if not a broken nose.

But so far, nothing.

There’s no way in hell Neil would let go such irresponsibility without punishment, which can only mean that Max hasn’t told on him. *Yet.* Billy’d rather they just get it over with, instead of this suspense, instead of waiting for Max to inevitably blab. She probably wants additional leverage to use against him.

The little devil is waiting outside, tapping her foot. They get into the car in silence and drive off in silence. Not that Billy is a fan of Max’s voice, but god, he is *so tired of the fucking silence.*

Max is slumped in the passenger seat with her eyes closed, clutching her skateboard to her chest. Billy notes, once again, the duct tape sloppily wrapped around its middle. He wonders how many times it gave way under her weight and she had to re-tape it all over.

He thinks, for no reason whatsoever, about what Harrington said about apologizing.

“So when are you gonna tell him?” Billy blurts out, before he can do something stupid like listen to Steve Harrington.

Max cracks her eyes open defiantly.

“Tell who what, exactly?”

Oh boy, she speaks. Wonders never cease. Maybe, after her screaming fit Saturday night, she’s finally done with the silence, but you never know when she might change her mind.

“Tell Neil,” Billy grumbles, because he can’t very well back out now, can he? “About, you know, two nights ago.”
“I already told him about that.”

Impossible. Billy doesn’t have bruises.

“No you didn’t.”

Max’s eyes flash dangerously. “Yes I fucking did. I told him we were late because we dropped some of my friends off first, and you went right on ahead to a friend’s house.”

Well, fuck.

“Why the heck did you cover for me?” he demands, and knows he sounds angry about it.

It’s just that every bone in his body disapproves of owing her.

Max is not having any of it.

“Because I’m not a fucking snitch!” she throws in his face, “but don’t worry, I won’t bother next time.”

With that, she cold-shoulders him and starts to roll down her window, until the sharp winter air is funneling through the car.

But Billy is not done yet. Maybe they can have an actual conversation for once. It probably won’t kill them, maybe.

“What about that night in November?”

Max laughs without humor and doesn’t look at him.

“Yeah, I sure as shit ain’t gonna tell him about that.”

“Well, maybe we should -” Billy gets out. He doesn’t want to do this. “- you know, talk about it.”

Snort from Max. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

“Not all your problems can be solved with a fucking nail bat, Maxine,” he admonishes, and feels like a hypocrite.

With an air of immense boredom, Max sticks her hand out the window to drift it around in the airstream.

"Go to hell, Billy."

Billy grips the steering wheel tighter and counts to ten in his head. Then to twenty. Then to 47, which is when they reach the middle school parking lot.

"Look," he grits out once the car is parked, barely keeping himself from slapping her up the head, "I get it, you’re still pissed. Well, so am I. Let’s just agree that we’re even, and you can stop with the silent treatment shit, because it’s really getting on my nerves."

There. He said it. Billy only feels a little bit nauseous, too, so that’s good.

Max seems to think differently. "Whoa, hold it," she goes and raises both hands, "You are angry with me?! About that night?!!"
Bill pulls a face like *duh*.

"You ran away while I was supposed to watch you, knocked me out with some drug shit and nearly busted my balls with that fucking bat! You missed by two inches, dipshit!"

"Yeah, and I really regret that," Max snarls, face clenching furiously, "Next time I'll aim better!"

And with that, she shoulders her way out of the car.

"God, she's a bitch," Billy growls, heartfelt, into his steering wheel, as soon as the door slams shut after Max. But he forgets that her window is rolled down.

Walking away backwards, Max flips him off and shouts "At least I'm not a fucking psycho!" all across the parking lot.

A few of the kids around watch her storm off, then turn to look at him with wide eyes. Billy grins at them, baring his teeth, until they scamper off.

As far as conversations go, this one went pretty shitty.

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Max goes back to not talking to him.

It was to be expected, really, what with that Monday morning disaster, but it’s still fucking frustrating. The little devil sits in the car like she’s made of stone, and Billy just drives. He doesn’t speed (much), he doesn’t turn up the music too loud, he doesn’t speak. Two can play a game.

By Wednesday, the grand total of words spoken between Billy and Max amounts to a whooping -1-.

(A very decided “no” on Billy’s side when Max changed the station to Cindi Lauper’s *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*, which went ignored. He’s had that fucking song stuck in his head for 36 hours now.)

On other news – as there’s only a week left ‘til the holidays – the town of Hawkins has fully descended into a snow-covered, tinsel-adorned, picture-perfect Christmas mania. Billy wants to puke every time he sees yet another gigantic, fake candy cane in somebody’s front yard. It’s terrible, and so cold. Billy likes to think he’s pretty hardcore, but there’s just no way to pull off a leatherjacket with an unbuttoned shirt in this weather. Nobody looks impressed anymore, they just look pitiful, or like Billy has lost his mind, or both.

Thanks to small miracles, the high school’s gym has a functioning heating system. So at least for basketball practice can Billy discard his shirt and show off his abs. He works hard for those, after all. Harrington, who has semi-successfully evaded Billy in the hallways this week, hides in a corner of the changing rooms and only grunts when Billy calls “King Steve! How nice of you to join us!” over their sniggering teammates’ heads.

Because it’s the last practice before the holidays, the coach lets them have a little tournament: teams of two will play each other in five minute matches, until only one team is left. Tommy swaggers towards Billy with a slimy, winning smile on his face.

“Hanson!” the coach calls at once, “I don’t think so. Over here with Donaldson. Hargrove, you’re
with Harrington.”

Isn’t that just a blast.

Harrington, standing on the other side of the gym, tilts his head back in annoyance. Billy strides over, predatory grin in place.

“What’s with the sour look, Harrington? With me on your team, you might actually win a game once in a while.”

“Max talking to you yet?” Harrington retorts snottily, and walks away in order to sit on the benches and wait for their turn.

As he shoulders past, Billy has to bite his tongue to stop himself from tripping the other boy up.

Apparently, Harrington is a lot less chill without a bottle of beer in his hands. If Billy remembers correctly, they parted ways Saturday night without any (new) bad blood between them. Sadly, his beer-ridden brain has deleted about half his memories of that night, so maybe he said or did something that Harrington has taken offense to. It wouldn’t be surprising, but then there’s always the possibility that Harrington just has girly mood swings or some shit.

“Why so bitchy, pretty boy?” Billy growls lowly, taking a seat next to him, “Somebody putting you on edge?”

“Only you, Hargrove,” Harrington says just as low, and a little less bitchy.

Billy feels a shudder running down his spine.

He preens a little. “Only me, huh? What a compliment out of your pretty mouth.”

Harrington rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, don’t cream your pants.”

“Aw, that’s cute. You’re not that impressing, amigo. You’ll have to work harder.”

“Like how?” Steve blurts out, trying to make it sound like a joke and failing.

“Maybe try playing shirtless,” Billy says and wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

Hilariously, Steve’s ears go red. Before he can work out a reply, the coach blows his whistle.

“Harrington, Hargrove, you’re up!”

Billy strides onto the court with confidence, and snickers with glee at Steve, who pulls his shirt off defiantly before following him.

“Shut up,” he grumbles as they move into position, “they always turn the heat up too high.”

“Whatever you say, Harrington,” Billy smirks, and catches the ball.

To everyone’s surprise but the coach’s, they win by a long shot. Even Billy, who is acutely aware of his own talent, is shocked at how well they work together when they’re not busy trying to outdo one another. Harrington seems to read his mind, is always exactly where he needs him to be, and makes his shots with a satisfying accuracy. Billy has to hand it to the other boy – he gets why Harrington was the star player before his own arrival.
They win the entire tournament with embarrassing ease.

At the end of practice, Billy is openly grinning, because even though, objectively, it’s only a high-school game for kicks, he feels good about at least one win this week. Even Harrington, though his posture suggests indifference, has a smile tugging at his lips.

The coach is as thrilled as a bald, middle-aged high-school teacher can possibly be. He treats them to a ten minute talk on the meaning of teamwork to their sport and how they should prepare to always play on the same team from now on. When he’s finally sent them off with a less-than-enthusiastic Merry Christmas, the rest of their teammates have already cleared the showers.

Steve seems to be in a hurry, because he is out of his clothes in seconds and stalks into the shower room stiffly. Billy leisurely strolls in after him.

He turns the water up. “Good job out there, pretty boy.”

“You, too,” Steve says and eyes him suspiciously.

Billy can’t really blame him. Literally all the shower heads are unoccupied, but Billy still chose the one right next to him. Full of adrenalin as he is after their winning streak, he can’t help it. Billy winks, all provocative, and wonders just how far Harrington will let him go.

He gets an eye-roll for his troubles. Harrington proceeds to ignore him (how great, another one), shampoos his hair with efficiency and runs his head under the water jet with closed eyes. Billy has about a dozen great quips about Steve’s ridiculous hair, but none come out of his mouth. His eyes, without his permission, follow the flowing water down Harrington’s body.

All the way down.

Damn.

Billy is officially screwed.

“You gonna start washing up,” Steve asks suddenly, without opening his eyes, “or are you just gonna keep standing there?”

Steve turns his shower off and, with a smug sideways glance, Billy’s too. “You’re wasting water with all that staring, buddy.”

Okay.

They have reached dangerous, dangerous territory. Billy gets to make the quips. Billy gets to make fun of Harrington, and his stupid polos and his even stupider hair. Billy even gets to flirt, because he is a sarcastic little shit and definitely doesn’t mean anything by it.

Harrington doesn’t get to do any of that.

Billy gets angry as quickly as flipping a switch. He takes a threatening step forwards and keeps his eyes on Harrington’s face.

“Piece of advice, buddy. Don’t talk about things that will get your face kicked in.”

Harrington has one inch on him and uses it well. “Excuse me?”

They are standing so close to each other, Billy could lower his head and lick beads of water off Steve’s collarbone.
Which would be gross, Jesus fucking hell. Totally gross.

There was a point to be made, here. Somewhere.

Harrington raises his eyebrows. Ah, right.

Billy pokes a finger into Harrington’s bare (firm, wet, glistering, stop) chest and walks him backwards all the way until his back hits the wall. “Sorry to disappoint, but I don’t swing that way.”

Harrington’s eyebrows keep climbing. “I never said you did. But you do make a lot of innuendos.”

Which he’s not supposed to talk about, for fuck’s sake! Billy, jaw clenching painfully, raises his fist, but Harrington blocks it.

“I don’t think it’ll help your case if we have a fight on the bathroom floor, naked.”

“Keep talking and you’ll lose every single one of those shiny teeth.”

“Aw, you think my teeth are shiny? Thanks.”

“You know, you sound like you have a really strong desire to take a nap in a pool of your own blood.”

Steve smiles ruefully. “There are scarier things than that. Scarier things than you, Billy.”

Well, fuck you too. Billy wants to storm out like a drama queen, but that would be dumb, because he hasn’t washed his fucking hair yet. If anybody has to leave its Harrington, and quickly, before this gets anymore awkward. Is that even possible?

“You look like you’re having a bad day,” Steve says and sounds almost sympathetic, “Max really isn’t talking to you, is she?”

Yes, yes it is possible. God-fucking-damnit.

“I don’t care about that, and even if I did, can we not talk about her in here?!” Like this?!

Steve disregards his very valid point. “You sure sounded like you cared Saturday. I think your exact words were I don’t even care if she insults me, I just want her to talk to me again.”

Well, shit. Billy wants to kick his drunk self.

“How do you even remember that? You were drunk off your ass!”

Offense is the best defense.

“So were you,” Harrington counters without pause, "I'd say that just made you all the more honest."

“What is your point, jerk face?” Billy barks crossly. "Are you just talking shit to protect your pretty face? Cuz that's not gonna work!"

Steve slowly leans his head back until the back of it thumps against the wall behind him.

"No, honestly?" he goes and looks like he’s about to say something Billy absolutely doesn't want to hear. "I think you’re really lonely. You go around pretending you hate your sister – and everyone else for that matter – but a few beers in, she was all you were talking about. And I get it man, I do. Being an ass will generally alienate everyone around you, and once you realize that's not actually
what you want, it's too late. I speak from experience."

**What.**

Despite himself, Billy is flooded with so many bad feelings - guilt, shame, anger, sadness - that he almost feels sick with it.

Who does this guy think he is?

Billy's gonna give him a piece of him mind, that's right, show him the ropes, and then decorate the shower floor with Harrington's blood.

"She's not my sister," he grumbles out after a beat, which is just plain weak.

Fucking Steve.

"You know there's always a way to come back from that, though, right?" Harrington continues calmly, "I did."

Billy pushes down every emotion inside him that is not anger and puts his face very close to Harrington's.

"Listen very carefully, amigo. You're talking about a whole lotta things you don't understand. And if you know what's best for you, I suggest you get the fuck out of here, before I forget myself.”

Billy puts all his psychotic scariness into that speech and knows, in all modesty, that almost everyone else would have pissed themselves and fucking bolted. Not Harrington.

“I'd sure love to, amigo, but you're the one blocking me in with your, uh, body.”

This one time, Steve’s voice wavers a tiny little bit, and if Billy isn’t very much mistaken, his gaze flickers downwards for the split of a second.

**Hah.**

Billy regains his composure in a matter of seconds. He and leans back, smirking.

“Right, right. I’ll make you a deal, pretty boy: we’ll never speak of this again, and I might be persuaded to let you leave with your precious little face intact.”

For some inexplicable reason, Steve laughs. “Sure, okay. I have one condition, though.”

Billy’s nostrils flare. “What.”

“Next time you want to talk, we’ll do it with clothes on.”

Billy huffs, takes a step back. “Where would be the fun in that?”

Steve grins. He walks away with a swagger in his step (bastard) and Billy is a big fan of lying to himself, but there’s no denying it: He’s definitely checking out that ass, and it looks even better without the jeans on top.

He’s so, so screwed.
Still reeling from his, well, close encounter with Harrington, Billy leans against his car and smokes a cigarette as he waits for Max to get out of AV club.

Only now that he's wearing clothes again, does he realize what a terribly misleading picture they must have made, arguing naked in the showers with only a hand's breadth between them.

Jesus, if someone had seen them... Billy would be a dead man walking.

Some of his basketball teammates had still been in the parking lot earlier, talking, but they all drove off in their respective cars before Billy even reached his own. Harrington, having gotten dressed at top-speed, is nowhere to be seen, and neither is his stupid Beemer. Maybe it's better this way.

Now, see Billy is not a fucking idiot. He's fucked a lot of girls, spent a lot of time in denial, hating himself, but he did live in California, where the homosexual community is significantly larger than here.

Billy has experiences, okay.

In fact, he has scars to show for the consequences of those experiences, with a father like his. So, Billy's not gonna lie: Steve Harrington is, apart from being a polo-wearing, shit-talking dumbass and a general nuisance, exactly Billy's type. In a perfect world, far away from Neil Hargrove and Indiana in general, Billy would have pressed Steve up against that shower wall and kissed the hell out of him, if only to cut off his know-all bullshit.

But this is Hawkins, and the day Billy kisses Steve Harrington is the day he signs his own death warrant.

A small gaggle of senior girls advances from the east. They all wear heels, even though the streets are slippery with frozen snow. A couple weeks ago, Billy went on a date with one of them, Lisa. Like most of his dates, it did not end well. When they spot him, the girls take Lisa into their midst and march past him with their noses in the air. The one to the left, however, gives him a look of pure disgust and flips him off.

It's a great prospect on what Max is going to be like in a few years, though probably (hopefully) with less lip-gloss involved.

Then they all increase their speed, as if they’re scared that Billy, offended by the girl's rudeness (which he honestly kind of is) would go after them and try to start a fight or something. Which is bullshit. Billy has never hit a girl in his life. He might be an asshole, but he's not his dad.

Max is late, as per usual.

When she finally exits the middle school building amidst the nerd brigade, Billy is on his third cigarette. The rugrats make it down the stairs in slow-motion all the way animatedly discussing something that Billy probably wouldn't even understand if somebody made the effort to explain it to
The curly haired one Steve is so fond of trips over his own feet in his excitement, which looks pathetic and generates a nerd-internal fit of laughter. A car honks over on the street, where Mrs. Byers' has pulled up in the no-parking zone.

Billy is 100 percent sure Max has long since spotted him, waiting for her, but out of what can only be sheer spite she accompanies her friends to the curb and watches the four boys pile into the tiny vehicle. She leans down to talk to Mrs. Byers and kisses Lucas on the cheek (again out of spite, because even from this distance can Billy spot the surprised look on the kid's face) before waving good-bye. Then she turns away and start to slouch into his direction.

Billy inadvertently feels a pang in his chest.

It's obvious that Max would much rather squeeze into that already overcrowded, smelly-looking rust bucket with her friends, than have Billy drive her in the Camaro. And with the way that four skinny arms wave out of the old Pinto's open windows all the way up the road, her friends would have preferred that, too.

As Billy watches Max (still pointedly slouching) grinning after the nerds' retreating ride, it hits him like a ton of bricks.

He's a creepy loner with no friends whatsoever.

Steve was right.

Tommy only hangs out with him because he's a slimeball and, as the human history indicates, assholes stick together. Other than that, he doesn't really have anything going for him, does he? This is not California. There are no beaches in Hicksville, Indiana, no piers, no grand boulevards, no clubs. Billy goes to school, Billy lifts his weights, Billy gets drunk.

The only social events he takes part in are house parties, for the sole purpose of obtaining free beer. There, the rest of the high-schoolers celebrate him for his remarkable chugging skills, all the girls (who have not yet been warned) want to get into his pants and all the guys want to be like him. But as soon as he sets the bottle down, most of them scatter, trying to stay out of his way, scared of getting on his wrong side.

At the end of the day, none of them actually like him, as more than a beer-chugging, fist-fighting form of entertainment. And Billy can't even blame them.

In all of Hawkins, there are maybe three people who are not afraid of him. His dad, Max and now apparently Steve. Coincidentally, these are also the people who probably, deservedly, hate him most out of everyone.

Great job, Hargrove, Billy tells himself, discarding his unfinished smoke as Max climbs into the Camaro without a peep, it takes a lot of hard work to be despised by an entire town.

That night, after Max goes to sleep, Billy's dad corners him in the living room and demands to see his report card. Billy goes to bed with a pack of frozen peas on his throbbing left eye.
It's more of the same on Thursday.

Max remains ever silent. The nerd brigade, waiting for her at the curb, glare at him before they scuttle off. Nancy Wheeler, walking past his locker in between classes with a stack of books pressed to her chest, turns up her nose and walks faster. During lunch, Tommy makes crude comments about every girl in school and has to be shoved into a wall in order to shut up. Steve, on the other hand, is disappointingly MIA.

The proverbial cherry on top waits at home, in the shape of half a dozen gigantic, fake candy canes that Susan puts up in their front yard with a big-ass smile.

Apparently their next door neighbor, an elderly lady with a pesky little dog, has lent her spare ones to Susan. Why one would have even one of these monstrosities, let alone any to spare, Billy can't begin to fathom, but the lady reportedly said that there was no such thing as too much Christmas spirit. Billy's seen her garden and can assure, there is definitely such a thing. It looks as though Santa Claus himself has projectile-vomited all over the place.

He wonders if there's any way he can survive the holidays in this shithole town with all these crazy people. He watches Max hang a bit of spare-because-you-can-never-have-enough mistletoe over their front door with unfitting enthusiasm and decides that, nope, there is no way in hell.

Billy spends the rest of the afternoon on his bed, listening to AC/DC. He daydreams about California, where people only wear Santa hats in combination with red swim trunks. He counts the days to his eighteenth birthday, when Neil can legally go fuck himself, and finds that there are way too many.

When Jailbreak comes on, he starts to pack a bag.

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Hours later, after a pretentious dinner, boring TV and half-hearted goodnights, Billy waits exactly 39 minutes until the house is consistently dark and quiet. He shoulders an old duffel bag, which easily fits everything that matters to him, and pushes the window open.

Everybody in this godforsaken town can just go fuck themselves. Billy is outta here.

“What are you doing?” a voice snaps behind Billy, who damn well nearly jumps out of his skin. On the up side, it’s not Neil. On the down side, Max just caught him with one leg out the window and a huge bag over his shoulder. Billy can’t really see himself talking his way out of this one.

“What does it fucking look like, dipshit?” he groans. “Go back to bed.”

Max, of course, does the opposite and walks into the room, arms crossed. “Are you running away?”

“Close the door, would you?” Billy hisses, aggravated, and his leg starts to hurt.

He pulls it back inside and faces his stepsister defiantly.

Max is rolling her eyes as she shuts the door. “I can’t believe you’re just gonna run.”
Of course she would pick this exact moment to break the silent treatment. Fucking convenient, isn’t it.

“So what if I am?” Billy doesn’t have time for this. “It’s not like you’d be sad to see me go!”

“I wouldn’t,” Max agrees, “I just think it would be a really fucking stupid thing to do.”

“Well then we’re lucky I don’t care what you think. Sayonara, shitbird.”

Billy gives her a sarcastic, two-fingered salute and makes to climb onto the windowsill again.

Max leaps over in a heartbeat and wrenches the duffel bag off Billy’s shoulder. He loses his balance and goes tumbling backwards into the room.

They’re damn lucky Neil is such a deep sleeper.

On his back, staring at the ceiling: “Max - I’m going to kill you.”

Unconcerned, the little devil leans over him, red hair dangling into his face. “Why would you want to leave, anyways?”

“Are you kidding me? This a shithole town with shitty people in it and I’m stuck with this fucked-up excuse of a family. The question should be, why wouldn’t I want to leave?”

Billy gets to his feet with lots of angry huffing.

“Because you’re a minor, dumbass!” Max takes a few steps back and clutches Billy’s bag to her chest, even though it’s nearly as big as she is. “What are you gonna do, huh? Drive back to Cali and then what? Do you even have any money?”

127 bucks total, but he’s not gonna admit that to Max, of all people.

“That’s really none of your fucking business.”

“It is, though.”

“Why?? For fuck’s sake, Maxine, can it! You’ll get to live your stupid little life with your stupid little friends and you’ll never have to worry about me ever again,” he says a little bitterly, “The only drawback for you is that you’ll have to find yourself a new chauffeur, but I’m sure Harrington is up for the job.”

Max regards him with a scrutinizing look that Billy doesn’t like at all. She opens her mouth, closes it again.

Then she says: “You’ll have to sleep in your car. It’s the middle of the winter, you’ll freeze to death.”

“I don’t fucking care.”

Max shifts her weight from one leg to the other.

“You’ll have to spend Christmas on your own.”

Billy is mostly thinking about the quietest way to get his bag back.

“Better alone than with you.”
For a moment there, Max looks pretty offended.

“What? You thought we’d have a happy little White Christmas? In this house? Grow up, Max. My dad is a dick, your mom is broke, you’re not talking to me—“ except for right now, which is just terrible timing, “—and let’s be honest: when they go on their stupid trip and leave you alone with me, we’ll probably bash each other’s heads in. I really don’t get why you’re trying to talk me out of this.”

“We’re family now, whether we like it or not,” Max mocks angrily, “which means I’m stuck looking out for you.”

For a moment Billy thinks she’s lost her mind, until he realizes that Max just fucking quoted him. Low blow.

He growls at her. “I don’t even know why I’m still talking to you. Give me my stuff and get lost, Max.”

“No,” she says.

“Max!”

“No!” she repeats stubbornly, “Here’s what we’re going to do instead,” Max drops the bag and kicks it under Billy’s bed, “We’re both going back to bed. We survive the next week,” she strides over and closes the window, “and forget any of this ever happened. Understood?”

Billy is too dumbfounded to answer. Max nods with an air of finality, and starts to leave.

As he watches her go, Billy gets out an incredulous “Why?” in a last-ditch attempt at making sense of whatever the hell just happened.

She turns around in the doorway, dropping her voice as to not alert the parents: “Because you’re right. This family is a fucking disaster. And you don’t get to leave me alone with it.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and please feel free to let me know what you think :)
The next morning, Billy still has no fucking clue as to why he didn’t just ignore everything Max said.

Windows can be reopened even after little devils close them. Bags can be retrieved from under a bed even after tiny annoying redheads stash them there. Max throwing a crazy little bitch fit shouldn’t have stopped him from leaving, but somehow it did.

Well, maybe it was just that very last thing she said. He doesn’t get to leave her alone. Does that mean, in some weird way, that she wants him around? Or is he just the necessary evil to keep the parents’ attention away from her own little misdeeds? Probably that.

Billy wanders into the kitchen, craving coffee and a cigarette (the latter of which will have to wait, though, because Susan has a thing about the smell lingering in her curtains). When Max, sitting at the breakfast table with her mother, spots him, she does something entirely unprecedented.

She smiles at him.

Well, it’s not a smile, per se. It’s more like a pleasantly surprised raise of the corners of her mouth. Maybe she didn’t really expect him to stay, either. It’s not like he ever listened to her before.

They drive to school mostly in silence – Billy somehow doesn’t feel like music this morning – but for once the silence is not prickly, or angry, or downright hostile. Snow starts to fall very lightly as they drive through Hawkins, and Max watches with joyful wonder, as though she’s never seen snow before (even though there has been nothing but snow for the past two weeks and Billy is already so sick of it).

It’s almost peaceful and almost companionable.

But then Billy says, with mock excitement, “You know, if the snowflakes fascinate you so much you can always stick your head out the window like a dog and try to catch some on your tongue.”

“Fuck you, too,” Max says, with dignity.

It’s a weird place to be in.

When Billy pulls up in the parking lot, Max doesn’t even give him her customary stink eye (which in the past weeks was her way of saying bye, see you later, but I hope you die painfully before then).

She clambers out and makes to close the door, but hesitates. She turns back and sticks her head inside.

“She’s taking us to the Arcade after school. My mom knows. Can you come pick me up after?”
Billy is disturbed to notice that he gets a little giddy at that. Not at the fact that he has to chauffeur her around yet again, but she’s talking to him. Actual sentences that go above the basic fuck-you’s. She even sounds nice enough about it, for her standards.

“What time?”

“Around five? Thanks.”

She lifts her hand in what might, with a lot of fantasy, pass as a little wave.

So much progress overnight. Billy should try to run away more often.

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Billy stands by his promise - mostly because of his dad, but still - and pulls up right in front of the arcade at 5 p.m. on the dot.

A few spaces to his right, Steve Harrington is waiting by his Beemer, because of course he is. When he spots Billy getting out of his own car, he promptly walks over.

“Hargrove,” he nods, and plants his ass against the corner of the Camaro’s hood. “Had a good last day of school?”

Apparently they are pretending that their unfortunate shower room encounter has never happened. Billy can live with that.

“No,” he deadpans, pulls a cigarette out of his back pocket and lights it without ever taking his eyes off Steve. “Don’t tell me you have.”

“I would never,” Steve says solemnly.

They’re interrupted by the arcade’s front door flying open (which is lucky because Billy already ran out of casual things to say), revealing the curly-haired Dustin kid with the stupid hat.

“Hey, Steve!” he calls with that goofy smile of his, which drops immediately when he turns his attention to Billy. “Hey, Asshole.”

Billy salutes.

“Hmpf. Your sister says to hang on. She’s having a wicked run at Dig Dug.”

Billy scoffs around his smoke. “Well, tell my step-sister I don’t give a fuck about her dumbass game and to get a move on.”

Dustin gawks in offense, then glances at Steve for confirmation, who shrugs. Dusting mirrors him and pulls his head back.

Billy gives Steve a meaningful look. “Can that twerp do anything at all without your approval?”

“Shut up,” Steve grumps with angry eyebrows.

The arcade’s door swings open again and reveals the little devil herself. Max crosses her arms over
her chest and hip-checks the door when it swings back.

“Thank you so much, Billy, for making Dustin distract me,” she says with mock sweetness, “Now I’ve got to start over.”

And she disappears again.

Unbelievable.

“Little bitch,” Billy growls under his breath, and ignores Steve’s disapproving cough.

Billy finishes his smoke in the awkward silence that follows, until Steve speaks up again.

“I have a question.”

Billy drops his cigarette to the ground and puts it out with his foot.

“Well? Can’t stop you from asking, now, can I?”

“Don’t freak out now, but why exactly do you think you hate Max?”

He can’t be serious.

“Didn’t you already ask me that?”

“Yeah, but it’s not like I got a real answer last time.”

“Why do you want one so badly, anyway?” Billy demands, annoyed, “What’s it to you if me and the little rugrat don’t get along?”

Steve gives him a look. “Oh, I dunno, maybe because you’re both miserable?”

“So what?” Billy snorts, “You think if I made friends with Max, we’d be less miserable?”

Harrington seems to honestly consider this.

“Probably,” he settles on, “It can’t hurt to get along with at least one member of your own family. So! Why?”

Billy wants to tell Harrington to fuck off with his shit, because Max is not his family, but then again – she kind of is, isn’t she? They’re stuck with each other. Also, this conversation is starting to get on his nerves - if he gets his stupid answer, maybe Steve will let it go.

“I don’t hate her, per se,” Billy admits begrudgingly, ”I even kind of liked her, back when I first met her. She was tough as nails... Still is. But she was also the daughter Neil never had, which in comparison, made me even more of a liability than I was before. And then, uh, she kind of accidentally ratted me out once, and we had to move because of that, and well,” Billy shrugs. "Here we are."

Those are a lot of words. He feels deeply uncomfortable telling all of this to Steve (why exactly is he doing this again?), but it’s not as bad as he would have thought. The wheels are apparently turning fast, up in Steve’s mind, because he kind of looks like he’s about to lay an egg.

"I thought," he starts out uncomfortably, "Well, Max mentioned once or twice that you guys moved after you... um, got in with the wrong crowd? And ended up being hospitalized after they beat you up?"
Billy snorts derisively. "Yeah, that's what they told her."

"So... so you weren't in the hospital?"

"No, I was. And I did get in with what my dad would call the wrong crowd, and I would call my friends. It just wasn't them who put me in the hospital."

"Then who did?" Steve asks quietly, like he already knows the answer.

He's not half as dumb as those ridiculous polo shirts make him look.

"Take a wild guess," Billy half-laughs.

"Well, shit."

"Yeah. I swear to god Harrington," Billy says, rounding on Steve, "if you start pitying me or some shit-"

Now it's Harrington's turn to half-laugh. "I'm not pitying you. What your dad did to you sucks, big time. Anybody who beats up his own kids is a grade A asshole. But that's no excuse for you to be one, too."

"What's that now?" Billy snarls.

"You heard me. I'm not clear on the details yet, but I'm pretty sure Max didn't mean for you to get hospitalized, Jesus. Sounds like she's got no clue what was going on and you're treating her like a piece of shit, while you're supposed to look out for her. How does that make you any different from your father?"

"Excuse me?" Billy growls, getting all up in Harrington’s space, but the other boy doesn't budge. "I've never laid a hand on her!"

"You've laid your hands on enough other people. Like Lucas. Or me. And none of us are to blame for what happened to you."

Billy feels his hackles raise. "You can go right to hell with your wide-eyed, know-all, idealistic bullshit! You've know idea what you're talking about. You're a spoiled-rotten rich boy! You're fucking naive!"

Billy is breathing heavily through his nose, but Harrington, one eyebrow raised, looks unimpressed.

"Sure," he sighs, puts a hand to Billy's chest and very lightly starts to push him away.

Billy goes.

He has no idea why he does that, but soon enough Harrington is walking away, and Billy still hasn't punched him.

But somehow, the worse thing is that Steve is walking away, back to his own car, probably ready to sulk in it until the return of the rugrats.

“Wait,” Billy blurts out, and bites his tongue.

*What the hell.*

Steve turns around, halfway between their cars, looking a little apprehensive but mostly
unconcerned.

“What?”

*I could use your help.* It’s five stupid words, they shouldn’t be so hard to say. Billy grapples with himself.

“Maybe you’re right about Max.”

“Okay. And?”

And *what*, Steve? Billy doesn’t want to have this conversation. What he wants to do is tell the other boy to fuck off with his pseudo-psychological bullshit, maybe shout a little and kick a tire of the stupid Beemer. But then again, it would be kind of nice to get Max and the stupid nail bat threat off his back. And even if she mostly just got in his way and talked shit, Billy feels like he somehow owes her after last night.

His inner fight must show on his face, because in his worst move yet, Steve takes pity on him. He slowly walks back up to Billy’s side.

“Did something happen?”

Billy wonders what Steve’s face would do if he said he was going to run away. Laugh, probably.

“She- Max is talking to me again. I think.”

God, he sounds like an idiot.

Steve purses his lips against an amused smirk. “Is she now? Congratulations.”

“It’s just – she’s not. I haven’t…”

As Billy stutters his way through meaningless half-sentences, he wonders where all his confidence has disappeared to. He could use some of it right now.

“You still haven’t apologized?” Steve comes to his rescue.

“I don’t know how,” Billy admits through gritted teeth.

He can’t believe he’s asking Steve Harrington for help on how to make amends, in broad daylight, under no influence of alcohol whatsoever. This is a new low.

“Sorry seems to be the hardest word,” Steve muses.

“You did not just fucking quote Elton John at me.”

“Oh, I guess I did. Do you want me to leave?” Steve wonders lightly, gesturing to his car.

What a drama queen.

“*Fuck you,* Harrington.”

“Alright, alright, I get it,” Steve laughs, putting a hand on Billy’s shoulder. “You’re a big, tough guy, all hard shell, no core whatsoever; you don’t do apologies.”

Billy stares at the offending hand until Steve pulls it back.
“Do you want a piece of advice?”

“Do you want a broken jaw?”

Steve rolls his eyes. “Uh-huh, very frightening. You know, this is supposed to be a civil conversation, you don’t have to constantly threaten me.”

“Eh, I dunno, threatening you is just so much fun, pretty boy.”

"Jesus, Billy, do you want my advice or not?"

"Spit it out, Harrington," Billy growls.

"No, no, you've got to say, yes, please, Steve."

That boy is going to kill him. Billy wants to wipe that smug smile off Steve's face with his lip— with his fists. His fists, damnit.

There are lots of people around, though, little kids, too, and Max is only one door away. Sadly, punching is not an option (and neither is kissing, Hargrove, fucking get it together).

"Yes, please, Steve," Billy says through gritted teeth and wants to bite his tongue off.

"Oh, wow," Steve goes, taken aback, "I thought you would choke on that."

“Nah… I might puke, though.”

That makes Steve laugh. It’s a good sound.

“Look, if you’re too much of a chickenshit to tell Max you’re sorry, maybe you can find a way to show her.”

Billy crosses his arms over his chest. “Fuck you. What’s that even mean?”

“Uh, it’s Christmas, isn’t it? I’m sure you can find something to give her that shows you want to make amends.”

He can’t be fucking serious.

“That’s you’re grand solution?” Billy inquires disbelievingly, “Buy her forgiveness with a stupid Christmas present? You know you’re basically suggesting bribery, right?”

Steve clicks his tongue. “No, dumbass. I’m not saying to give her money or buy some expensive shit just for the sake of it, I’m saying give her something with meaning.”

Billy has to put a lot of effort into not shouting, right now.

“Like what?”

“Well, no idea. If you really don’t know what she likes, ask her friends.”

“Like hell!”

“Well,” Steve shrugs, “if you can’t think of anything, there is always bribery.”
On Saturday, T minus 3 days before Christmas, Billy is required to drive Max all the way up to Indianapolis, so she can squander away all her saved-up pocket money on presents for her little friends.

Billy very much wants to ask why Susan or Neil can’t take her, whether they think he’s got nothing better to do than take Max shopping, of all the stupid things (he doesn’t, actually, but that’s not the point), but Neil already has that distinctly pissed off look on his face that Billy associates with broken bones, so he swallows it down.

He compensates by listening to AC/DC tapes in the car, slapping the steering wheel along with the bass. It helps a little bit. Max deliberately doesn’t comment (being stuck with Billy all day is probably not her idea of a fun trip either), but when Billy asks her a question she’s not ignoring him either.

(“Any reason you waited until now to do your fucking Christmas shopping, shitbird?”

“Because fuck you, that’s why.”)

They drive down the country roads in mutually bad-tempered silence, right up until *Highway to Hell* comes on. Max gives him a sideways look.

(“Well, that’s appropriate.”

Billy snorts involuntarily, and Max laughs for real and then she’s suddenly singing along. She hits his shoulder excitedly and they belt out the chorus together, like a couple of idiots.

Billy doesn’t know why he’s going along with this, but for about four and a half minutes they’re actually having a good time. He honestly didn’t think it was possible.

Just a little later, however, they reach the huge, garish mall on the outskirt of Indianapolis and apparently his step-sister is now reaching the age where shopping is considered fun rather than a necessary evil. A real pity, that.

Max memorizes the floor plan by the entrance and methodically works her way through the plethora of shops, looking for god knows what, Billy always at her heels. He wants nothing more than to drop her off at any random book shop and wait in the food court, but he’s got strict instructions not to let Max out of his sight.

 Apparently at thirteen she’s still in immediate danger of getting lost (nonsense, because Max might be a pain in the ass but she’s not stupid), or worse yet, get herself kidnapped (also no concern in Billy’s eyes, because whichever unlucky bastard tried to take Max would definitely return her within the hour).

But Neil is a creepy bastard, and if Billy dared to let Max go off on her own, his dad would surely
find out about it one way or another. So Billy wanders after the little red-head for hours, from store to store, with gritted teeth. It’s not like she’s got enough money to even buy all that much, but apparently she needs to make sure she gets the perfect gift for each one of her friends.

By the time they leave the third clothes store they entered just because Max wanted a look around, it’s three p.m. and Billy is on his very last nerve.

He’s already carrying half a dozen little bags from as many different stores (does the little devil even have that many friends?) and slowly starts to usher Max towards the closest exits, when she spots the blinking lights of a small arcade behind his back. Her face splits into a pleased grin.

Billy follows her eyes and immediately starts to protest.

“Jesus, no, come on Max! We’ve been here for hours! You’ve got a perfectly fine arcade at home that you can go to with your friends, why would you need to play your stupid games here??”

Max smiles sweetly. “Again: because fuck you, that’s why.”

Billy closes his eyes and takes a deep, calming breath.

“Listen, shitbird, here’s the thing. If you drag me into even one more store, much less that crazy, rugrat-pestered hellhole over there, I will literally rip your head off-“ Max opens her mouth in offense but Billy talks right over her, “-so if I give you a couple quarters to keep you busy in there while I go get myself some coffee, will you promise not to tell Neil?”

Max considers this for a moment, glances over his shoulder at the arcade, then back at him. She holds out her hand.

Well, at least she’s open to bribery.

Billy slouches to the food court, more exhausted than after any basketball practice. He’s only a few yards away from a saving cup of coffee when he spots a small, dingy store in a corner, selling sporting goods. In the single shop window, between boxing gloves and a hockey stick, is a skateboard.

Huh.

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Max (neither lost, nor kidnapped) finds him half an hour later in a café and bitches until he buys her a coke. By the time they finally make it home, they’re about ready to kick each other’s heads in. Just because they’re back on speaking terms it doesn’t mean they have anything particularly nice to say to each other. After a whole day of senseless shopping and being stuck in a tiny car with her, Billy has had it up to here with Max and her constant bickering (a feeling she quite vocally reciprocates).

He makes it through dinner with clenched teeth, listening to his dad detailing his and Susan’s preparations for the ski trip they’re going on right after Christmas, and then gets the fuck out of there.

There’s a party that evening, which is convenient, because even though his fellow high-schoolers
mostly suck, Billy is about ready to get shit-faced after the day he’s had.

In a follow-up to her infamous Halloween Bash, Tina has invited the entire senior class to *Come and Be Naughty*, which all alone makes Billy want to barf. He's exclusively going for the free booze, but regrets that decision as soon as he steps over the threshold of Tina's Loch Nora residence.

It's a Christmas nightmare.

Due to an unknown reason Billy associates with collective brain failure, at least 80 percent of the guests are dressed up for the occasion. He's surrounded by Santa hats, red Rudolph noses and girls with fake angel wings stuck to their backs. Two of those smack Billy in the face within the first minute of his arrival.

A guy Billy vaguely remembers being dressed as a Neanderthal two months ago walks by, now sporting pointy elf ears and unfavorable green tights. Another one has a wildly blinking string of fairy lights wrapped all around him, illuminating the staircase.

There is tinsel everywhere and, worse yet, mistletoe under Every. Single. Doorway.

The way to the kitchen is a red, green and gold maze spiked with a dozen girls attempting to kiss him and one random dude trying to stick a pair of plastic antlers onto his head. (Billy leaves him with broken antlers and some creative suggestion as to where he should stick them.)

When he finally makes it to the fridge, Billy downs a beer in one go right then and there, even though nobody's watching, and takes another one to go.

Because it's so cold outside, most of the party people are crowded together in the living area, dancing to a horrible rendition of *Rockin' around the Christmas Tree*. No way in hell is Billy getting in on this. His Christmas spirit has officially sunken to a sub-zero level.

Eventually, he ends up in a corner with Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers, because compared to that blinking, glittering madness on the designated dancefloor, they are the lesser of two evils.

By the grace of some unknown god Billy has long since stopped believing in, they're not currently making out, nor are they wearing costumes. In fact, they look like they're having about as much of a good time as Billy is. Clad in vaguely winter-themed sweaters, they’ve got their arms crossed, backs to the wall, identical scowls in place. This, and the big-ass camera dangling from Jonathan's neck, is probably the reason why everyone's keeping away from them.

Exactly what Billy is looking for.

"Wheeler," he says, getting in line with the creepy bouncer aesthetic, "Byers."

Predictably, Nancy scrunches up her nose and turns her back on him. Over her head, Jonathan gives him an awkward nod.

"You guys didn't bring Harrington, did you?" Billy wonders aloud without thinking it through.

"Why do you ask? Want to give him some more bruises?" Nancy snaps, but doesn't wait for an answer before cold-shouldering him again.


"You didn't have to come," Nancy cuts in, apparently unable to hold herself back.
Jonathan shrugs. "You wanted to."

"Yes, well - I thought maybe it would be fun," Nancy defends weakly and sounds like she wants to be anywhere else but here.

Billy can relate.

Over to their left, in the doorway to the kitchen, somebody spills scarlet cinnamon punch. Jonathan excuses himself to go and take pictures of the blood-like looking puddle. Billy watches with raised eyebrows.

"Your boyfriend is weird," he tells Nancy, who regards him with a glare.

"Listen, Hargrove, I don't know what you and Steve have been up to, but I swear to god, if you touch a single hair on his head, I will-"

"You'll what?" Billy cuts her off, unimpressed, "Shoot me?"

He is not sure what she's even on about, but he's not gonna let a girl threaten him.

"Yes, actually, I will," Nancy snarls.

There is so much cold sincerity in her voice that suddenly, Billy has no doubt left whatsoever that this girl could and would shoot him without a moment's hesitation.

What the hell.

"Jesus, Wheeler, calm down. I'm not out to hurt your little pet ex-boyfriend."

"Steve is my friend," she snaps, "and he thinks he can save you, but if you dare to screw him over in any way at all, I swear I will - I'm going to..."

Apparently there are no words bad enough to describe what she'll do to him, but Billy has another issue.

"I don't need to be saved," he notes, nonplussed.

"Yes you do. I'm just not convinced there's much left worth saving."

Now that is just plain rude, but Nancy has pure fire coming out of her eyes, a lot like Max in her best moments, so Billy holds his tongue.

He's not intimidated, or anything. He's just not stupid.

After excruciating 45 minutes, Billy escapes the party during the commotion caused by somebody's angel wings catching flame in an unattended candle.

Idiots, all of them.

Thoroughly hacked off and disappointingly sober, Billy drives to the Quarry, because he has a feeling.
Sure enough, Steve’s car is parked right by the quarry’s edge again. Billy parks a little way to the left and gets out.

Steve himself is sitting on the hood of the BMW again, leaning back against the windshield, legs splayed out in front of him. This time, there are no beer bottles anywhere to be seen.

Billy comes to stand next to the left headlight, looking down at Steve, who in turn doesn't take his eyes of the skies. Is he star-gazing now, or what?

"Not in the mood for a party, pretty boy?"

"Nope," comes the simple response.

"Good choice, it fucking sucks. Care for some company?"

"As long as it's company above the age of 13."

Billy is not sure why he's taking a seat next to Steve - he just feels like it. Steve doesn't scoot over to make any more room, so they end up pressed together from shoulders to knees which... is not too bad actually. Steve is like a furnace, even though it's definitely below 35 degrees.

"Our local number one babysitter didn't grow tired of his little rugrats, did he now?"

"Dustin's mad at me... I was supposed to buy him lunch today but I overslept."

Billy doesn't know why Steve is so willingly sharing his grievances.

"You overslept lunch?" he inquires anyways, because that's quite an accomplishment.

"Only because I didn't sleep during the night."

"You got insomnia?"

"I dunno. I can't really sleep unless there's light out."

Billy frowns. "Are you afraid of the dark or what?"

"No, not of the dark. Maybe of what's hiding in it." 

Steve is being surprisingly open right now, but also very cryptic. And maybe a little bit nuts.

Billy raised his head to check for hidden, empty vodka bottles, but missing evidence suggests soberness on Steve's side.

"Sounding a little crazy there, buddy," Billy notes, rummaging around in his pockets for his cigarettes.

"I know," Steve murmurs.

Okay then.

They fall silent while Billy lights up. He takes a drag, exhales, and watches the smoke billowing over their heads. Holds the cigarette out for Harrington to take.

"I bought a skateboard."
Steve slowly turns his head to look at him, which puts his face very close to Billy's cheek. He takes the cigarette between his slender fingers, but doesn’t take a drag.

"You have a Camaro," Steve points out.

Billy can feel his breathe against his skin, suppresses a shudder. Pretends he's shivering solely from the cold.

"No shit, Sherlock. It's for Max."

"Of course. Good for you."

Billy turns his head, too. There are maybe two inches of space between the tips of their noses. Their eyes meet.

"You think?"

Why the fuck does he sound so insecure?

"Sure," Steve says, abruptly turning his face back to the sky. “You broke hers a while ago, didn’t you, so it’s probably a good place to start. You know, I’m impressed, you did exactly what I told you to do even though I was vague as shit and honestly, I didn’t even really know what exactly it was I was telling you to do-“

Well now he’s just rambling. Billy snaps his fingers next to Steve’s ear until he gets his smoke back.

After a beat of slightly awkward silence, Steve asks how the party was. Billy is about to complain a lot (hearing a story about Billy getting hit in the face by a pair of angel wings is sure to make Steve laugh), but then he thinks of something else that calls for discussion.

"Nancy says you're trying to save me."

Steve seems to balk a little. "You talked to Nancy? And she didn't punch you?"

"I'm sure she wanted to, but you're missing the point."

"Which is?"

"You can’t save me,” Billy says tonelessly, “Not from my dad, or anything else.”

"I know that. But you can."

“No shit. As soon as I’m eighteen, I’m out of here and then my dad can die in a ditch for all I care.”

"That's not what I meant."

“Well, what did you mean?”

“Just,” Steve hesitates, “that maybe you can save yourself from going down the same path as your father. You know. Be a better person.”

Billy feels his stomach sink. “I don’t wanna talk about that.”

Steve sighs. "Well, what do you want to talk about?"

Good question. Preferably nothing. Steve surely can do much better things with his mouth than talk.
Ah, no. That's a bad train of thought leading to urges Billy is trying very hard to suppress.

"How are you not freezing?" he asks, because he can't think of anything better.

"What makes you think I'm not?" Steve snorts.

"Well then what are you even doing here?"

Billy feels the other boy's shoulders shrug against his. "I like looking down at the lake."

This guy makes no sense at all.

"Don't you have a perfectly fine pool at home to stare into, and probably an entire collection of your dad's best liquors to go with it? Why do you hang out here, in the middle of the woods?"

With me, Billy nearly adds, but it's not like Harrington invited him. For all Billy knows, the guys mopes around at the quarry every night, like a complete loner.

Weirdly, Steve has stiffened next to him. "Why do you?"

"I asked first. And you know that my house sucks."

"Has it ever occurred to you that maybe my house sucks, too?" Steve inquires, sounding pretty bitchy all of a sudden.

"Don't be stupid, I've seen your place," Billy waves his hand around vaguely, "It's huge. And I'm pretty sure your parents are fine."

Steve, however, does not look fine.

"You do realize that just because I've got a big ass house and mostly non-violent parents, it doesn't automatically make me the happiest guy on earth, right?"

Oh boy, now he's getting angry.

With a weird, dog-like growl, Steve pushes off the car and starts pacing up and down in front of it. The beams of the headlights flicker sporadically as Steve’s long legs cut through them.

Billy sits up to watch the show. "What's biting you, buddy? Is daddy not giving you enough allowance?"

Harrington rounds on him, snarling, "Trust me, you don't wanna know!"

What a drama queen. Billy spreads out his arms.

"Sure I do. C'mon, pretty boy, don't you want to share with the class?"

"Fine. Fine! You know what's biting me, buddy? I can't fucking sleep! I'm failing half my classes because I can't concentrate and everything I can think about are Dustin and his dumb friends getting themselves into trouble again, which I know eventually they will and then I've got to be ready - I can't be asleep when they need me! And that pool you think is so great? I can't even look at it without feeling sick, and my parents think I'm going crazy because I can't tell them why. Do you think your dad is the only monster in this town? Hell no! You act like you're the toughest guy around, like you've seen it all, but you know what Billy? You've seen shit! You know shit! Do you think I carry a nail bat in my car for fun?!!"
Well, fuck.

Billy's obviously been poking a hornets nest he didn't know existed.

Of course, objectively he knows that everyone's got problems, that's just how humans are wired - but who would have thought that rich-boy, polo-clad, babysitting Steve Harrington of all people, has issues.

Pretty bad ones, too, the way he talks about his... pool?

"Woah, man," Billy says, once Harrington has stopped breathing so hard, "I'm sorry, alright? I didn't mean to upset you, okay? You can calm down, I'll shut up."

Steve blinks at him and the angry wrinkles on his forehead smooth over with bewilderment.

"Did you just say you're sorry?"


"Fuck you."

Steve nods knowingly. “Yeah, that’s more like it.”

Billy smiles, he can’t help it.

Steve’s eyes widen comically. He steps forwards jerkily, until his thigh brushes against Billy’s knee, and leans down to peer into his face.

Stubbornly, Billy stays right where he is, even though his stomach does somersaults at their renewed close proximity.

“What? I got something on my face?”

“You were smiling,” Steve points out dumbly.

“Go figure, pretty boy,” Billy says languidly, leaning back against the windshield with his hands behind his head, stretching out lasciviously.

Beneath his jacket, his shirt rides up, exposing a small strip of skin to the icy winter air. Billy shivers heavily, but it is so worth it, because Steve is turning tomato red in the car’s dim illumination.

They stare at one another for a heartbeat, before Billy smirks coolly.

“You like what you see, Harrington?”

Steve visibly shakes himself. Hands on his hips, he takes that mom-stance Billy’s seen him use on the rugrats.

“Actually, what I would really like to see is you showing-off over there on the hood of your own car, so I can drive mine home.”

Eh.

Touché.
On Christmas ‘Eve, Max, laden with all her carefully selected gifts, goes to a party at the Byers’ place and Billy, who spends the evening hanging around in his room, feeling sorry for himself, is commandeered to fetch her five hours later.

It would be a hardship, if he had anything better to do.

Still, when Max hops into the Camaro with shining eyes and flushed cheeks, waving happily to her friends, Billy can’t help feeling a little annoyed with her.

It’s definitely not jealousy.

“Had a good time, twerp? I hope Sinclair kept his hands off.”

Max lets out a long-suffering huff.

“I had a great time, thank you,” she says haughtily and fiddles with something small in her hand.

“What’s that you’ve got there?”

If it’s chocolate, Billy’s so gonna steal it.

“That’s really none of your business. Also, you wouldn’t understand it anyways.”

Probably true, but Max isn’t calling the shots, here.

“Don’t make me kick your ass now, shithead.”

“Hmpf. It’s a figure to play Dungeons and Dragons with, alright? Will made it for me.”

Defiantly, she holds out her hand and Billy spots a tiny, lopsided stick figure with an orange blob of hair.

He raises an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t that fuck-ass game have some real playing pieces to come with it?”

“It does,” Max says slowly, like she’s talking to a complete blockhead, “but not one for a Zoomer.”

“What the fuck is a Zoomer, Max.”

“I am the Zoomer, you moron.”

Billy experiences a very strong urge to pry that little stick figure out of her hand and throw it out the window. He takes a deep breath and convinces himself that ruining Max’s night is not going to make his any better. It works a little bit.

This is a work in progress, okay.
Christmas Day at the Hargrove residence is, in one word, depressing. In more words, it’s a giant, soul-destroying, motherfucking shitshow.

Well.

Maybe Billy is being dramatic, but so is Max, who has set up her little Zoomer figurine in front of her on the breakfast table and keeps sighing at it.

Neil, in his endless ignorance, seems to expect Max to have more childlike enthusiasm for the whole ordeal and repeatedly asks if she isn’t excited to open presents.

Max clearly isn’t (even without teenage cynicism looming over her she would know not to expect much) but eventually she pastes an innocent smile on her face and leads the way into the living room. There, under their measly tree, lies a grand total of nine parcels.

Susan puts on Bing Crosby and there goes that.

(The highlight is when Max, batting her eyelashes, presents Neil with an honest to god, self-drawn picture of their ‘family’. The guts on this girl.

The lowlight is when Billy opens his one present and finds a truly appalling, self-knit Christmas sweater curtesy of Susan, which he as to put on amid Max’s badly concealed snickering.)

Neil proceeds to laze around in the recliner, drinking beer and watching football, while Susan spends all afternoon in the kitchen, cobbling together a home cooked, picture perfect Christmas dinner.

Max tries to help and ends up cutting herself while peeling potatoes. Consequently, she gets banished from the kitchen and Neil says she’ll never make a good housewife at this rate. Max looks very pleased about that.

Billy tries to help, but his father tells him to stay out of Susan’s way, because apparently only women are supposed to do kitchen work.

If he doesn’t get out of here quickly, Billy is going to punch someone - most probably his dad, which would not end well for him at all. Max, too, looks about ready to vibrate out of her skin, but they’re not allowed to leave, because Christmas is a time for family.

So they end up on opposite ends of the chilly front porch "getting some fresh air", breathing deeply and watching the light snow fall gently onto the earth.

"I can't believe you're too dumb to peel potatoes," Billy comments around a cigarette.

Max looks over from where she's leaning against the railing and scowls at him.

"I can't believe you're wearing a Christmas sweater," she counters sassily.

Point.

"Well I can't believe you gave Neil a drawing like a fucking five-year-old and he bought it."

Max smirks at that, proud, but gets sort of glum after a moment.

"I can't believe my Mom's going on a ski trip without me."

That’s a good one, but Billy can do better.
"I can't believe she's leaving you with me."

"Yeah," Max agrees thoughtfully - looks like they've got a winner. "I can't think of anything worse than that."

And that should not sting as much as it does.

"Oh look, finally something we agree on," Billy declares ironically, puts out his smoke and goes back to his personal little hell.

Their absurd act continues after dinner, when they are compelled to gather in the living room to watch *It's a Wonderful Life.*

(It is not.)

Max is squeezed onto the sofa between Susan and Neil, looking like she took a bite out of a bad lemon, while Billy is forced to watch them play happy little family from the recliner.

It's quite horrifying, actually: Neil loosely puts his arm around Max's shoulder, sipping a glass of cheap sparkling wine as though this is the perfect ending to a perfect day. Susan's smile is cemented onto her face in a way that looks almost painful.

Max only makes it halfway through the movie - which no one can fault her for - before claiming to be tired and heading to the bathroom.

She returns to say goodbye to her mom, since they'll be leaving at dawn break tomorrow morning and Max has reasonably declined getting up before seven to see them off. Billy would have done the same, had anybody asked him.

Susan is very emotional and apologetic (she is leaving her daughter alone with an alleged psycho, after all) but Max seems remotely indifferent to it all. She catches Billy's eye on her way out and gives him a significant look that could mean absolutely anything.

Billy himself is left on tenterhooks. He would've liked to make fun of the movie in his head, or think a little more about all the ways this family is fucked up, but he can't concentrate.

The skateboard he bought for Max is burning a hole through his chest all the way from its hiding place. Billy hasn't had the guts to put it under the tree with the rest of the gifts, or hand it over in the light of day.

The thing is, it is an apology gift, but it's disguised as a Christmas present to protect Billy's exceedingly suffering reputation. That's obviously not gonna work out *after* Christmas, of which there are only two hours left.

Damnit.

Billy excuses himself during commercials and wanders into his room to retrieve the skateboard from under his bed.

He's got to do it now, while there's still light under her door. If he wakes her up to hand over a present he could've just as well put under the fucking tree, it'll even weirder than it already is.
Don't be such a chickenshit, Billy tells himself, *it's just a stupid skateboard, not a fucking friendship bracelet.*

The thing's sloppily wrapped in a spare piece of ludicrous gift wrap Billy found in the storage closet - pale blue with dozens of obnoxiously joyful Frosty the Snowmen depicted on it. Max probably won't appreciate those at all, which is exactly what Billy is going for. There has to be some kind if limit to this.

With the unhandy package in hand, Billy plants himself in front of Max's door.

He knocks.

After a few uncomfortable seconds in which Billy debates the merits of just leaving the parcel out here on the floor, the door cracks open. One piercing blue eye appears in the tiny gap, considering him.

"Hello," Billy says like an idiot and hides the present behind his back like an even bigger idiot.

The door opens wider, until all of Max fits through and she can comfortably leans against the doorjamb.

Billy tries for a smile, or at least a non-threatening expression, but he's not sure it works.

Max's face goes from confused to annoyed to curious in a heartbeat.

"What? Are you running away again? At least wait until they're gone," she jerks her head in the vague direction of the living room, smirks. "I wouldn't mind having the place to myself for a couple days. But there's a blizzard coming up, so don't come crawling back when your car gets stuck in a snowdrift."

God, she talks too much.

Billy can't believe he ever thought the silent treatment was a bad thing. Rolling his eyes, he holds out the present.

This at least shuts up her sarcasm-filled rambling.

"Merry Christmas," Billy says lamely.

Max balks. "Is this a skateboard?"

"No," Billy snarks, shoving the distinctly skateboard-shaped parcel into her arms, "It's a pair of shoes. What do you think, dipshit?"

Max stares down at it as though she was just handed a ticking time-bomb.

"Um. Why?"

Billy scratches his neck.

"I broke yours, didn't I? Figured you might need a new one eventually. One that's not falling apart under your feet."

Humming thoughtfully, Max tears at the corner of the wrapping and peers inside cautiously.

Billy groans. "Fucking hell, shitbird, it's not gonna explode."
But Max seems to have figured that out for herself. With newfound excitement, she tears off all of the gift wrap, balls it up and throws it over her shoulder into her room, with no concern for poor Frosty whatsoever.

"Is this your way of telling me you're not gonna be driving me around anymore?"

She goes for nonchalance, but there's delight audible beneath it, and awe in the way she runs her fingers over the board's spotless surface.

Is this what success feels like?

"No," Billy answers belatedly, "You know, if you don't like it you can give it right back, I kept the receipt."

Max clicks her tongue, affronted, and presses the skateboard against her chest.

"Shut up. I just don't understand why you would..." She looks up at him suddenly, meets his eyes. "Oh."

Billy crossed his arms defensively and feels very found out. This was a terrible idea. Max is never going to let him hear the end of this - it's a lifetime's worth of teasing. He's never taking Harrington's advice ever again.

"Thanks," Max says.

Wait, what?

She sounds unsure, isn't smiling or anything, but she is holding onto the board tightly and there's a little too much understanding in her unwavering eyes for Billy's liking.

Abort mission, now.

"We're never talking about this again, you hear me?" he declares gravely, and walks away.

"Hey, Billy," Max calls after him.

He turns around halfway down the hall and is met with that smug, maddening grin he's been waiting for.

"I can't believe you got me a Christmas present," she stage-whispers, "That is such a dork move."

Her grin is both a challenge and a rescue.

She's a red-headed, frustrating, shit-talking little devil and maybe Billy really doesn't hate her after all.

"Fuck you, Maxine," he growls and pretends he means it.

Chapter End Notes

This took forever to finish and I'm very happy with some parts, but others are kind of.. meh. But at least it's the longest one yet! I would love to hear what you think.
Thank you for reading!
When Billy wakes up the next morning, it has snowed enough through the night for the stuff to pile up to his windowsill.

What a nightmare.

He puts on sweatpants and a hoodie and drags his feet to the kitchen, mood as icy as the world outside.

Max, clad in an over-sized sweater, sits cross-legged on the kitchen counter in front of the window, staring outside and drinking from a mug. She’s so entranced in whatever the fuck she’s looking at, she doesn’t notice Billy’s presence until he clears his throat in the doorway.

Max glances at him once in what barely passes as acknowledgement.

“Have you ever seen so much snow in one place?” she gushes, eyes glinting excitedly, and points at the white horror show.

“I never wanted to see so much snow in any place,” Billy grunts, dropping into a chair. “You realize we’re snowed in, right?”

Max jumps off the counter.

“No we’re not. It’s only knee-high out on the street, we could get through if we really wanted to.”

“Which we don’t. I’m not driving in this shit, you’re definitely not skating anywhere, and we’d freeze our asses off walking… Now that I think about it, feel free to take a hike.”

“Ha, ha,” Max goes, and sets down a second mug on the table in front of Billy.

“What the hell is that?” he asks flatly.

“Hot cocoa, duh. With all the good stuff.”

She drops a couple mini-marshmallows into it.

“… are you trying to bribe me? I don’t even like cocoa.”

Max scoffs. “Quit being difficult. It’s good.”

She takes the seat opposite him and Billy, for once, heeds her call. They drink in silence. Max gets a cocoa moustache while Billy ignores his grumbling stomach and waits for the other shoe to drop.

It’s not until the redhead has finished her drink up to the last drop that she gets real.

“I want to talk to you about something.”

“Of course you do,” Billy sighs, “I didn’t teach you to be nice for nothing.”

Max makes a little frowny face, but doesn’t comment.
“It’s about something I saw last night.”

“Well spit it out. You’re testing my patience already, Maxine.”

She looks at him with a disturbing mixture of annoyance and pity. Points a finger at his eyebrow, which, he remembers with a sinking stomach, is probably still bloody.

“Split it on a kitchen cabinet door looking for the bleach,” he quips morbidly, “With the two of us stuck here for three days, I figured we’d better have an emergency out.”

One look at Max’s face tells him she’s not buying it one bit, and he can’t even blame her.

“Wanna try that again?” she asks, eyebrows raised over piercing blue eyes and a sarcastic smile.

For the first time ever, Billy notes how much she resembles him. For some reason, that thought makes him panic.

“What do you want to hear, shitbird?”

Billy tries to sound as menacing as possible, so Max will back the fuck down and he won’t have to deal with what she’s on about. But his furrowed eyebrow stings, and with the pain come the memories of last night.

***

*It's a Wonderful Life* still wasn't over by the time Billy returned to the living room.

By sheer force of will, he sat through the rest of it, keen to escape, thinking about how his Dad would be out of town for three whole days. Maybe, if the skateboard did it's magic and Max calmed down, he'd actually get to enjoy his holidays for once. Deeply immersed in his thoughts, Billy didn't notice the movie had ended until Susan got to her feet.

"We'd better get to bed," she said, with a somewhat nervous glace at Billy, "if we want to get up early enough to make it to the resort by the afternoon."

"Right you are," Neil agreed at once, "Honey, why don't you go check our bags and see if we packed everything. I want to have a word with my son."

Billy, about to grab the remote and enjoy a couple hours of well-earned solitude, froze in his seat. Susan hesitated, eyes flickering uncertainly between her husband and stepson.

"It's Christmas, Neil," she said quietly, after a moment.

"Oh, I know, don't worry," he answered lightly and turned to Billy, "We'll just have a little chat, won't we, Billy, about what I expect from you during our absence."

Susan reluctantly left the room and Billy got to his feet, adrenalin pumping through his body. After calmly turning the TV off, Neil mirrored him. They stood face to face in the quiet living room. Automatically, every muscle in Billy's body tensed, preparing to duck out of the way.

Neil smiled. "You know I've worked very hard to afford this trip for me and Susan, don't you, son?"
We haven't been on vacation in a very long time."

Billy carefully looked up. "Yeah, I know."

"Then you also understand how... unpleasant it would be if anything got in the way, don't you?"
Aha. So this was where they were going.

Billy lifted his chin, steeling himself.

"Yes, sir."

"We're putting a lot of trust in you," Neil continued pleasantly, "leaving Maxine alone with you for so long. I hope you won't disappoint me again."

"Yes, sir."

"You remember what I've been trying to teach you for a while now, don't you? In regards to Susan and your sister?"

Billy swallowed heavily and forced himself not to avert his eyes. He couldn't show any weakness right now.

"Respect and responsibility, sir."

Neil looked sadistically pleased. "That's right, boy. Now, for the next three days your responsibility is to make sure Max is safe and sound, at home."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to not let Max out of your sight for even a second, do I make myself clear?"

Billy bared his teeth. "Should I follow her to the loo as well, sir?"

Neil's fake smile dropped. He took a step closer until they were almost nose to nose, and grabbed a fistful of Billy's shirt.

"Don't you get cheeky with me, boy," he said, dangerously quiet.

Then he pushed Billy away again.

"I haven't forgotten about the time last month, when you lost your sister for a whole night."

"I told you, she ran away, it wasn't my fault!" Billy bit out impulsively. "And she's not my sister!"

Without batting an eyelash, Neil raised his arm and backhanded him across the face. Billy, flinching, had turned his face away too slowly and his father's wedding ring caught on his eyebrow with full force. He could feel the skin break on impact.

"Consider this a warning, boy," Neil said deliberately, shaking out his hand. "I won't tolerate any more mistakes."

Billy didn't breathe until his dad had left the room. He wiped a hand over his brow, fingers coming away bloody.

Merry fucking Christmas.
"I want you to tell me the truth."

Max's sharp voice pulls Billy back into the present.

He shakes himself out of it and grits his teeth.

"Don't talk to me about the truth, Max. Everybody lies in this family, and you're a pro already."

"Stop deflecting," Max says, "Tell me. The truth."

"You can't handle the truth, Max, you're a child."

Max bristles visibly but manages to stay calm.

"Did you not listen to me? I told you, I saw. After you did that thing that we're never talking about again... well. I didn't go to sleep yet. I went to the bathroom for a glass of water but my Mum was in there looking for aspirin, so I went to the kitchen instead."

Billy doesn't want to hear this. He has the childish urge to cover his ears and pretend none of it is happening.

But Max talks on relentlessly. "And I walked by the living room, and I heard you, and I saw you. Billy, I already know the truth. I just wanted to hear you say it, so I could... believe it, I guess."

Max swallows heavily.

Their eyes meet over two mugs of hot cocoa that she made in a ridiculous attempt to soften the blow.

"Your dad did this to you."

Her words float between them as though she dug up the darkest of Billy's secrets and strung it up for the world to see. Billy has no idea what to do. His mind is blank. He can't bear to look at Max's face, so he looks at her hands, which are wrapped tightly around her empty mug.

She sounds almost apologetic when she speaks again.

"He's done it before, hasn't he?"

Every fiber in Billy's body screams for him to deny everything, to do what he's always done and pretend everything is fine. But Max isn't gullible and if she really heard everything last night...

He jerks a hand to his eyebrow.

"This is nothing," he says, careful to keep all emotion out of his voice, "Not that it's any of your fucking business, but I know how to deal with it. I'm perfectly fine and we're done talking about this. Do you understand?"

He needs her to understand and shut the fuck up, now. But Max wouldn't be Max if she ever did what Billy wanted her to.
"No," she says softly, "because you're not fine. You haven't been fine in a long time, have you?"

"Max-"

"No, I get it now," she talks over him, "Your dad's a psycho and he treated you like shit your whole life. No wonder you're such an ass. He's turned you into himself."

Billy's vision goes red.

With a sudden jerk of his arm, he swipes his half-empty mug off the table. It shatters on the floor with a bang, splattering cocoa everywhere.

"You don't know shit, Max!"

He jumps to his feet, adrenalin pumping through his veins. With two long strides around the table, he's by her side, yanking her up by the collar of her shirt.

"You have no idea! No idea what it's like to have your own dad break your bones, to live in a house where everybody despises you! You think you get it, now? You think you understand why I am who I am; why I'm always angry, a bit of a jerk? Maybe you even pity me now, huh? Well then you're fucking stupid Max, because you've no idea what kind of person he's turned me into! That night in November, you think I didn't have better plans than to search the whole town for you? He forces me to look out for you! He's using you to control me! For all I cared, you could've been dying in a ditch somewhere and I still would've gone on that date! That's how much of an asshole I am!"

Billy is breathing deeply, staring down at where Max's shirt is twisted in his fist. During his entire rant, Max hasn't moved. She's limp in his grip, looking up at him with teary eyes. But she doesn't look scared; she looks pitiful, which makes Billy just angrier. Before he can do something stupid, like bash her head against the table, she puts her small, shaky hand on top of his and Billy freezes.

"I hate you," Max says simply, hiding the quiver in her voice quite well, "but nobody deserves that shit. You're dad's a piece of shit… next time I promise I won't just stand there. I'll do something to stop him."

Billy lets go of her like he's burned himself.

"No you won't. Stay out of it Max, do you hear me? You've done enough."

Max crosses her arms over her chest uncomfortably.

"What are you talking about, I haven't done anything."

"Yeah, right," Billy huffs.

He gestures to his eyebrow again.

"This? It's because of you. Everything that's gone wrong in the past three months was because of you. Do you think, after living with that psycho for my whole life, I didn't learn to keep my head down? How to stay out of his way? But then came Susan. And you. He might act like you're the precious little girl he always wanted, but don't you understand what you really are to him? Nothing but a lesson that he can teach to me. A lesson about respect, and responsibility, and the fact that I'll never be good enough for anything."

For the first time in weeks, he's stunned Max into silence. She drops back down into her seat as though somebody let all the air out of her.
Maybe this was enough truth for her.

"Let it go, Max. And I swear to god," he threatens as an afterthought, "if you talk to anyone about this, I will kill you."

Billy turns to leave.

Fuck breakfast. He'll go back to bed and when he wakes up again, maybe all of this turns out to be a dream. Maybe Max doesn't actually know anything and maybe he hasn't just destroyed every little bit of progress they made over the past week by blaming everything on her.

Behind him, Max clears her throat. Apparently she's unable to let anything go, but Billy ignores her; he's had enough.

“So it was my fault, wasn’t it?”

He’s almost out the door, almost, but Max sounds so shockingly devastated, he turns back around without thinking.

“What?”

“Back in Cali. Before we moved. He was looking for you. He seemed so worried, I thought… I told him you went down to the pier. He said he found you all banged up in an alley, but... he lied, didn’t he? It wasn’t your friends, it was him... He beat you up so bad you had to go to the hospital?”

Billy’s left eyelid twitches. “Yeah, he did. But you were stupid enough to believe him.”

Now she looks devastated, too, and Billy suddenly feels a perverted sense of satisfaction.

“Are you shocked now, little girl? Are you scared of your big, bad stepdaddy? Scared that you’ll be next, once he’s done me in?”

Max swallows heavily, but as she gets to her feet again, her gaze is steady and her chin is raised defiantly.

“I’m not scared,” she says, and Billy believes her.

Then: “I’m sorry.”

With these two words, Max proves once and for all that at thirteen, she’s already a way bigger person than Billy will ever be.

Beneath all the confusion and shame she’s brought up, Billy knows that this is his chance. She’s giving him a perfect opportunity. This is the moment for Billy to say, “Me, too,” and be done with it.

The words get stuck in his throat.

He jerks his head in a neutral sort of acknowledgement, but it seems to be enough for Max.

She takes a deep breath, half-smiles. “Maybe we can make a deal, okay? We’ve no idea how much longer we’ll be stuck here, until the snow melts. If we don’t want to end up going crazy or killing each other, we should probably try to, you know... be civil.”

That sounds a lot like a trap.

Billy narrows his eyes.
“Are you proposing a truce?”

Max laughs a little. “Bullshit. Have you met us? I just thought it would be nice if we made it to the New Year without losing a limb. Or other significant body parts.”

With a shit-eating grin, she sticks out her hand like she wants to shake on it. “Let’s call it a temporary ceasefire.”

She can’t be serious. He’s spent the last ten minutes spitting horrible things at her, yet here she is, trying to… trying to do what? Be friends? Billy’s mind is reeling with all the unexpected turns they took today, and he’s only been awake for half an hour.

Maybe Max is just trying to cut him some slack, now that she’s figured out just how shitty their family really is. That would be kind of nice, Billy guesses, but also a huge blow to his ego.

Then again, they’re stuck in this tiny house while the world outside is swallowed up by snow, and with Max constantly on his throat for three days, Billy might actually have to go look for the bleach. Maybe this is the lesser evil.

So he shakes, crushing her fingers a little, and when she yanks her hand back, affronted, he slaps her up the head for good measure.

Without missing a beat, Max punches him in the gut.

While Billy’s doubled over wheezing, Max stalks past him and vanishes into her room, slamming the door after her.

Looks like they’re in a good place, then.

---

The next time Max emerges from her room, it’s past noon and she’s bundled up in the thickest, warmest winter clothes she possesses. Apparently she put on several jackets on top of each other, because she looks like a red, purple and blue dumpling.

Billy laughs for two minutes.

“I need your help,” Max says testily, when he stops.

“With what?”

“Building a snowman.”

“Do I look like a fucking five-year-old to you? I don’t do fun in the snow, Max.”

“Please. I need it to be really big and really ugly so I can pretend it’s Neil and beat him to the ground.”

She sounds calm and collected, too much so for her standards, and Billy can easily detect the fury bubbling underneath. On his behalf. He can’t remember the last time somebody was angry for him and not at him. It’s almost touching and he almost says yes.
But he can’t. He already showed way too much weakness today.

Max **knows**. The thought spikes a deep-rooted, self-protecting fear in his gut. He can’t give her any more munition to use against him. He is still Billy fucking Hargrove, and he’s not about to be seen building a fucking snowman with his kid step-sister. This is where he draws the line.

“If you need help building whatever shit you wanna build out there in the ice age, go asks your nerdy friends, cuz I’m not doing it.”

He expects Max to whine and protest, like the nuisance she is, but she just narrows her eyes at him sort of irritably, flips him off and marches out of the room.

She spends almost an hour in the backyard, painstakingly building a snowman that is bigger than herself and really fucking ugly.

Billy, who watches through the window, half-hidden behind a potted plant, is not sure if the ugliness really is on purpose, or if Max is just fucking bad at snowman-building.

When she’s done, she stands there for a minute, hands on her hips, and stares at her work, while Billy stares at her. The she kicks her leg out in a sudden, Karate Kid worthy punch that knocks snowman-Neil’s head straight off. She goes absolutely berserkers then, pounding at the headless figure with her fists and feet until all that’s left is a sad, dirty mound of snow. It’s quite satisfying to watch, actually. Max turns towards the house, and spots Billy in his inadequate hiding place at once. She rolls her eyes and tries to flip him off again, but her mitten gets in the way.

As Max, visibly cursing, starts towards the house, Billy retreats to the living room and turns on the TV; pretends he's been there the whole time.

"What a dumbass," he hears Max very clearly say under her breath out by the back door where she's kicking off her boots.

Then she appears in the threshold, pulls off her mittens and chucks them at Billy with moderate aim. Her fluffy hat follows and hits him in the face.

Billy spits out a little fuzz. "Feel better?"

"Massively."

Max takes forever to get out of her multiple jackets, before plopping down on the floor in front of the sofa with a deep sigh. She steals the remote control from Billy and starts to zap through the channels.

"I was watching that," Billy complains mildly, even though he has literally no idea what was on.

Max cranes her neck to smile up at him angelically. "And now you’re not."

Billy tips his head back and hopes for the house to collapse under all the snow and relieve him from this nightmare.

Instead, the phone rings.

Billy kicks Max in the side until she gets up with a growl, kicks Billy in the shin, and goes to answer.

"Hi, Mum," she's saying out in the hallway, and Billy randomly changes channels again just to mess with her.

"Oh no, really? That's terrible, I'm so sorry."
Billy can't see her face but he's pretty sure she's faking. He wonders what could have happened. Maybe Neil figured out that he doesn't actually know how to ski and broke his leg going down. Who knows, maybe he even broke his neck.

"Yeah Mum, I bet. That really sucks. ...Nah, I'm sure he'll calm down."

Probably not the neck, then. Pity.

Billy keeps listening.

"So what are you gonna do now? ...Uh-huh... uh-huh... okay. ...Yeah, no, lots of snow, too, but we're fine. ...Yeah, I'm sure... I promise. I'll tell him. ...Okay, good luck Mum, bye."

"Any broken bones?" Billy asks hopefully when Max walks back in.

She furrows her eyebrows.

"They didn't even make it to the ski place. Halfway through the snow got so bad they had to stop, and now they're stuck in some roadside motel. Apparently Neil is flipping."

"Good."

"Not for my mother," Max grumbles.

She grabs a pillow, bats it at Billy until he scoots over a little, and curls up on the right end of the sofa. They continue their fight over the remote, but before either of them win, there is a weird buzzing sound and then the TV and the lights all go out at the same time.

Neither of them move.

It's the middle of the day, but with all the snow kind of dampening everything, it's suddenly quite dark in here.

"What the fuck," Max say eventually.

Billy puts his arm over his face. "Must be a blackout, cuz of the blizzard."

"No shit, Sherlock."

Billy can't see her, but the eye rolling is audible in her voice.

"You still think all this fucking snow is so great?" Billy wonders sardonically, and gets an angry huff in response.

From that moments onwards, everything starts to go downhill (which is surprising, since Billy thought they'd already hit rock bottom a few hours ago). It becomes very clear very soon, that Max is not made for being stuck inside with nothing to do.

Billy, who is still processing the morning's conversation, and Christmas overall, would be happy to just laze around on the sofa all day with the beer left in the no longer refrigerating fridge and do absolutely nothing. He'd also be very happy to ignore Max's ongoing boredom, but unfortunately she's not being very quiet about it.

Her restlessness is beyond irritating: She goes to her room and comes back out, complaining about
the lack of light, and bitching at Billy to somehow fix it. She walks around the house with her walkie-talkie, whining about how she can't get a good signal. She starts to get dressed to go outside again, but changes her mind halfway through and instead practices her aim with her mittens. (When they hit Billy in the back of the head for the sixth time in a row, he abandons the dishes he was doing and chases Max off with the dirty towel.)

Next, she tries to read a book, but huffs and puffs so much throughout that Billy takes it away. The ensuing fight only keeps her busy for ten minutes.

(“Jesus, Max, you're acting like a little kid! Can’t you call up the nerd brigade and go annoy them for a while?

“It’s the day after Christmas, you idiot! They’ve all got family stuff going on.”

“Big deal. You’re a clever girl, find something to do on your own.”

“Like what?!?”

“I don’t know! Play a fucking game for all I care, as long as you do it quietly!”

“Oh yeah? With who - you? Don’t make me laugh.”)

Eventually, Billy flees into his room and locks the door. He uses his pillows as a makeshift punching bag, but his peace doesn’t last long. After about ten minutes, a series of rhythmic bangs starts up out in the hallway.

He rips the door open, seething, to find Max on the floor with her back against the opposite wall, lazily bouncing a small ball off his bedroom door. Now that the door’s open, it hits him in the knee.

"Fucking hell, Max!” Billy thunders, "You're not a two-year old! Why do you have to keep getting on my nerves?!"

Before November, his shouting alone would have scared her off.

As it is, she just shrugs. "I have a feeling it's the only form of entertainment I'm gonna get today."

That is it.

Billy has to do something, before she drives both of them crazy. He pulls her up off the floor and drags her to the kitchen as gently as he can manage.

"What are you doing?” Max complains, breaking free.

Billy digs his lighter out of his pocket and chucks it at her.

"It's fucking dark in here. Make yourself useful and find some candles."

Without waiting for an undoubtedly rude response, he walks back to his room and sifts through a few old boxes. When he returns to the kitchen, Max has more or less successfully assembled a small array of mostly used candles on the table, but none of them are lit.

Stubborn little brat.

Billy throws a stack of battered playing cards on the table and drops into the chair opposite Max,
who's visibly sneering.

"Oh, so you won't build a snow man, but card games are okay?"

"Well I ain't gonna play Go Fish, now, am I?"

Max throws her arms up dramatically. "I literally have no idea what you're gonna do, Billy, you're not exactly what I'd call predictable."

"Thanks. Now give me back my lighter so I can get those candles going."

"I can do it!"

Billy smirks. "Pretty sure little kids are not supposed to play with fire."

"Fuck you," Max snarls and lights all the candles at top speed.

There we go.

"Now what?" she snaps bitchily.

"Now I'll teach you to play poker. You can show all your little nerd friends and then you won't have to play Damsels in Distress anymore."

"Dungeons and Dragons," Max grumbles, "Why are we doing this, exactly?"

Billy looks at her like duh. "I have a feeling that if we don't find something for you to do soon, you'll blow the house up, and I'd rather not be responsible for that."

Max crosses her arms petulantly and says nothing. Billy is just going to take that as agreement.

"Alright, dipshit. We're playing Texas Holdem-"

"We're in Indiana."

"Very funny. The rules-"

"Pretty sure we're not supposed to be gambling," Max keeps nagging.

Billy sighs. "You're thirteen, Max. We're not gambling with money, don't be stupid."

Instead, they scourge the kitchen cabinets for Reese’s Pieces and Mars Bars, and divide the candy between them. Billy mentally pats himself on the back for having so much patience.

"Okay, twerp," he says evenly, "Now shut up and listen: Goal is to make a hand of five cards by the end of the round. Some hands are of lower value, some of higher. The higher ones obviously beat the lower ones. The highest one there is, is the Royal Flush, which looks like this..."

Max might be a super annoying brat, but Billy has to hand it to her: she pays perfect attention to everything he says, repeats it back to him just as perfectly, and scoffs when he asks if they need to go through the rules again. They start playing and Max gets the hang of it immediately, because here is the thing: for a shithead kid, Max is really fucking clever.

Which is why it is twice as funny that it takes almost an hour (and all the chocolate bars on Billy's side of the table) for her to notice that Billy is cheating the fuck out of their game.
But eventually she does spot the card up his sleeve and, bada bing bada boom, all the fun is over. Max opens her mouth in a hilariously outraged expression and Billy, caught in the act, laughs in her face.

"You know, I really thought you'd notice sooner."

"You...! You are such an asshole!" Max all but shrieks.

While Billy is still sniggering, she gets up dramatically, throws her cards in his face and storms off.

"Hey, shitbird, don't be such a sore loser!" Billy calls after her, grinning.

Max slams her door in response.

That's all fair and shit, but now she won't come out anymore.

Billy knocks a few times, to absolutely no avail, except for a decided “Fuck you” from behind closed doors (Max really needs to expand her insult vocabulary).

He eats half a dozen Mars Bars, practices his shuffling skills and a couple card tricks, until he realizes what a pathetic picture he must make, all alone in the candle-lit kitchen, playing cards by himself.

Slowly and reluctantly, Billy realizes that Max bitching around beyond reason might have been annoying as fuck, but it did keep him busy.

Billy lifts his weights and does a couple dozen push-ups and twice as many sit-ups, and at the height of his boredom, takes a nap on the sofa.

He wakes up to the sound of Max banging a wooden spoon against a saucepan, right next to his head.

"What the fuck, you little piece of shit," Billy groans resignedly and pushes her away.

Max bares her teeth at him in a nasty grin, turns on her heel and marches back to her room.

Snowed in, no power, nothing to do, and yet Billy isn't even allowed to take one goddamn nap in peace.

Max took the spoon and pan with her, so Billy refrains from chasing after her, lest she waits behind her door to whack him over the head with the saucepan. That seems like the kind of thing Max wouldn't hesitate to do.

Around five, the power comes back on. The TV springs back to live with an alarming crackling sound, and Billy turns the volume up high. Half an hour later, with The A-Team blaring through the house so loudly there's no chance she could miss it, Max still hasn't showed up.

Billy is so fucking annoyed with her. It feels like for weeks and weeks he's been doing nothing but
try to get in her good books, but she still won't ease up on him. One little prank and she's back to giving him the cold shoulder. If she goes back to the silent treatment Billy may very well bash her head in.

Billy spends at least twenty minutes pondering whether it would be more annoying to spend the following two days he's stuck here fighting with Max or being ignored by her.

Neither option seems particularly appealing, and then Billy has a small epiphany about what his life has become.

By seven, Max has left her room exactly one time, to go to the bathroom. Billy is beyond frustrated, and he doesn't even know why.

For ages he has dreaded being stuck home alone with Max, figured he wouldn’t have a free second in between looking after her and fighting with her. He should be happy that he managed to piss her off enough to leave him alone for three consecutive hours, but somehow he really isn’t.

Billy digs the last remaining pizza out of the freezer (what with those 3 hours without power it's probably already started to defrost anyway) and puts it into the oven. The smell is heavenly, and suddenly Billy wonders if Max has actually eaten anything since breakfast. He puts two slices on a plate and walks up to her room.

Billy bangs his fist against the door.

"Hey, twerp," he calls, "I got food."

"Congratulations," comes the sarcastic reply.

"Eh... it's pizza?"

"Jesus, Billy, fuck off"

She is so unhelpful.

Stubbornly, Billy takes a seat on the floor, sets the plate down in front of him and starts wafting the delicious pizza smell through the gap under Max's door, in a last-ditch effort to lure her out.

It takes about three seconds for the door to open.

Max stares down at him.

"Are you kidding me right now?" she asks incredulously.

Billy huffs. "I thought we agreed on a temporary ceasefire?"

Max crouches down until they're on eylevel. Her facial expression is inscrutable as she carefully picks up the plate with one hand. The other pats his knee condescendingly.

"You are an idiot."

"Well, you're a pain in the ass."

Max stands and indicates the food. "This is supposed to bribe me, isn't it?"
"Yes," Billy says. No point denying it. "Is it working?"

Max takes a bite.

"Maybe," she says through a mouthful of cheese like the gross person she is, and closes the door in Billy's face.

Great.

In a surprising twist of fate, Max finally leaves her room all of five minutes later, because she can eat like hell and the two slices apparently weren't enough.

She must be very corruptible indeed, especially when there's pizza involved (understandable), because she sits at the kitchen table with Billy, they only fight over the last slice a little, and she even does the clean-up after.

Billy turns up the heat, because with nightfall it got really fucking cold, and retreats to the sofa with an extra sweater.

Because it's the day after Christmas, all the channels are still playing dumb Christmas movies. Billy rolls his eyes at the TV seven different times before settling on Black Christmas, which is appropriate, considering everything.

Max strides in ten minutes later, a blanket draped around her shoulders like a cape, and drops, crisscross, into the recliner. She balances an enormous bowl of popcorn in her lap and focuses on the movie, chewing obnoxiously.

Billy sighs.

In the spirit of Christmas, he changes the program to the more kid-appropriate Miracle on 34th Street, but he's not happy about it.

Max doesn’t look happy either. She gives him a look of pure disgust. Without a word, she untangles her feet, walks over to join Billy on the sofa and snaps her fingers for the remote.

“You are such a brat,” Billy notes resignedly, but then Max switches back to Black Christmas, and holds out her bowl of popcorn for Billy to share.

Okay, then.

Unfortunately, Max eventually falls asleep on the sofa. Billy only notices this when Max turns and stretches out, unconsciously kicking her legs into his lap, as if she wasn't already occupying two thirds of the sofa. Billy pushes them off.

However, Max is apparently just as stubborn asleep as she is awake, because Billy pushes her feet away three more times before giving up. Max sleeps on peacefully, but if she ends up kicking him in the nuts, Billy will have her head.

The movie ends, and then the one after that. Midnight comes and goes. The TV is playing as loud as ever and Billy's not exactly being quiet either. He gets up to go to the kitchen for drinks several times and Max never even stirs. This is starting to become a problem.
Around one, Billy goes to the bathroom and brushes his teeth.

Then he comes back. Stands in front of the sofa with his arms crossed and contemplates his options.

Theoretically, Billy could scoop Max up and carry her to bed - it's not like the little short ass could weight all that much - but that would require an uncomfortable amount of touching. Also, with his luck, Billy would probably manage to bang her head against a doorframe or something, and that would make for a whole lot of awkward questions.

He could also just wake her up and tell her to go to bed, face her wrath when she wants to know why the hell he didn't just let her sleep out here.

He could also simply not care and leave her here, face her wrath in the morning when she wakes up freezing with a sore back and wants to know why the hell he did let her sleep out here.

None of that sounds very nice.

Max's left arm hangs over the edge of the sofa in a weird angle, knuckles nearly brushing the floor. That can't be comfortable.

"Goddamnit," Billy says under his breath.

Gingerly, he takes hold of her shirt sleeve between two fingers and lifts her arm onto her chest. Then he grabs an old comforter from the recliner and throws it on top of her. Max barely moves.

There. Problem solved. Billy goes to bed.

Twenty minutes later and nowhere near sleep, Billy groans into his pillow, kicks his blankets off angrily and goes back to the living room. It's no use.

He unceremoniously scoops Max up into his arms along with the comforter. Her head lolls against his shoulder and she's way heavier than expected, but he makes it to her room without problem.

He doesn't bang her head against anything, Max doesn't wake up and there are no awkward questions. They both end up safely in bed and no one ever has to know.

A little while later, just before Billy drifts off, it occurs to him that in the morning, Max will surely wonder how she got into bed if she remembers falling asleep on the sofa. It won't be hard to figure out, and then Max will know that he tucked her in like a sentimental dumbass.

God-fuckin-damnit.

That's what you get for trying to be a nice guy.

Chapter End Notes

There's no Steve, I'm so sorry!

By the time I realized I'd written myself into a corner with all that snow, it was too late. So that's how I ended up with this entirely plotless, filler chapter, but well. I really want to finish this fic before Season 3 goes up, so I'll focus on the final two chapters and
hereby promise that they will include more action and more Steve.

One more disclaimer: I have no knowledge whatsoever concerning the game of poker, or the American television program of the 80s. I'm just googling my way through and hope it doesn't blow.
thunder only happens when it's raining

Chapter Notes

Season 3 is out in less than a week and I am desperately behind on schedule with this story, because university has been kicking my ass these past weeks.

But here is at least chapter 5 for now, I hope you like it!

But please do remember to heed the warnings of chapter 1! I don't want to spoiler anyone here, but if you're sensible to or maybe triggered by any of the things mentioned, skip down to the end notes to see what's going on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Billy..."

Nope. Sleeping, dreaming, not waking up.

"Hey, Billy..."

No, no. Still sleeping. Whoever is blowing into his ear can fuck right off. Barely conscious, he pulls his blankets up to his nose.

"Billy, WAKE UP!!"

Okay, that does the trick.

Billy jumps a feet into the air, flails around in shock and rips his eyes open.

Max is standing by his bed, skateboard under one arm, grinning down at him.

While Billy is blinking at her, heart racing, Max puts the board on the floor and steps on, swaying back and forth innocently.

"Oh good," she says brightly, "you're up!"

It's ass o'clock in the morning and Max is on her skateboard, in his room.

"What the hell, dipshit," Billy groans into his pillow, too tired to yell at her.

"It's almost noon, Billy. I'm going out."

"No, you're not. I ain't getting up any time soon, and either way, I'm not driving in this weather."

Max clicks her tongue.

"The snow already started to melt and they cleared the streets this morning. And either way, I'm not asking you to drive me, I'm just telling you I'm going. Steve's taking us all out for lunch," she explains with a big-ass smile, "They're picking me up."

Unfortunately, Billy's stomach gives a little swoop at the mention of Steve's name, which is equally
perplexing and distracting.

Still.

"And why couldn't you just leave me a fucking note, huh?"

Max pushes off the wall and idly rolls down the room, then pushes off his desk and rolls back again.

"Well, I just thought it would be better if I told you in person. I didn't want to freak you out by being gone when you woke up. You know," she adds cheekily, "what with all this new-found concern you have for me."

For a second, Max catches his eye, and Billy understands perfectly what is going on.

All it took was 24 hours, a skateboard, a little too much honesty and one nighttime slip-up, for Max to no longer be even slightly afraid of him. Billy can literally see it in her eyes, which no longer show fear, respect or even repulsion like they used to, but only pure mischief.

Billy is stuck between complacency and horror, because if Max was annoying before, now she'll be downright unbearable.

"I don't know what you're thinking right now," Max quips at that exact moment, "but it sure looks like hard work."

Case in point.

Billy heavily breathes through his nose, once, twice, then he's out of the bed and on his feet at the speed of lightning.

Max staggers off her board in surprise, shrieks mightily and sprints out of the room. Billy chases after her with a loud growl, down the hall and twice around the kitchen table, and finally catches her in the living room.

Amid Max screaming bloody murder, Billy grabs her around the waist, grunts when she elbows him. He dodges her flying fists and propels her towards the recliner, which she gracelessly flops into.

Her hair gets all over her face and she spits some off it out of her mouth; squints at Billy through a curtain of red.

"You look like an angry bull," she sasses, and then she starts to laugh.

Billy sighs. "You look like a pain in the ass."

Max rolls her eyes and chucks a throw pillow at him that he catches easily.

"Steve will be here in five," she says, pointedly looking him up and down, "so you should either go hide somewhere or do something about your hair."

Billy ignores the part about Steve (and the second, totally unrelated stomach swoop that comes with it) and throws the pillow back to her.

"What's wrong with my hair, you little shit?"

In lieu of an answer, Max just raises an eyebrow.

What on earth has he gotten himself into.
By the time the doorbell rings a little while later, Billy has managed to style his hair into a presentable piece of art, and also put on some real clothes. He's foregone his ridiculous Christmas sweater in favor of another unbuttoned shirt, though, because of his inexplicable need to see Steve flustered.

"It's fucking December, Billy, you're not fooling anyone," Max hisses, rushing past him on her way to the door. "Put some real clothes on, you idiotic show-off."

Billy ignores her.

He hears the front door opening, accompanied by Max's enthusiastic hello, and languidly strolls down the hall.

"...boys are already in the car, go ahead and join them," Steve is saying, "I saved the passenger seat for you."

Max looks over her shoulder as Billy joins them, coolly leaning against the doorjamb. She wiggles her eyebrows at him before brushing past Steve on her way out.

"Bye, Billy!"

"Later, twerp."

Steve watches Max race down the front lawn before turning to smile at Billy.

"Hey, Hargrove."

"Had a nice Christmas, pretty boy?" Billy asks lowly, acutely aware of the five children watching from the car with their noses pressed against the windowpanes.

Steve shrugs. "Okay one, I guess. You?"

"Eh, pretty shitty."

"Any good presents, at least?"

"Nope," Billy says, popping the p, "just a hideous piece of clothing."

Inexplicably, Steve grins at that.

"Prefect, mine goes with the theme," he quips and hands Billy a small paper bag.

What?

Staring, Billy pulls out a fluffy green pom-pom hat, complete with ear flaps, and is momentarily lost for words.

"My mom got me the same one in red last year and I hated it," Steve explains, full of shit, "So I thought you deserved one, too. It does keep your ears very warm."

"You're giving me a pom-pom hat. Me." Billy deadpans.

It's all he's got right now.

"Merry Christmas. By the way, this is where you're supposed to say thank you."
"Fuck you," Billy says mildly and Steve laughs.

"You're welcome. Anyway, I was wondering, wanna hang out at the quarry again tonight? Say, around nine? My dad got this really fancy bottle of Chardonnay for Christmas."

Billy, still stuck on the fucking hat, has to work very hard in order to keep his poker face up right now. Apparently they’re moving on from accidental meetings to actually scheduling their pathetic, drunk quarry outings. That’s no reason to be happy, though. He’s totally cool.

“Stealing daddy’s wine now, are we?” Billy quips easily (he’s cool), “Harrington, I’m impressed. What happened to your good-boy manners?”

“It’s not like he’s gonna notice,” Steve shrugs nonchalantly, but Billy can see he’s secretly pleased.

What a dork.

“Okay, why not,” Billy accepts.

He’s sure he manages about the same level of nonchalance Steve did. There’s no need for excitement, really. They’re just hanging out, getting drunk, they’ve done it before. It’s not like Harrington asked him on a date. That would be stupid.

Billy looks at Steve’s earnest smile and feels his stomach swoop yet again.

So stupid.

“So, uh, I’ll let you get back to it then,” Steve says, vaguely waving his hand around, “before you catch a cold or something.”

“I’m not cold,” Billy says, even though he has to clench his teeth a little to stop them from chattering.

“Oh yeah?” Steve snorts, “Your goosebumps say differently.”

Then he reaches out in what feels to Billy like slow motion, and pokes a finger into Billy’s chest. Billy’s goosebumps multiply by approximately ten thousand and they both freeze.

A loud banging sound behind them on the street snaps them out of it and Steve, looking caught, jumps around to look.

The back door of Steve’s Beemer has burst open, and now all four boys come tumbling out, while Max facepalms in the front seat.

"Uhm," Steve goes, glancing at Billy and blushing, "I'd better get going, they seem to be getting... restless."

Billy bites his lips to stop himself from grinning. “Sure… restless.”

“I’ll drop Max off back here in a few hours, that alright?” Steve promises frantically, walking backwards and almost tripping over his own feet.

“Keep her for as long as you like,” Billy says with a roll of his eyes and salutes.

He watches Steve take his signature mom stance at the curb and shoo all the boys back into the car. He’s immensely glad he’s not stuck in that packed, pre-pubescent mess. They drive off and Billy releases a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. Then he closes the door and immediately starts cursing and jumping up and down in order to regain the feeling in his frozen toes.
Fucking winter.

In a weak moment, Billy has to actively stomp down the weird-ass desire to put on Steve’s stupid hat, then quickly goes to hide it in his drawer. What a terrible gift to give to someone with great hair like his.

With Max gone, the house is blessedly quiet and empty. Billy contemplates his options, shrugs to himself and goes back to bed. What good are the holidays if you don’t spend at least one entire day sleeping?

Roughly two hours later, the telephone starts ringing. By then, Billy has already vacated his warm, cozy bed in favor of breakfast, but it’s still annoying as shit. Just one day of peace, is that too much to ask?

"Hargrove?" Billy grumps into the receiver.

There’s some muffled shouting on the other end of the line, then:

"Hey, it's Steve... uh, Steve Harrington."

"I don't actually know all that many Steves, pretty boy," Billy drawls, "What do you need?"

"Er, well," Steve stalls, "I'm afraid I can't take Max home as promised."

Billy's stomach drops. "Why not? Is she okay? Jesus, don't tell me you lost her!"

"No, no, no," Steve backtracks immediately, "She's fine, she's right here, don't worry."

Billy coughs a little, embarrassed. "Wasn't worried."

"Uh-huh," Steve goes and sound suspiciously like he's raising his eyebrows in that stupid know-all manner. "The thing is, she won't get in my car."

Billy snorts. "Whatcha do to her?"

"Me? Nothing. But the boys are in my car, obviously, and Max refuses to be anywhere near them right now. She says she'll wait for you out in front out the diner, so hurry because it's really cold."

"What the hell, Harrington."

"I know, I'm sorry. Look, I gotta go, my backseat is full of obnoxious pre-teens and it's starting to gain negative attention. See you tonight, okay?"

And then he hangs up on Billy.

"Fucking great," Billy mutters to himself, slams the phone down.

He grabs his only winter coat and gets in his car, because even if it's the last thing he wants to do right now, he can't very well let Max freeze to death out there, can he?
Max is sitting on the front steps of the diner, arms around her knees, looking grumpy. When Billy pulls up, she stomps over, rips the passenger door open and all but falls inside.

Billy looks straight ahead. "You okay?"

"Fine," Max spits in a manner suggesting the exact opposite. "Just drive."

Billy drives.

In their driveway, Max barely waits for the car to stop before tearing out and disappearing into the house. Billy follows at moderate speed and, upon entering, just so catches the sound of Max's door slamming shut.

He wanders past her room and thinks about knocking, but since this time it doesn't seem to be his fault, he decides he'd rather not get involved. Teenage girls are a little like minefields - if you don't know your way around, you better stay away.

So instead Billy heads to the kitchen, heats up a microwave meal for lunch which expired last week and begrudgingly acknowledges the fact that he's gonna have to go and get groceries.

"Going to the store," he shouts a little while later, banging a fist against Max's closed door in passing. "Want anything?"

"Fuck off," comes the muffled reply.

Billy rolls his eyes. "Okay, no Mars Bars for you, you little piece of shit," he calls back and leaves.

It takes longer than necessary - partly because, after more than two days, it's immensely refreshing to be out of the house; but mainly because Billy doesn't really know his way around the grocery store - and by the time he leaves, it's almost getting dark again.

When he gets back home, Max is curled up on the sofa, watching TV and imitating a burrito, what with how tightly she's cocooned herself into several blankets.

Billy puts the food away and comes back to carefully nudge the Max-Burrito and see if it's still alive.

In return, he receives a downright homicidal look from the depths of the blankets and strategically retreats to his room.

Maybe an hour later, when Billy's just starting to lift some weights, Max just sort of slinks in, arms wrapped around herself.

She glances around at everything but Billy, and sits down on his bed.
This is weird and annoying enough at it is (it's the second time today she came into his room without asking, let alone having permission) but the worst thing is that Max is clearly crying. Not like, loud sobs or anything, but her eyes are red and glassy, her cheeks definitely wet. And she's not even trying to hide it.

This is bad.

They’ve got the fighting and the name-calling down, they can do the sassing and even the easy banter, but this. No.

Just no.

Billy sets his dumbbell down with a clank.

“Stop looking at me like that!” Max complains.

“Like what?” he asks dumbly.

“Like I’m a ticking time bomb or some shit.”

Honestly, she could just as well be one, sitting there looking like the picture of misery.

Billy has no clue what to do.

Two weeks ago he would have kicked her right back out and told her to take her girly blubbering somewhere else. But he can’t do that now, can he? She would go right back to ignoring him, and he doesn’t need that shit show again so soon, thanks.

Normal people have a history of comforting people who are crying, Billy supposes, but there’s no way that’s gonna happen. Billy’s got a reputation to hold up. And Max has a reputation of punching him when he gets too close. He should probably ask her what happened, from a safe distance away, even if he kind of doesn’t want to know.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" is what comes out of his mouth.

"I swear to god, Billy, do not make fun of me right now," Max snaps, and manages to sound menacing even while wiping her face on her shirtsleeve.

Thing is, Billy couldn't make fun of her right now even if he wanted to, he's too far out of his depth to do anything but stare. Then he says the next best thing that comes to his mind.

"Who do I beat up?"

That makes Max laugh, but not in a good way. More in a wet, everything-sucks-and-so-do-you kind of way. She looks really fucking sad.

Somewhere deep down, the sight sparks an irrational spell of fury in Billy.

“I’m serious, Max,” he growls, and strides over to her with purpose. “The nerds say something to you? They hurt you?”

He reaches out, intending to grab Max’s chin and force her to look at him, but when his hand comes close to her face, she flinches back, hard.

Damn.
Billy steps back, drops into his office chair. “Fuck, Max. I wasn’t going to hit you.”

“I know that,” she says briskly, “just don’t touch me, asshole.”

Billy huffs. This really is the opposite of easy.

“I just had a stupid fight with my stupid friends,” Max sniffs, “It’s nothing. Don’t you dare beat anyone up. I’ll kill you if you lay even a single finger on Lucas or the others ever again.”

The sincerity of the death threat is literally drowning in her tears. Billy is getting really annoyed really quickly, here.

“So if it’s nothing and you don’t want to be touched and you don’t want me to beat up any of your stupid friends, then what do you want?!”

“Nothing!” Max insists angrily, but seems to realize herself that she’s not making any sense. “I dunno… a tissue,” she amends, which, fair enough.

Billy rolls over to his bedside drawer and digs out a pack of tissues, all the while using his body to shield the rest of its contents from Max’s sight. He throws the package into her lap and idly spins in his chair while she blows her nose noisily and hopefully wipes the tears off her face. Billy’s determined not to look too closely, lest he start feeling sorry for her or some shit. Sympathy for the little devil is not an option.

“I don’t want him to come back,” Max whispers.

“Who?”

“Neil.”

Oh. Billy gives an awkward little cough.

“Now that you know I got all my good personality traits from him?”

“Just… He’s gonna keep messing you up, isn’t he? I don’t want him to come back,” she repeats forcefully, and, well, shit.

Now he kind of has to go over there.

Max blinks, shocked, when Billy stands up and walks up to her again. Billy is shocked he’s doing that, too, but Max can just shut the fuck up. All of this is her fault.

“You and me both, kid,” he says, carefully taking a seat on the far end of the bed. “But at least he’s not as bad as me, right?”

Max inclines her head. “You are an asshole,” she agrees rather feebly.

“That’s right,” he encourages, and tries to ignore the surrealism of it all.

Here he is, trying to convince a little girl that he’s the bigger evil in their fucked up family dynamics, because at least she’s already used to him being an ass.

“If you’re lucky, he’ll finish me off by accident,” Billy makes air quotes, “sooner or later and do all your dirty work for you.”

The fucked up part is, he’s only half-joking.
Max huffs. "That's bullshit, Billy. Yeah you're an asshole, and you've beat people up, but not your own fucking kid. And - you know I don't actually want you dead, right?"

How can somebody say something nice (-ish) like that and still sound so bitchy about it?

Billy shrugs and waves his hand like so-so. Max leans over and punches him, hard. (Called it, didn't he?)

"I hate you so much."

"Then what are you doing here, exactly?"

It's a fair question, Billy thinks, but to his horror, Max tears up again.

"Because there is literally no one else around," she says, still kind of accusatory, but for the first time since she walked in, her voice is audibly shaking.

Then she clamps her mouth shut, rubs her face, slides off the bed and starts digging through all the shit that's covering Billy's bedroom floor. She pushes aside several battered porn magazines (without a flinch, which is super concerning) 'til she finds an old Rolling Stone and flips it open.

Their weird, weird conversation is apparently over.

Billy, again, doesn't know what to do, and since Max is obviously not out to tell him, he slowly leaves the bed and goes back to lifting his weights - acutely aware of his step-sister's disconcerting presence in his room.

When the silence gets too much for him to bear, he digs through his records and puts on Fleetwood Mac for Max. He might not know a lot about her interests, apart from the Arcade and the skateboarding, but she sure as hell loves Stevie Nicks.

Billy goes from lifting to push-ups and sit-ups, and Max's foot starts tapping a little to the music, while she's still engrossed in the mag, and Billy counts it a success. Until Landslide comes on and Max promptly tears up again.

"Jesus Christ."

Now, Billy is an asshole, they've covered that, but not even he can keep working out while the girl is crying three feet to his left. Goddamnit.

"Fuck off, you're sweaty," is Max's very predictable comment to his sitting down next to her again, closer this time.

Still. He leans against the bedframe.

"Wanna talk about what happened with the nerd brigade?"

"Do I look like I wanna fucking talk about it? Especially with you?"

Despite the tears, Max must be finding her way back to reality, because she sounds appropriately disgusted. Billy figures it would hurt his feelings if he had any. Which he doesn't.

Keep telling yourself that, a tiny voice in the back of his head chirps, maybe you'll believe it someday.
Billy shakes it off. He's got bigger fish to fry.

"Well, you are still here," he reminds Max, and gets the stink-eye in return.

"...Do you want me to make spaghetti for dinner?" he tries again.

Max perks up a little. "Yes."

"Good. Okay," he says, and when Max doesn't move any further, he gets up and heads to the kitchen.

To his delight (which he stomps down immediately, because he does not care) Max follows him outside like a lost duckling.

She takes a seat at the kitchen counter with the Rolling Stone. When Billy raises her eyes at her, amused, she levels him with a glare that very plainly says that his ass is grass if he dares to comment. So he doesn't, raises his arms in surrender and starts looking for the noodles.

They eat in silence, avoiding each other's eyes.

"I don't like to be alone when I'm sad," Max says suddenly, when her plate is cleared.

"Okay," Billy says, surprised, around a mouthful of spaghetti.

"You're still the last person I want to be around," she insists, like she really wants to hurt him.

"Okay," Billy says again, feels like he really is walking through a mine field.

Max furrows her eyebrows.

"If you dare..." she starts to threaten, but bites her lip halfway through, apparently unsure how to put it.

So Billy says "I won't," very carefully, because her cheeks are still kind of blotchy. "I get it."

Max nods tightly, once. Then she puts her dishes into the sink and leaves.

Billy’s gonna get whiplash with all the mood swings around here.

He does the dishes and spends way too much time in front of the mirror in his room, trying to decide what to wear for his, well, meeting with Steve. Only after spending 20 minutes on his hair, for a trip into the forest nonetheless, does Billy realize that he's probably losing his mind.

Maybe he should ask Max to slap him.

Apropos Max.

Billy grabs his jacket and car keys, and detours to her room.

“Hey, squirt,” he calls and knocks on her closed door.

“What?” Max calls back, which he takes as permission to enter.

She’s on her bed, cross-legged, holding her dorky walkie-talkie in her lap. Somebody is clearly
talking through it, but it’s so low, the words are unintelligible. After a few moments it goes quiet, and Max looks up at Billy expectantly.

“I’m going out for a little while. No sneaking out, got it, dipshit?”

“Don’t worry,” Max smiles feebly, “there’s still too much snow outside for bikes or skateboards. I’ll just watch some TV and go to bed.”

The walkie-talkie starts up again and they look at it simultaneously.

“Who’s trying to reach you?” Billy asks hesitantly.

In lieu of an answer, Max twiddles a button and the noise grows louder, until Lucas Sinclair’s voice is ringing through the room, contorted by the occasional static.

“-sorry about what happened, okay? Max? If you’re there, can you please answer? I really need to talk to you about this, so if you can hear me… please. Over.”

Billy raises an eyebrow. “How long’s this been going on for?”

“’Bout an hour, on an off,” Max shrugs and damn, Billy almost feels sorry for the Sinclair kid.

“You’ll drive yourself crazy,” he comments, “either answer him already or turn the damn thing off.”

Max shrugs again, and Billy is running late, but he’s somehow reluctant to leave. He remembers what she said about not wanting to be alone, and feels like a jerk. It’s not a new feeling.

Billy swallows his pride. “Look, will you be okay on your own? ’Cause I can stay. If you want.”

Max is rolling her eyes even before he finishes, which is a welcome sight.

“I’m fine, you idiot. Just go already. Don’t leave your date waiting.”

“I’m not going on a date,” Billy blurts out.

What the hell is wrong with him?

“Yeah, right,” Max snorts, “that’s why you spent half an hour in front of the mirror.”

Then she has the audacity to outright laugh at him, which he is weirdly glad to hear, but also very annoyed by. She’ll be fine, Billy decides, and pulls a face at her as he turns to go.

He leaves the door ajar and as he walks down the hallway, he can hear her speak up again.

“It’s Max. I’m listening. Over.”

---

During the entire drive, Billy is stuck dealing with emotions he did not previously know he could possess.

He’s realized that, quite horrifyingly, he’s actively and truthfully starting to care about Max. That definitely wasn’t supposed to happen.
It’s just – Max is a tremendously annoying piece of shit, but she’s also a little girl and today she fucking came crying to him. And whatever people might think, Billy is not made of stone.

Also, the fact remains that yesterday, by admitting to her his dad’s abusive behavior, he revealed his biggest weakness to her. And instead of making fun of him, she apologized and destroyed a snowman in his honor. Come on.

Billy reaches the conclusion that maybe this is exactly why Max has let him see her cry in the first place: on the scale of emotional openness and simultaneous utter embarrassment, they are now even.

And apart from that whole mess, there’s still Steve.

Billy hates to admit it to even himself, but he's nervous. Maybe it's because Steve is being inexplicably nice to him, despite the fact that Billy never officially apologized for beating the shit out of him.

Or maybe it's because Steve's the first boy he's been alone with ever since that day in Cali.

But before he can really get into that and talk himself into a frenzy or some equally pathetic shit, he arrives at the quarry.

Steve’s car is in its usual place, but once Billy gets out of his own (teeth beginning to chatter almost immediately because holy shit can it get any colder), he finds that Steve isn’t. Instead, there’s light inside the Beemer, and Billy can see Steve’s ridiculous hair silhouetted against the window.

Billy doesn’t know whether he’s supposed to wait for Steve to get out, or get in there with him. On the one hand, sitting in a car with Steve Harrington, out on the quarry at night, seems like a huge cliché out of a dumb teen romance movie – and this is not a date, remember? But on the other hand, it’s really fucking freezing out here.

The decision is made for him when the passenger door is pushed open from inside and Steve’s voice resounds all around the quarry.

“Jeez, Billy, get in! It’s way too cold!”

Billy doesn’t need to be told that twice. He circles around to the passenger side and slides into the thankfully heated car.

"Jesus," he grumps, "I don't understand why people choose to live in places where it gets this cold."

The center console puts a foot’s distance between them, and Billy doesn’t know if he’s relieved or disappointed about that.

Steve, looking frustratingly cool where he lounges in the reclined driver’s seat, smirks at him.

"You know, this exactly what I gave you that hat for."

"Forget it, Harrington. I haven't yet lost all of my pride."

Steve laughs. "Aw, come on. It's not like anybody would see you in the dark."

"You would see me."

"Yes and I'd enjoy it, too."
Billy snorts. "Fuck off, you idiot."

He digs a cigarette out of his pocket to calm his tingling nerves, but before he can light it up, Steve swiftly plucks it out from in between his lips.

"Wha- Dude!"

Steve just shakes his head. “I smoked one cigarette in here one single time, windows open and all, but the smell stuck to the upholstery like crazy. Dustin gave me shit for a week because he thought I was chain-smoking in my car.”

He fishes a couple of red solo cups from the backseat, along with the fancy bottle of Chardonnay Billy was promised.

“You get wine, but only if you don’t spill it.”

“So many rules, pretty boy…” Billy sighs theatrically and snaps his fingers for one of the cups.

“Shuddup.”

Steve very carefully fills one of the cups halfway and hands it over, before pouring one for himself.

He holds it out and says: “To the fact that this fuck-ass year will be over in four days.”

“I’ll definitely drink to that.”

They do just that, and to Billy it honestly tastes like any other wine he’s tried before (which weren’t many, but still), but he’s not gonna say that out loud when Steve looks so obviously proud of his glorious haul.

Steve smacks his lips and leans over to pull some fancy lever, so Billy can recline his seat, too.

"So - how's Max doing?"

Billy pulls a face. "She was really upset earlier. But she was talking to Lucas when I left so maybe they've figured it out by now."

"Did she talk to you about what happened?"

"Wouldn't really call it talking, no," Billy mutters, "Look, Harrington, you were there, weren't you? What did they do to her?"

Steve shoots him a furtive glance and fiddles with the bottle stopper.

Billy rolls his eyes. "I'm not going to chase them down, man, relax. I just want to know how they managed to make Max cry."

"Max cried?"

"Yes, and she's not doing that easily, so maybe now you understand why I was... surprised."

"Just admit you were worried, Billy."

"Oh fuck off."

Steve chuckles a little before putting on a somber face.
"To be honest, they were fighting about you."

Now Billy is surprised for real. "Me?"

Steve shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "Yeah... you know, first they were just talking about Christmas and what presents they got and that kind of shit, but eventually the boys wanted to know, you know, how Max was doing. At home. Alone. With you."

"Okay?" Billy says, trying to foresee where the fighting comes in.

He thought him and Max were getting on unexpectedly great, and if she'd been so upset about being stuck with Billy, then surely she would've kept away from him today, wouldn't she?

"Well, Max told them it wasn't half bad, and that you were actually doing much better. Anger-management wise, and stuff."

See? That actually sounds pretty nice. Billy stamps down a tiny flicker of pride and tries to focus.

"And?"

Steve looks away. "And they had trouble believing her."

Well.

"That's fair, though, isn't it?" Billy reasons, trying to sound nonchalant.

Steve keeps looking the other way. "Maybe, yeah. But Max kind of insisted that you were, I quote, trying, and that you maybe even deserved a second chance."

Billy has no idea how to feel about that. Max is supposed to hate him. He pushes the thought away and whistles lowly.

"I bet the nerds didn't like that."

"Nope," Steve says, popping the p, "and that's when it got real ugly, because they told Max she was stupid for letting her guard down and trusting you."

Billy can't believe he's agreeing with the nerds. But calling Max, of all people, stupid, is certainly not a very sensible thing to do.

"That would have pushed her over the edge," he muses.

"No, actually she was the most calm and rational out of them all, until Lucas called you a psycho. That pushed her over the edge."

Billy chuckles wearily. "What a little hypocrite. She literally called me a psycho last week."

"Well, today she called you a poor bastard," Steve says quietly. "You told her, didn't you? About your dad?"

Billy snorts. "Heck no, she found out on her own. Was bound to, at some point. He was getting careless."

"What do you mean?"

"He used to only mess with me when Max wasn't around. Didn't want her to know. But if he hits me
with her in the next room, of course she'll catch on sooner or later."

Steve whistles lowly through his teeth. "How'd she take it?"

"Well, apparently she pities me now, going by how she went from 'fucking psycho' to 'poor bastard'."

"Or maybe," Steve nudges Billy's elbow with his own, "she meant what she said and noticed you were trying."

Billy finds it hard not to find that absurd.

"I mean, I tried to be nicer to her, I guess. But I didn’t think she even noticed. Or, you know. Gave a fuck."

Steve takes a moment to drink about half of his wine in one go.

"I can’t speak for Max," he says slowly, "but to me, the difference is glaringly obvious."

Maybe they should have taken their drinks outside after all, because it sure is getting pretty hot in here.

"What difference?" Billy asks and tries hard not to fidget in his seat.

"The difference between the Billy from two month ago and you right now."

"Jesus, you sound like a life coach. Or a shrink."

Steve laughs, but it’s very low and kind of sad. "I know you probably don't want to hear this, but I'm really proud of you. For trying so hard with Max. I think you're doing really well."

Billy can feel his ears go red.

"Why wouldn't I want to hear that? That's.." he clears his throat awkwardly, "That's a nice thing to say, I guess."

"Yeah, well," Steve goes, just as awkwardly, "with you, I never really know. If nice things are okay."

Billy isn't sure if that's supposed to be a question, so he takes a big sip of wine and tries to change the subject.

"I actually think that Max is trying much harder than me."

"What makes you say that?"

"She apologized to me. Like, for real, with actual words. And I couldn't even say 'me, too'. That's fucked up, isn't it?"

"Maybe." Steve downs the rest of his drink and pours himself some more. "But you've got to give yourself time. Honest communication takes practice. What did she apologize for?"

"For telling my dad where I went. That time in California."

"You mean when he put you in the hospital?"
"Mh-hmm."

Steve drinks again, then tips his head back as though he needs a moment to process this.

"What... what did you even do, that made him so mad?"

"Broke his rules."

"What rules?"

"You're getting pretty nosey there, Stevie."

Steve blushes and looks away. "Sorry. You don't have to tell me. I was just curious."

Languidly, Billy turns his head to the side and waits until Steve looks back at him. Their eyes meet.

"If I tell you, it'll have to stay between us."

"Of course," Steve says earnestly, big brown eyes open wide.

And Billy finds, quite surprisingly, that he trusts him. That throws him off for a second, because if he's being very honest with himself (which seems to be becoming a thing, lately), he hasn't really trusted anybody in a long time.

“All the bad things a normal person can be, my dad is,” he starts out slowly, “Sexist, for example. He’s never hit Susan as far as I know, but he’s not treating her right either. Racist, too, which is why I tried to keep Max away from Sinclair. And... very, very homophobic.”

Steve is still looking at him. Not staring or glaring or anything. Just looking and waiting. Anybody else, it would have been uncomfortable and annoying but with Steve it somehow… isn't.

“When he… on the day I ended up in the hospital, I was supposed to watch Max,” Billy continues carefully, fiddling with his cup. “It was really sunny that day… I mean, it’s always sunny in California, but that day it was just really, really hot, so I didn’t wanna stay cooped up inside. I left Max alone and met… a friend.”

At that point, Billy’s voice just kind of stops working.

“Hey,” Steve says quietly, “It’s okay. You can say it.”

The I already know goes unsaid.

Billy wipes his nose and talks to the window. It doesn’t help that he can see his reflection in the glass.

“My dad found us kissing on the beach. He chased my friend off and dragged me into an alley to beat me up. We moved just so I could never see that guy again. We weren’t even doing anything that bad. Just, you know. Making out a little.”

Heavy silence stretches between them for a few, in Billy's case frantic, heartbeats.

Then Steve blows out a breath he's been holding and says, "Well, that sucks. Even if you didn't get to."

And, just.
Billy blinks. Steve blinks back. And then he bursts out laughing.

What even is this guy?

"Oh god, I'm sorry," Steve gets out after a bit, "that was terrible."

"Yes, it was," Billy agrees at once, but he can't help chuckling along. "Wine fucks you up bad, doesn't it, Harrington?"

"Aw, don't call me that."

"What? That's your name, dumbass."

"Yeah, my last name," Steve complains stupidly, "I liked what you called me before."

"What, pretty boy?"

"No, Stevie. But I like pretty boy, too, when you say it." Steve pauses for a second and glances down at his empty cup. "Think this is the Chardonnay talking?"

Billy is grinning so hard it almost hurts. "You are ridiculous."

"I'm gonna take that as a yes," Steve goes and hands Billy the bottle and the empty cup, "Take this away from me, please."

Obediently, Billy puts the stuff back to where it came from.

"Why where you even drinking that quickly?"

"Maybe I was trying to give myself liquid courage," Steve muses, and curls up sideways in his seat, so his entire body faces Billy.

"Whatcha need courage for, pretty boy?"

Billy has drunken just enough for the pleasant buzz of the alcohol to drown out the voice in back of his head telling him that this is probably a bad idea. He downs the rest of his own drink and puts it away. Then he leans back in his seat, pulls his legs in and turns his head to Steve again.

Both of their heads are on the edge of the headrests, faces only inches apart. Their knees are touching over the center console.

"I wanted to try something," Steve says quietly.

His eyes are wandering all over Billy’s face.

Billy’s throat is weirdly dry. “What did you want to try?”

Steve’s face inches ever closer, his eyes zero in on Billy’s mouth, his lips part and then he says…

“I don’t remember.”

…Unbelievable.

Billy tips his head back and just starts to laugh.

Steve breaks into honest-to-god giggles and the next minute, they’re just two idiots in a car in the forest in the middle of the night, laughing their asses off. Billy couldn’t explain it if he wanted to.
“Okay, you need to sober up, or you’re not making it home tonight,” he decides, and wonders when he became the sensible one in their equation. “Let’s talk about something normal. Like… your college plans.”

Steve snorts elaborately, rubs a hand over his face. “Oh, you mean my non-existent plans? Yeah, that’s gonna sober me up real quick. And it’s probably gonna bore you to death.”

“I don’t care,” Billy says, “I’ve got nowhere else to be.”

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Hours later, after Steve was deemed sober enough to drive himself home, the Camaro glides through the dark, quiet streets of Hawkins and Billy feels like he’s flying.

He’s not sure how much of that is from the alcohol, but he finds he doesn’t care much. In fact, he feels like nothing could ruin this night for him, not even the chief of police pulling him over for a breath test.

But of course, Billy has crowed too soon.

There is one very distinct thing that could ruin absolutely any night and it’s waiting for him in the driveway.

Billy is just mildly worrying how to pluck up enough drunken authority to steal the remote control from Max (who is sure to be still awake and enjoying her rule over the TV) and persuade her to go to bed, when he turns into their street and spots his dad’s car in front of the house.

They’re back.

Billy instantly hits the brakes.

The Camaro screeches to a halt and Billy sits in the middle of the dark road, breathing heavily and staring up at the house. It’s the only place around with the windows still lit, and Billy knows what’s waiting for him inside. He just knows.

His dad has returned a day early, from a trip he’d worked overtime for moths to pay for, which was a complete disaster, to find his stepdaughter home alone and Billy gone all evening, when he’d told him so plainly not to let Max out of his sight. There is not a cat in hell’s chance for this night to end well.

Billy can feel his heart beating in his throat. Every instinct tells him to turn this car around, drive away as fast as possible and stay gone forever.

But.

He’s been trying so hard not to be a coward any longer.

Three people in all of Hawkins who are not afraid of him. He’s faced Steve Harrington. He’s faced Max, multiple times. There is only one to go.

And above all that stands one fact alone: Max is in there.
Neil hasn’t put a hand on her yet, but with an attitude like hers, Billy always knew it was only a matter of time. And if his dad is as furious as Billy anticipates, but Billy isn’t around to take it out on, she’s a highly suitable substitute.

Slowly, Billy takes his feet off the brakes and inches further down the road. He parks in front of the house and needs two minutes to talk himself into getting out of the car.

By the time he unlocks the front door with his keys, his mind has shut down far enough for Billy to calmly take his shoes and jacket off in the hall and start looking for his father. He has accepted his fate.

Billy doesn’t have to search long.

His dad is waiting for him in the living room, sitting stiffly in the recliner, small glass filled halfway with amber liquid in his hand.

“When did you get home?” Billy asks and is impressed with himself for managing to sound so at ease.

But then Neil raises his eyes to look at him and Billy’s feet start to tingle with the need to run away. Billy plants them with determination, meets his father’s inscrutable gaze head-on.

“About two hours ago,” Neil says, mirroring Billy’s calm voice and taking a sip.

Chances are good he’s been drinking for all of those two hours.

“It took us the whole day to get here,” Neil continues, and a slight, slurry edge to his words unfolds. “A lot of the roads are still not completely free of that fucking snow.”

“That sucks,” Billy says tonelessly.

Neil gets to his feet, sways a little.

“Damn straight it does. You know what else sucked? Finally getting home and finding—” he burps a little, “—and finding Max all alone on the sofa. So let’s hear it then, son. Where were you when you were supposed to be right the fuck here, watching your sister?”

“I was hanging out with a friend,” Billy says truthfully.

There’s no use in making up a lie anyways – Neil hears what he wants to hear.

“A friend?” he repeats maliciously, “Hard to believe that a psychotic fag like you would find any normal friends.”

Billy thinks of Steve and, despite everything, has to suppress a smile. “Nobody said he was normal.”

“Where?” he repeats nastily, “What were you and your friend doing, then, that was so important you abandoned your sister?”

“I was hanging out with a friend,” Billy says truthfully.

Nope.”

“Color me surprised,” Neil says nastily, “What were you and your friend doing, then, that was so important you abandoned your sister?”

Billy feels annoyance rise beneath his carefully constructed mask of calmness.

“I didn’t abandon her, Jesus, she can survive a couple hours on her own. And we were just talking!”
Talking, huh? Been drinking, too, have you? By the smell of it.”

“Not as much as you, by the smell of it,” Billy retorts, and gets slapped in the face for his troubles.

He doesn’t even flinch.

“Hey!”

A new voice suddenly pipes up, and father and son both turn their heads to find Max in the doorway, hands on her hips.

Neil growls a little. “I told you to go to your room and stay there, Maxine.”

“What, so you can beat up your own fucking child in peace? No way!”

“You watch your tone, young lady-“

“Max! Leave them alone!”

Here comes Susan, appearing in the doorway behind Max and gripping her daughter’s shoulders with a fearful look on her face.

“What the fuck, Mum! I’m not going to sit in my room while this asshole beats Billy up, again! Did you know it was him,” she points an accusatory finger at Neil, “who beat Billy into the hospital back home?”

Susan visibly shivers. “Max, stop talking!”

“Wait- did you know? Did you??”

“Get her out of here!” Neil barks at Susan, completely ignoring Max spitting like an angry cat.

Susan starts to drag her backwards out of the room, while Max fights hands and feet to stay and Neil watches on angrily. All three of them are yelling orders, threats and (in Max’s case) curses over each other and Billy feels the inexplicable urge to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

“Max,” he says instead, not very loudly, but they all fall silent anyway. “Go.”

“What?” Max snaps, incredulous.

“This has got nothing to do with you,” Billy says quietly, catching her eye and trying to will her to leave. “Go.”

Somehow, the uncomprehending, almost betrayed look on Max’s face is even worse than watching Susan reinforce her viselike grip on her and drag her off.

Billy feels his stomach sink when his only ally is pulled out of his sight, but it's better this way. No way is Billy taking any chances on Max getting involved in this, and she doesn’t have to watch it, either.

Neil releases a heavy breath and rounds on Billy again.

“Where were we?”

“Talkin’ ‘bout how you are drunk as hell,” Billy replies dutifully and catches another stinging slap.
“I think we were talking about how you seem to be forgetting some very important rules,” Neil grits out through his teeth.

Billy wipes his mouth and shrugs, stifling a tiny voice in the back of his head, which is screaming that his behavior has surpassed reckless and is verging on downright suicidal.

Neil seems to think along the same lines, because he takes a few steps closer, grabs a fistful of Billy’s shirt and draws him in close. His breath gets right in Billy’s face and now he knows that his father was drinking scotch. A lot of scotch.

“I thought I taught you a lesson last time I caught you with that disgusting fag down by the pier! You remember that? Remember what that creep was doing to you? Remember how I had to get you out of there?”

“I remember that you broke my fucking arm,” Billy spits, furious hatred winning out over deep-rooted, terrible fear.

Neil all but fletches his teeth. “Apparently it didn’t hurt enough.”

Before Billy can open his mouth again, he catches a fist to the gut and promptly doubles over, all the breath knocked out of him.

From above, Neil rams his elbow into Billy’s back, right between his shoulder blades, and he goes down.

“Your attitude’s getting on my nerves boy,” Neil rambles somewhere above, “Gotta take you down a notch, don’t we?”

Groaning, Billy rolls onto his back, looks up to where his dad is standing over him, rolling back his shirtsleeves. This is what it comes down to.

With a sadistic, drunken smile, Neil lifts his leg and stomps down as though trying to kill a cockroach, right on Billy’s knee.

Billy screams.

His kneecap dislocates, then jumps back in place when Billy flails on the floor, instinctively cradling his leg. He almost pukes with the pain and barley registers Max’s answering screams dully echoing through the thin walls.

His dad doesn’t let him catch a break. Repeatedly, he kicks Billy in his stomach and chest, then leans down to lift his limp upper body up off the floor by the collar of his shirt. His fist reels back and then he does his best to beat Billy’s face in.

It hurts so bad, Billy loses any kind of coherent thought, any chance to defend himself, while his father punches and punches as though he plans on ending this tonight, for good.

After what feels like forever, Neil’s arms must be getting tired, because he drops Billy like a sack of potatoes and shakes his hands out, panting wildly.

Billy groans, barely conscious, and turns his head to spit blood onto the carpet. If he were able to think properly, he would have known not to do that. Neil roars, fury returning instantly, and starts aiming kicks again.

Billy is rolling up as tightly as possible, trying to shield his ribs and stomach from further damage,
even though his knee protests with burning agony.

Sooner or later, Billy knows, his father will beat him fully unconscious, and he’s not gonna stop there. Billy will die on this floor and nobody is going to save him, nothing will stop this, except -

“Leave him alone, you psychotic asshole!”

Max must have broken free from her mother’s hold.

Neil doesn’t seem to really hear her, or maybe just doesn’t care, but he must register something, because the pounding does stop for a split second and Billy manages to lift his head an inch.

Max is standing in the doorway like a vision, anger radiating off her in a way more focused and righteous than Neil’s drunken wrath. Her small face is taunt with determination and as Billy’s head drops back down, he thinks she looks like a warrior.

But Neil can’t see that, standing with his back to Max as he repeatedly gives Billy bruises.

He also doesn’t see her take charge, until she jumps on his back with a war cry, wrenching him backwards and causing him to stumble sideways into the potted plant in the corner. It’s like a scene out of a bad movie.

Billy can’t move, lies heavily breathing on the floor, can do nothing but watch on through a blurry haze.

The plant goes over, spilling earth all around, but Neil doesn’t – he roars like an angry bull. He shakes off a screaming Max, who lands on the floor behind him, and aims another kick at Billy’s face.

But Max is not done yet.

“Stop!” she screams at the top of her lungs, “Stop it! You’re going to kill him! STOP!”

Billy blinks blood out of his eyes and sees, just barely, how Max’s foot kicks out. Neil’s knee buckles when she hits the back of it.

If he was angry with her before, now he’s fucking furious.

He lets up on Billy, which is a nice change, but then he goes for Max, which is a disaster.

She spits hair out of her mouth and scrambles backwards on the ground, but despite being drunk, Neil is quicker. It happens in a matter of seconds.

Neil bends down with an angry grunt, grabs Max around the throat and pulls her up by it. He marches her backwards as she shrieks, fingers wrapping ever tighter around her neck, until they slam into the wall by the door. He pins her up against it until her feet leave the ground.

“And what do you think you’re doing?” Neil asks deliberately, indifferent to how Max is hitting him left and right with her small fists, or how she’s struggling to breathe.

Billy knows that tone of voice. That’s exactly how his dad had sounded back in California, minutes before he beat him up bad enough to put him in the hospital.

But Max, no matter how fierce inside, is small and breakable in a way that Billy never was. Neil’s lost control long before his last drink. She’s not going to survive this in one piece.
And he can’t let his dad hurt his little sister.

Billy gathers every little piece of strength he still has left, every shred of fighting spirit, and makes it to his feet.

“You little bitch,” Neil is hissing right in Max’s face, and she manages to look disgusted even while fighting for air. “You think you can fight me? You think you can tell me what to do? You dare to get in my way? No, no. That is not how this works. In this house – in my fucking house – you do as I say.”

He’s still pinning her up against the wall, her heels are literally banging against it, and Susan is nowhere to be seen.

It’s now or never.

Billy drags himself closer and Max’s eyes widen as she spots him over Neil’s shoulder. Billy knows he must look like a zombie. His knee hurts so bad he can hardly stay standing, breathing feels like torture, and there’s definitely blood all over his face.

Neil doesn’t hear him coming.

Billy’s fist connects with the side of his father’s head in what is probably the weakest punch he’s ever thrown. And yet, Neil staggers, shouting.

As his grip on her slackens, Max manages to pull herself free. She slides down the wall and stumbles sideways into the doorway, coughing and clutching her throat.

Billy sways on his feet. There’s no time to run or argue, or even to lift his hands in defense.

Neil roars as he turns, and his retaliating strike hits him right in the chest.

Billy tries to plant his feet, he really does.

But his knee is busted up, and every bit of power he had left, he put into that one punch. He goes down backwards like a sack of potatoes, lands on the glass-made coffee table and feels it shatter beneath him.

The last things he registers are a sharp pain in his shoulder and Max’s voice, screaming his name.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for this chapter: Apart from the usual drinking and cursing, please be aware that there is some homophobic language and the physical abuse of a minor happening in this chapter, so if that triggers you, please read with caution or skip the end!

It broke my heart to write that scene, but it had to be done and now that we’ve hit rock bottom, things can only go up!

Please feel free to let me know what you thought in the comments - or if you just want to come freak out about season 3 for a moment, that's great too, because I am definitely freaking out!
climb a mountain and turn around

Chapter Notes

Hello again!

Sorry for the long wait - this fic was meant to be finished a month ago, but there were exams to write and a Season 3 trauma to deal with and then I started a full-time summer job.

But! As you might have noticed, there will now be 7 instead of 6 chapters, because after what happened in the S3 finale ((still not over it)), this is now my happy place and too many good things still needed to happen for it to fit into one chapter.

This one right here is all dialogue and no plot, mainly because I want Max and Billy to learn to use their words, and I have no excuses at all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Billy feels tired to his bones when he wakes up.

His body seems to float, out of his control, on a cloud of all-numbing cotton candy.

After many fruitless tries, he manages to open his eyes a tiny crack, but all he sees is red.

Must be hell, then.

Apparently Neil has finally managed to off him.

Billy sighs a little, but finds he doesn't really care. He was always gonna end up in hell anyways, but the all-red decor seems a little cliché.

"Billy?" a small voice suddenly pipes up by his left ear, but Billy is too tired to be startled much.

The red in his vision shifts, and now he can make out a chalk-white blob with wide, blue eyes.

Not hell, then.

Just Max.

"Ahyehalight?" he slurs, barely able to move his lips.

"Jesus," Max murmurs, "I'm calling a nurse."

She vanishes from his field of vision, and through the bone-tired numbness that seems to encompass his entire body, Billy feels a spark of panic.

He wills himself, his brain, to get it together, and bit by bit, he feels his body wake up further. With all his combined willpower, he manages to turn his head and figure out his surroundings.

Hospital.
There's a heart-rate monitor and an IV to his right, an ugly blue curtain all around his ugly sickbed, and, to his left, a frustrated little redhead, sitting on a plastic chair and fiddling with a call-button.

"Stupid shit's not working," Max is mumbling to herself and gets to her feet to, presumably, find a nurse by foot.

Billy's hand shoots out on its own and catches hold of Max's shirtsleeve. She swivels around with a surprised little yelp.

Billy pries his eyes open all the way and finds Max's.

"Are... you... alright?" he tries again, more slowly, and slurs only a little this time.

Max slumps in what might be relief, but could just as well be disappointment. Maybe she would've preferred Neil to finish the job. But then she probably wouldn't have come to his rescue.

"I thought you had brain damage!" she exclaims overly dramatic, but takes her seat again. "Don't do that to me!"

_Do what_, Billy wants to asks, but that one sentence exhausted him. Instead he pats Max's arm sluggishly, in what he hopes conveys an apology.

Max sighs, rubbing her eyes tiredly.

The next moment, somebody rips the curtain back behind her.

They both seem to be a little on edge still, because Billy jumps with surprise and promptly feels his head explode with pain, while Max spins her head around fast enough for her hair to hit her in the face.

When Billy can open his eyes again, he sees a young woman with curly blonde hair standing between the curtain folds. She's dressed to the nines in an old-fashioned nurse's uniform, complete with the little headpiece and the toothy smile.

"Mr. Hargrove!" she says brightly, "how lovely to see you awake! I'm Nurse Betty."

Of course she is.

Max hides her snort behind a cough, but sobers up quickly when Nurse Betty walks around the bed to critically peer at Billy's monitor.

"How are we feeling, then, Mr. Hargrove?"

Billy makes a non-committal sound close to "Meh" and attempts a shrug (which fucking hurts).

"Alright, well, let me just check your vitals and your bandages, and we'll see how everything looks."

On Billy's other side, Max pulls her knees to her chest and wraps one arm around them in an attempt to make herself as small as possible. Her free hand determinedly grabs for one of Billy's.

"Can I stay?" she asks quietly, but also like she won't take no for an answer.

"Sure, honey," the nurse says with another sunny smile, and begins to do her thing.

Billy pays no attention to whatever she's doing, even when she folds back his measly blanket and prods his rips (which also fucking hurts). Instead, he stares at the ceiling and concentrates on
squeezing Max's fingers in his hand so they'll stop shaking.

Why are the holding hands again?

The nurse seems to think he's not in immediate danger of dying, talks to him about taking it slowly and sending the doctor by soon, before she's right out the curtain again.

Billy wishes she would've stayed long enough to give Max some sort of reassurance, because the grip she has on his hand is starting to get painful.

"I'm fine, twerp," he says, and inwardly congratulates himself for sounding almost normal again.

Max doesn't seem to care.

"You're not fine!" she grovels. "You have three cracked ribs, a dislocated knee, a concussion, and ten stiches in your shoulder because you impaled yourself on our coffee table! And so many bruises! When we brought you in they thought you might have internal bleeding, too, in which case you could have fucking died! ...Also, your face looks like minced meat."

She says all this in a way only kids can: exaggerated, slightly hysterical and full of reproach, which can't completely hide the fear underneath it all. Billy is sure she insulted his face purely to get back at him.

"So how come I'm not dead, huh? I thought the old man would finish the job this time."

He expected her to be offended by his cynicism, or something, but instead Max averts her eyes, looking sheepish. She murmurs something under her breath that Billy doesn't quite catch.

"What was that?"

"I said, I need a new skateboard."

"Again? Why?"

Max purses her lips. "Because I broke mine over your dad's head in order to stop him from killing you?"

Billy's yaw drops. "You did what?"

Max shrugs in a weird mixture of pride and guilt.

"He's now got a concussion to match yours. And a nice big cut on the top of his head, which they had to shave his hair off to stich up. They handcuffed him to a hospital bed and once he's released, Hopper will take him in for criminal assault of a minor. He looks pathetic, even more so than you do, and I know because I went over there to spit in his face. Payback's a bitch," she tags on as an afterthought, leans back in her chair and crosses her arms decidedly.

Billy feels a little stunned.

"Max."

"Yes?" she says, voice laced with apprehension.

"Never in my life have I been prouder to call you my sister."

Max doesn't look impressed. "Pretty sure you've never called me your sister before."
"Now I did," he shrugs, but that really does sting. "Thanks for saving my life, I guess."

That makes her smile. "Thanks for saving mine, I guess."

Billy finds himself involuntarily smiling back. Something is definitely wrong with him. Must be the pain meds.

"Now, if I promise to buy you another skateboard, will you stop crushing my fingers?"

Max lets go of his hand like she's burned herself.

As she clears her throat awkwardly and fiddles with where the paint peels off on the edge of her chair, Billy fights against waves of memories coming back in brightly colored detail.

He sees Max pinned against the wall in his mind’s eye, Neil’s fingers around her throat…Jesus.

“So what happened then?” he asks thickly. “You know, after you knocked him out?”

Max shrugs tiredly. “My mom was calling the police from her bedroom. You know, while we were… preoccupied with Neil. Hopper showed up minutes after it was over and brought an ambulance. They carted you off, and well. You’ve been out all night. It’s like… nine in the morning or something like that. I think.”

That would explain why Max looks like she hasn’t slept.

“Where’s Susan now?”

“At home. Cleaning up, I suppose,” Max says grumpily. “She gave testimony and stuff to Hopper when we first got here, but when they said you’d both live, she left. She wanted me to come but I said no.”

“So you’ve been here all night? Max,” he admonishes quietly.

“It’s not like I would have been able to sleep either way!” she defends herself at once, “Anyway, I figured if I were you, I wouldn’t wanna wake up in the hospital all alone.”

She shrugs again, like she has no idea Billy’s insides are burning with shame and gratefulness. He remembers the last time he woke up in a hospital, alone, scared and confused, only to be discharged and sent back home with his dad.

This is definitely better, even though he’ll never say that out loud. He wants to tell Max to go home and get some sleep, that he’ll be fine, but to his utter humiliation, he feels tears pricking in the corners of his eyes.

This cannot be happening.

He turns his head away from Max in a pathetic attempt to hide his face.

“Hey,” Max says quietly, “It’s all good now, okay? Neil’s gone. Hopper promised me he’ll lock him up, and even if not, my mom would kick him out. He’s gone. He won’t hurt you again. They’ll keep you in here for a few days, but I’m sure you’ll be out by New Year’s and when you come home, he won’t be there…”

As Max keeps talking, Billy only registers a little of what she actually says, but her voice is calm and soothing and he can feel himself drifting off again.
When he wakes up the next time, Max is still there. She’s asleep with her head pillowed on her arms, which are resting on Billy’s mattress, by his elbow. Her hair is all over her face.

“She must be exhausted,” a voice says, and Billy’s eyes find Steve Harrington.

He’s standing by the ugly blue curtain, arms crossed in front of his chest. There’s a smile on his face but it looks very strained.

“Lucas says she was here all night. How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” Billy groans, “how did Lucas know?”

“Max radioed him last night, when the cops were at your place. He said it must’ve been… bad,” Steve finishes lamely.

Billy wants to tell him about how big of a shit show it was, that his father is a scumbag, maybe even rattle off some of his injuries – just so Steve can properly pity him.

What he says instead is, “I’m sorry.”

“What? No,” Steve comes a little closer, stands by Billy’s feet. “This isn’t your fault, okay, it’s your dad’s. You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

“No, I mean-“ Billy swallows around the lump in his throat.

He can’t bear to look at Steve, so he busies himself with moving Max’s hair off her face strand by strand.

“I’m sorry about what I did to you. Last month.”

Steve is very quiet.

As Max’s face slowly comes back into view, peaceful in her sleep, so does the side of her neck. Billy spots angry red blotches on her skin, just the size of Neil’s fingers, and feels bile rising up in his throat.

“Fuck,” he mumbles, sitting up quickly, which just about sets his chest on fire. “Fuck, I think I’m gonna throw up.”

“Hey, hey,” Steve goes, walks up further until he can grab Billy’s uninjured shoulder. “She’s fine. You’re both fine. Breathe. Billy, breathe.”

In that moment, everything comes crashing down on Billy all at once: The physical pain of hurting all over, the emotional pain of being beaten up by his dad, the memories of Max choking.

His fear of being stuck in the hospital mixes with his sheer panic about his uncertain future, now that his dad might go to jail, and so much guilt.

There’s Max, waking up suddenly and staring up at him with wide eyes, and Steve, who he beat up, who should hate him, who he shouldn’t like as much as he does, is the only thing holding Billy up.
And it all becomes way too much for one person to bear.

If he weren’t so utterly drained, he might have thrown a fit, lashed out at Steve and Max, destroyed everything in vicinity while screaming his gut out.

As it is, he just starts to cry.

Ugly, desperate sobs shake his body, everything really fucking hurts and the worst thing is – they don’t leave. Steve stays right where he is, keeps a firm grip on Billy’s shoulders, lets Billy lean against him.

Max, throwing off her confusion in a heartbeat, clambers onto the bed with him and starts to rub his back with one hand, while the other finds his and holds on tight.

They exchange a few frantic whispers over the top of his head that Billy currently can’t make sense of, because he’s too busy trying not to throw up on top of it all. Then they fall silent and just wait it out with Billy, who is sandwiched between them and cries like he hasn’t in years.

It takes forever to stop, and afterwards Billy is so ashamed, he asks to be alone.

Steve - dumb, pretty, decent Steve - complies without questions. He carefully lets go of Billy’s shoulders and, when he doesn’t immediately collapse, holds out his hand for Billy to shake.

“It’s all gonna be alright, man. Just get some rest. And I accept the apology, by the way,” he says earnestly, before clapping Billy on the shoulder one last time and turning to go.

Max, on the other hand, flat-out refuses to leave.

“Get a grip,” she chides, climbing off the bed, “So you cried a little, it’s not going to kill you. You’re allowed to have emotions, you know? After all the shit that went down, even you were bound to break down sooner or later.”

Billy wants to slap her up the head, but he’s too exhausted.

“If it helps,” Max continuous matter-of-factly, “I still think you’re the world’s second biggest asshole.”

That does kind of help.

“How’s your neck?” he whispers.

She waves him off. “Just a little sore. One of the nurses gave me some ointment, she reckons the bruises will be gone in no time.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stop him from doing that to you.”

“Jesus,” Max despairs, “will you stop? I think they gave you too many drugs. It’s not your fucking fault.”

She’s right, and Billy knows it, but he also thinks that this might be the only time in the foreseeable future where he’s emotionally raw enough to say any of this, and he would like to finally get it out.

“I’m sorry for the way I treated you. You didn’t deserve it.”

Max closes her eyes. “I might potentially forgive you, eventually. Depends on how much better you do in the future.”
Billy releases a breath he’s been holding, and feels like he’s been holding it for weeks. It’s actually more than he expected.

“That’s fair,” he says quietly, “And just so you know, I forgive you for what happened in Cali. I shouldn’t have blamed you in the first place.”

At that, Max presses her lips together so tightly it must hurt, and excuses herself for a moment. Looks like they both need some time to get a fucking grip.

When she comes back, she brings a newspaper she pilfered from the nurses’ office and reads him the sports part.

They pretend like nothing ever happened.

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Somebody’s shaking his shoulder.

Billy growls a little, trying to cling to the very nice dream he’s having about Steve Harrington and a candy cane, but somebody seems very intent on waking him up.

Billy’s about to tell Max to get lost, when he realizes that the voice that comes with the continuous shaking is way too gruff and deep for tiny redheads.

“Hey, kid, I’m sorry but I need you to wake up. We need to talk about some stuff.”

Billy opens his eyes to see Chief Hopper leaning over him.

“Hey, kid,” he repeats, “you with me?”

“Yes,” Billy groans, rubs his eyes and regrets that immediately when the movement jostles his fucked-up shoulder.

He blinks a couple times and registers that something is different. Everything is, actually, except for the constant ache in all of his body.

But the ugly blue curtain is gone, and instead Billy has actual walls and a firmly shut door.

“You’re all good, kid,” the Chief says, “They just moved you out of the ICU, alright? We even got you a single room, all nice and private.”

“Oh,” Billy says and it takes him a moment to figure out why he’s still feeling uneasy. “Where’s my sister?”

“In the cafeteria,” Hopper says calmly, pulling up a chair, “having a late lunch. I had to bribe her with money for food in order to get her to leave. She’s a tough negotiating partner.”

Billy relaxes a little and snorts. “She’s a tough everything, Chief.”

Hopper grins. “So I’ve heard.”

He takes his hat off and puts it on Billy’s tiny bedside table, over the telephone. He seems pretty
relaxed, but Billy can see the tick in his jaw and the way his brows don’t quite un-furrow all the way.

“So, how are you feeling? They let me take a look at your file,” he says, “Reads pretty shitty. Had a dislocated knee myself once; that shit hurts like a bitch-“

“I’m good,” Billy interrupts, trying not to sound too impolite. “Cut to the chase, Chief, why don’t you.”

Hopper eyes him for a moment, then clears his throat and digs a scrappy notepad out of his pocket.

“Alright. Listen up: I’m going to do whatever I can to make sure that this,” he waves a vague hand at Billy’s general shape, “never happens again. And I can do a lot, kid, okay? But in order to do that, I’m gonna need you to give me an official statement that I can use with the county judge. I know this is all kinds of fucked up, but I need you to tell me everything that went down last night. Anything you can remember. Okay?”

Is it okay? Billy doesn’t really know anymore. He kind of wishes Max was here to tell him.

Then he promptly has a mental image of Max, standing over him with her hands on her hips, urging him to fucking tell him everything, you idiot.

Billy talks to the ceiling.

He can’t bear to look at the chief, because it would make everything way too real. This is something Billy has spent his entire life denying, burying away deep inside, never letting anyone get a glimpse at what was going on, at least not until Max started digging.

And now he’s in a hospital bed, with his ribs, shoulder, knee and face all fucked up, and talks. There’s no more denying. He tells the chief everything that happened, from the ruined ski trip to coming home and mouthing off, from Max joining in on the fun to falling into the coffee table.

He can’t remember the beating all that well – he knows he went down embarrassingly quickly, spent most of it rolled up on the floor – but he recounts every single detail of Neil pinning Max against the wall and chocking her, even though it makes his eyes sting.

By the end, Hopper looks like he wants to punch a wall and simultaneously throw up. Billy can definitely relate.

“Is it gonna be enough?” Billy asks hoarsely, “To lock him up?”

“Yeah,” Hopper says emphatically, flipping his notepad shut. “We’ve got your statements – yours and Max’s, and I’ll go talk to your stepmother again right after this – and so far they match up with each other and with your injuries. Even if your stepmom wouldn’t want to press charges, I’ll let that bastard go free over my dead body.”

He looks at Billy, then, but doesn’t quite meet his eyes. “I know this was all though enough already, and I hate to ask – but Max said this has happened before. Is that true?”

Billy grips his sheets tightly in his fists and thinks about Max taking a skateboard to his dad’s head. That girl is braver than Billy will ever find the guts to be, but maybe he can learn a thing or two from her.

He nods.

“Why’ve you never told anyone?”
Stupid question, Billy wants to hurl at him, stupid fucking question.

What is he supposed to answer to this?

Because he believed he was man enough to take it? Because his dad had spent years instilling an overwhelming fear in him and he knew what telling anyone anything meant? Because his mom had already left, and without his dad there would’ve only been foster care? Because nobody would have believed him, or cared, in the first place? Because telling means people asking stupid fucking questions like this and getting all up in his business, thinking they’ve got any idea what they’re talking about?

Do you want a list, Chief?

His fury, his helplessness, must show on Billy’s face, because Hopper seems to realize his mistake and gruffly clears his throat.

“Let me rephrase. Why were you okay with telling now?”

Billy swallows his anger and looks at the older man through heavy-lidded eyes.

“Have you seen the bruises on my sister’s throat, Chief?”

This time, their eyes meet and Billy knows that they understand each other. Billy might not be worth saving, but neither of them are going to risk that bastard getting near Max ever again.

The chief gives a solemn nod, puts on his hat and gets up.

“Alright. I’ll stop by your house on my way to the station and talk to your stepmom. We’ll get everything sorted out. You just focus on feeling better now, alright, kid?”

“Yes, sir,” Billy says lightly, and when the chief holds out his hand, Billy shakes it.

“Hey, Chief?” he calls out again, when the man is almost by the door. “If you’re… If you’re already driving to our place, can you take Max with you? She needs to get home already.”

“Yeah,” the Chief sighs, “I’m sure I can find something else to bribe her with.”

Billy almost laughs. “Try Mars Bars,” he advises, “She loves those.”

“Got it.”

Not even ten minutes after the Chief’s departure, Max comes shuffling in, dark circles under her eyes and bits of chocolate stuck to the corners of her mouth. She looks exhausted, sad and guilty all at once.

“Hey, twerp,” Billy greets as she falls into the bedside chair, “You look like a zombie. You should’ve slept while I was out.”

“I did,” Max protests, “You fell asleep during that super thrilling article about somebody’s dog stealing baby Jesus out of their nativity scene and running amok with it, remember? So I squeezed into the bed with you because I was so tired, and I only ever woke up when they rolled us out of the ICU about an hour and a half ago. By the way, did you know you’re super clingy when you sleep? You wouldn’t let go of my arm when Hop got here. When school starts again I’ll tell everyone that Billy Hargrove likes to cuddle – it’ll ruin your reputation.”
Billy blinks at her.

“Max?”

“Hm?”

“You’re talking even more than usual. Did you steal someone’s coffee?”

“No,” she says, looking sheepish.

“Then what is it, dipshit?”

“Well, to be honest, I just came back to say goodbye. Hop’s making me go home,” Max says with a roll of her eyes, and manages to sound put-out even as she talks through a massive yawn.

“As he should. You need to sleep,” Billy says, and adds “in your own bed, twerp,” when she opens her mouth to argue.

Max harrumphs. “Fine. But I don’t like it. Will you be okay on your own?”

Billy almost laughs at how serious she is. As if Max being there would make any difference to how Billy is hurting all over, can barely move or breathe, or to the fact that the fucking police knows now and Billy has no idea what’s going to happen next.

But then he remembers that his dad is somewhere in the building, chained up, but still. He remembers how uneasy he felt, just half an hour ago when he woke up and Max wasn’t there.

The little devil seems to somehow sense his conflict, because she reaches out and takes his hand again.

What is it with all the touching, Billy wonders. She always used to keep away as far as possible.

“I think I can manage,” he answers belatedly, “I’m not a child, Max.”

“You are, though,” Max says softly and squeezes his hand.

Billy stiffens.

Instantly, Max lets go and gets to her feet, back to business.

“I’ll come back first thing tomorrow, okay? Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Billy says and gives her a mock salute.

In response, Max flips him off, which is such familiar territory, it actually makes him feel better.

He kind of wants to thank her for sticking around so long – she really came through for him in the past 20 hours, she deserves some sort of recognition for that, doesn’t she?

Billy’s taking too long to beat back and Max is starting to look at him funny.

What’s he gonna do – pat her on the head? Fucking ridiculous.

Billy clears his throat.

“See you tomorrow, shitbird.”
As promised, Max returns the next day as soon as visiting hours start, but she’s not alone.

She strides into his tiny room at a quarter past ten, head held high, and stands two steps from his bed.

Billy is confused. “Hi?”

“Hi,” Max says and jerks her head in the direction of the door.

Billy looks and sees Susan.

She makes her entrance with maybe two percent of the confidence her daughter just displayed, and shuffles up to the bed at the speed of a tortoise.

“Hello, Billy,” she says, voice controlled, “How are you feeling?”

“Um,” Billy says. Under normal circumstances, he would’ve made some sarcastic quip, but he’s a little lost right now. “Better, I guess.”

To be honest, Billy doesn’t really know how to feel about Susan being here… or about Susan in general. The best word that comes to mind would probably be indifferent. Yes, she never actively tried to defend him, when Neil was in one of his moods, but she’s small and frail, and if he was her, Billy probably would’ve tried to stay out of the way, too.

Then again, the only useful thing she managed to do while her own daughter choked at the hand of her own husband, was to call the police.

If she is here now, that means that either Max has put her mad persuasion skills to good use, or they have news.

“What’s going on?” Billy asks evenly.

Arms crossed, Max marches to Billy’s other side and plants herself pointedly between the IV and the heart monitor. She’s very obviously daring her mother to say anything wrong.

Susan takes a shaky breath.

“I was going to come by yesterday, but everything is a mess at home, and I though you needed your rest.”

“There’s not much rest involved when this one’s around,” Billy jokes weakly, jerking his thumb at Max, who scoffs indignantly.
Billy shares a vaguely amused look with Susan. This seems to encourage her; she takes the bedside chair and relaxes a little.

"I talked to the chief of police."

"Hopper," Max supplies.

Susan nods at her. "Yes. Chief Hopper. I gave him my official statement yesterday when he brought Max home. And then he came by again this morning."

Billy steels himself.

"What'd he say?" he asks, "Does he know what's going to happen to my... to him?"

Susan takes another shaky breath, glances at Max and then meets Billy's eyes head on.

"They're putting him in detention for now," she says blandly. "No bail. There'll be a trial in the new year. And we're pressing charges, and, um. The chief says it should be a pretty safe case, with all the evidence. He says we shouldn't worry about it too much until the trial, and he... he's got that part covered."

Billy decodes this to mean that his dad is pretty safely going to jail.

He doesn't quite know how to feel about that, and judging by the look on her face, Susan doesn't either.

Billy kind of gets it - he's still kind of mad that she didn't stand up for Max, but she's probably not having a blast right now either.

"What we came here to talk about," Max speaks up sharply, breaking the awkward silence like a knife sliding through jelly, "is what you're going to do once you get out of here."

"Oh yeah? You got any plans for me, twerp?"

Billy feels more than hears the quiet puff of laughter Susan emits next to him. This is so weird.

Max crosses her arms over her chest. "Yes, in fact I do. Pretty simple one, too. You're coming home with us, and next year you're graduating and after that you can do whatever the hell you want to do."

She looks rather determined over there, as if it was that easy.

Billy cocks an eyebrow and looks at Susan again, waiting for the real-world answer.

She shrugs weakly. "That's the plan."

"What?"

"If... when your father goes to jail, normally child services would be in charge of you, because you're still a minor. And because I've never... well, I married your father, but I never adopted you, so I don't legally have any rights. But Chief Hopper says he knows some people who can help with that. And he's going to make Neil sign some papers, I'm not sure, I didn't really understand all of it. But apparently you're close enough to eighteen that nobody will pay too much attention. So. The chief is going to sort that out as well, and then you can just come back home until you finish school. I mean, you can stay after that, of course, but I figured you would want to go back to California or something."
Susan clasps her hands together very tightly in her lap.

Billy is confused.

"So... so you're not gonna kick me out?"

To his right, Max clicks her tongue indignantly, but Susan just smiles a sad little smile.

"Of course not. Why would I? It's your home, too. "

"But... Because... I mean, my dad, he... your daughter-"

"What your father did is not your fault, Billy," Susan says, and sounds sure about something for the first time since she got here. "If anything, it's mine. I haven't done right by you, and I'm sorry. But Neil's gone now, and no matter what happens at the trial, I won't let him come back. So if you want to, you'll always have a room at the house. It's your room."

Max, leaning against the heart-monitor, is nodding along vigorously.

Billy is lost for words, but luckily, Susan seems to have run out of things to say.

"I would stay, but I'm meeting my boss for lunch to see if I can work some more hours at the office," she says apologetically, and turns to Max as she gets to her feet. "Honey, I'll come back to fetch you after, alright?"

Max, looking more or less satisfied, inclines her head in acknowledgement.

Susan reaches out, hand hovering awkwardly over Billy's before giving it a quick pat.

"I hope they'll let you come home soon."

She smiles that sad little smile again and leaves.

Billy breathes as deeply as his bruised ribcage allows, and shifts over a little when Max sits cross-legged on the bed by his feet.

"How much of that was just you talking, shitbird?"

Max rolls her eyes. "You need to finish school, Billy. Don't be an idiot about this, okay?"

"I'll try," he murmurs in response, drops his head back against the cushions.

He's exhausted, somehow, even though most he did in the past 36 hours was sleep.

Max snorts meanly. "I won't get my hopes up, then."

"There a reason for why you're being so bitchy right now?"

"Well, some of us were pretty busy with clean-up and difficult conversations and general damage-control."

Billy furrows his eyebrows. "And..?"

"And," she grits out, picking at the duvet, "Maybe I didn't sleep well. Or at all."
"Why not? That's literally what I sent you home to do. You had one job, Max."

She doesn't laugh.

He expects some more bitching, along the lines of *I live to spite you* or something equally dramatic.

*Instead, Max's hand reflexively jumps to her throat.*

"Nightmares," she mumbles, and Billy's stomach sinks.

*He scoots to the side some more, grabs one of his many pillows out from behind his back and throws it to Max.*

"You mom will be a while. Sleep now, before you really get on my nerves. And you better not lie on my knee, dipshit."

To his surprise, Max gives him a wobbly smile. She doesn't protest at all (which is honestly a little concerning) and curls up on the end of the bed like a puppy. Her head ends up next to his thigh, right below where his hand lies.

Before Billy can think it through, he starts running his fingers through her hair.

Max jerks a little at the touch, but doesn't pull away.

"Will you wake me up if I have another nightmare?"

Billy scoffs. "Hell yeah. If you start trashing around and kicking me or some shit, you better believe I'll wake you up. And kick your ass."

"I'm serious," she whispers, and Billy doesn't know what he's supposed to be doing, here.

"Yeah, okay," he agrees on a whim, "I'll... watch out for nightmares or whatever."

"Promise?"

Max is pressing her face into the pillow and somehow, Billy's hand is still in her hair. He thinks the pain meds are definitely messing with his brain.

He says, "Sure, twerp. I promise."

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“Look at you,” Max exclaims brightly, when she walks in the next morning with Billy’s dufflebag draped over one shoulder.

It’s Sunday and Billy has slept through the night for the first time since he got here (because before, they kept waking him up to make sure his concussion didn’t kill him while he slept or some shit).

“You face actually looks like a face again,” Max continues, “Congratulations.”
“Thanks,” Billy deadpans, “You look a lot better than yesterday, too.”

“I know,” Max says swiftly, “Slept through the night. No nightmares, or at least I can’t remember them. I guess I’m over it.”

Billy can’t help but laugh at the matter-of-fact way she says that.

“Are you telling me all it took was a good night’s sleep for you to work through that trauma?”

“What trauma?” she says flatly and Billy laughs some more, ribs aching with it.

He nods at her baggage. “Whatcha got there, twerp?”

“I brought you some stuff,” Max says and dumps the duffle bag onto the bed. “I figured you might want some new clothes eventually. I’m not helping you change, though.”

She pulls a face and Billy rolls his eyes.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but you do remember that you’re not actually allowed into my room, right? That applies even when I’m not there. Especially then.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Max mumbles into the bag, “I also found a bunch of these under your bed.”

“Max!” Billy complains and watches in mortification as she pulls out a stack of books.

Barely containing her smirk, she waves a collective volume of Shakespeare plays under his nose.

“Really?”

“Those are on my English syllabus,” Billy says lamely.

“No they’re not, not all of them.” She holds up a flayed, yellowed copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. “This one looks like you read it about a hundred times. I didn’t know you were into books.”

“I didn’t know you were into snooping.”

“Yes, you did.”

“You’re right, I did. This is why I never wanted a little sister in the first place.”

“Bad luck,” Max quips, “You’re stuck with me now.”

“Shit, am I?”

He was trying to tease, but Billy’s afraid it came out a little insecure.

Max looks at him weirdly.

“Obviously, dumbass. Why, you trying to get rid of me?”

“No, shitbird. Just, you know you don’t owe me anything, right?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Max asks sharply, eyebrows furrowing.

Billy picks up *The Great Gatsby*, rubs a thumb over the cover.

“It means that you don’t have to bring me stuff. You don’t have to hang out here every day. I mean,
that you have every right to still hate me.”

“Who says I don’t?”

Billy looks at her like *duh* and indicates the stack of books.

*Max huffs through her teeth. She leans back in her chair, arms crossed in front of her chest, and puts her feet, sneakers and all, up on Billy’s mattress.*

*She levels him with a look that’s all scrutiny and no heat.*

“Okay, let’s say I don’t. Let’s say, because of everything with your dad, I’m giving you a second chance. That doesn’t mean I’m just going to forget about everything that was going on before, shithhead.”

“I thought we already talked about this.”

“But not enough. Jesus, Billy, I don’t want to talk about it anymore than you do. But we just – we have to deal with this,” she despairs, wringing her hands, “I mean, look at what happened. Look at where we are, look at you! I thought Neil was going to fucking kill you. Don’t you think we maybe could’ve prevented all of this if you’d – I don’t know, worked with me instead of against me? I could’ve helped you–

“It wasn’t any of your business,” Billy snaps, “And I already apologized.”

“Yes, and I said I would forgive you depending on how much better you were doing in the future. This is the future, Billy.”

Billy looks off to the side, overwhelmed. He doesn’t understand what she’s asking from him.

“Look,” Max whispers, “I’m on your side, alright? I want us to be a team. But we can’t just pretend that everything’s just sunshine and daisies now. I mean, up until a week ago, you hated me.”

“Come on, Max,” Billy says lowly, uncomfortably, “You know I never hated you.”

“Oh, do I? ‘Cause you sure were good at pretending.”

“Yes, pretending! I don’t know why you’re making such a big deal out of this. So we can’t really stand each other, so what? You though I was just going to watch you suffocate?”

*Max throws her arms up. “Now you’re just being dramatic! Of course I didn’t think that. Thursday night was fucked up, but I saved you and you saved me – that’s not what we need to talk about!”*

“Well then spit it out already!”

Max gestures wildly, looking for words. "Why did you try?"

"Try what?"

"Try with me. To, you know, be nicer. Even before all of this," she waves a vague hand at Billy's banged-up face, “happened.”

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific, dipshit,” Billy grunts, even though he knows exactly what she's on about.

But let’s be honest- hasn't he suffered enough?
Max folds her arms in front of her chest again, like she thinks differently.

"Okay. Why did you give me the skateboard? And don't say because of Christmas; that's bullshit and we both know it."

“I thought we agreed to never speak of that ever again?”

“Billy.”

Billy sighs. "Fine. That was actually kind of Steve's fault. But I guess I was just trying to say sorry, without actually having to say sorry.”

Max rolls her eyes. "No. I got that part. You're not half as subtle as you think you are. I just never understood why you suddenly wanted to say sorry in the first place.”

"Um, because I was a dick?"

Max lifts an eyebrow. "You were a dick before."

Billy squirms in his bed and wishes she'd drop it.

"Look. After we moved, I was really angry and I despised basically everyone in this small-town shithole just for being there, including you. But the thing is, if you treat everyone like shit, eventually they'll return the favor. And by the time I figured that out, it was too late."

Max slowly takes her feet off the bed. "I don't think it's too late, Billy."

"I used you. I let it out on you. And that sucked."

“Yeah, it did.”

Billy looks at her.

She’s still so tiny, somehow, even though it's been years since she came barreling into his life, a feisty little kid with a red mop of hair and too much sass for her own good. It’s funny how Billy still sees all of that first, despite the undeniably mature, determined look on her face. She really is here to stay, Billy realizes, and he’s done nothing to deserve her.

Time to own some shit.

“Listen,” Billy says quietly, trying to find the right words, “I know I was full of drugs on Friday, but I meant what I said. I’m sorry for the way I treated you. You’re an annoying little shit, but you’re a child, and I shouldn’t have treated you the same way my dad treated me, because I knew it was wrong.”

Max is very still, but her eyes seem to be glistening a little bit, and Billy doesn’t want to think about that, so he just keeps going.

“I’m glad my dad is gone. And what you did to stop him was badass, seriously. But I need you to realize that I’m still me. I’m still an asshole and I can’t promise you I’ll be very good at this whole do better bullshit.” He takes a deep, shaky breath. “But I’m gonna try, because I owe you. It’s gonna fucking suck, but I’ll try for you, and I really am sorry-“

“I heard you the first time,” Max cuts him off suddenly, softly, and leans forward to look directly into his eyes. “I hear you. And this is still probationary - but I do forgive you. I do. We’ll both do better from now on, okay?”
And that – that was what Billy was aiming for, right, but somehow it still hits him like a ton of bricks. All he can do is stare.

Could it be so easy? Can anything ever be this easy, without there being any sort of drawback? Billy stares at his stubborn little sister and looks for the catch.

“Okay?” Max repeats after a few moments.

She looks so confident.

Billy swallows. “Okay.”

“Good. See? That wasn’t so bad, was it?” With a satisfied smirk, she bends down and pulls a pack of playing cards out of the now empty duffle bag. “You up for a game?”

“Really?” Billy snorts, endlessly glad for the abrupt change of subject. “You wanna try that again, after last time?”

“I’ve been practicing. And you’re literally in a hospital bed,” Max points out, “I think the odds are in my favor. And once I won fair and square, I want you to teach me how to cheat.”

Warily, Billy takes the cards she’s dealt him.

“Why do you want to learn how to cheat at poker?”

“Well, you did say I should play with my friends, and you don’t think I’d risk losing to those nerds, do you?”

Billy can’t help but laugh at that, even though it still sends that stinging ache through his chest.

“That’s savage, Maxie.”

Max almost chokes on air and whacks him with her cards.

“Never call me that again!”

---

That afternoon, Billy comes to a very important conclusion.

Max has been here for a good four hours now, with nothing to do but entertain Billy, and has never even complained once (at least not in a serious way - the teasing never stops).

She jokes about how Billy face looks less like minced meat now, and more like he was attacked by a squid because of all the shiners. She makes him read a couple verses of Shakespeare out loud and promptly dissolves into peals of laughter when Billy imitates a posh British accent. She even convinces a couple nurses to help Billy change into his own clothes, even though Nurse Betty deems it endlessly impractical. When lunch is passed out, Max smiles politely at the nurse bringing it in,
then chucks it into the bin with a grossed-out sound and goes to get them sandwiches from the cafeteria.

So, Billy concludes the following: Max is still a gigantic pain in the ass, but she does have her merits.

By the time three rolls around, Max is lounging in what is on its way to becoming her chair exclusively, running a steady commentary on the cooking show they're watching on the tiny hospital TV.

Billy is more or less dozing off to the sound of her complaining about the cook’s overuse of the phrase "nice and slow", when suspicious sounds start up out on the hallway.

Through the half open door, Billy makes out the distinct buzz of a group of kids, and it's coming closer.

He wouldn't think much of it, if it weren't for the way Max suddenly bites her lips, glances at the clock on the wall and looks fucking guilty.

"Oh, no," Billy groans, trying to sit up, "Tell me you didn't."

Max jumps to her feet and turns off the TV.

"I kind of did," she admits sheepishly, walking backwards with her hands raised placatingly. "Please just be cool okay? You promised you would try to do better."

Now that is just fucking unfair.

"Jesus, you little piece of shit," Billy hisses, "Warn a guy!"

But Max is already pulling the door wide open and tumbling in comes the entire nerd brigade plus, because that is just Billy's luck, Steve.

Remember that statement from before, about Max having her merits?

Yeah, Billy is taking that back.

---

“This is a terrible idea."

“I agree. Just because he’s high on pain meds now, doesn’t mean he won’t go full-blown you-know-what-mode next week.”

“Well, if Max says he’s cool now, I trust her. I still think this is not up to us to decide.”

“Uh, yes it is! Isn’t that why we’re here? And, you do remember he almost broke a cabinet with your
back, right?"

“Of course I remember, but he just said he was sorry, and I’m willing to believe it. I thought we were here to—“

“Shut it, Lucas!”

“This is so unfair, Max! He’s literally in a hospital bed. Look at his face! How are we supposed to say no?!”

In between the nerd-ambush and his endless, humiliating quest to make it up to Max, Billy was more or less forced to apologize to the group of rugrats for scaring the shit out of them in November and manhandling Sinclair.

Now, Nancy Wheeler’s little brother, the curly-haired Henderson kid and Max’s little boyfriend are vividly discussing whether or not to accept said apology.

Meanwhile, Little Byers makes frowny faces, Steve laughs soundlessly in the background, and Max watches the boys with her head in her hands, looking very much like she is questioning her taste in friends.

Billy is, too, but he’s mainly pretending to be dead. Maybe eventually they’ll go away.

“You’re not!” Max now hurls at Henderson, “You’re supposed to accept his stupid apology and move the fuck on.”

“I think Max is right,” Steve intervenes evenly, even though there’s a smirk still tugging on his lips. “Moving on.”

Henderson gaps at him. “I know we all had a lot of other shit going on that night,” he says heavily, “but have you all completely forgotten how berserkers this guy went?! I refuse to trust someone who beat my friend’s face in!”

Steve puts a comforting hand on top of the kid’s ridiculous hat.

“I appreciate the loyalty, Dustin, but that’s between me and Billy, and we already sorted it out. And didn’t you want to ask Billy something?“

“Exactly,” Lucas agrees, but Billy’s pretty sure he’s just doing that to please Max. “Will?”

Little Byers squeezes past his idiotic friends and gives Billy a tiny, albeit seemingly honest smile. Billy decides not to scream at this particular rugrat, because he seems kind of breakable.

“I still think this is a terrible idea,” Wheeler remarks in the background, and raises his arms in sourly surrender when Max and Lucas shout him down.

“We’re having a New Year’s Eve Party at my house tomorrow,” Little Byers tells Billy, ignoring the others. He eyes the slowly fading bruises on Billy’s face. “I dunno if you’ll be okay by then. But if you want, you should come.”

“To your little nerd party?” Billy asks, but he tries not to sound mean about it.

Little Byers shrugs. “Jonathan, Steve and Nancy are also coming. And my mom will be there of course, and probably Hopper. And lots of food.”

“And did you ask all these people if they would be okay with me crashing?”
The boy shrugs again, nods. “Sure.”

Somehow, Billy has his doubts.

He hums. “What was your name again, kid?”

“Will,” the kid says carefully, while all his friends collectively take a protective step closer.

“Well, thanks for the invitation, Will,” Billy says earnestly, “Nice of you to ask.”

Little – Will blushes a little and the rest of the nerds deflate, looking slightly shell-shocked.

In her chair, Max grins triumphantly.

“Alright, dipshits,” Steve steps in, “I think that’s enough for now. Here’s a couple dollars – go raid the vending machine and wait for me outside, okay?”

“You said you were taking us to the arcade after this,” Henderson complains loudly, as Steve starts to usher them all towards the door.

“I am,” Steve says calmly, “You can wait ten more minutes, Dustin.”

He dangles a few bills over the kid’s head, laughs when he makes a grab for them, and shoos the boys out.

“You, too, Max,” he adds kindly, when she doesn’t move a muscle, “Your mom said you can come to the arcade. I’ll drop you off at home after.”

Max’s eyes wander from Steve to Billy suspiciously, but eventually she nods, bumps her fist against Billy’s and trails after her friends.

“I don’t know,” Billy groans, letting his head fall back, “how you stand these little monsters for more than thirty seconds at a time.”

“Well, they don’t understand how I can stand to be around you for more than thirty seconds, either,” Steve muses, dropping into Max’s chair, “So maybe I’m just that much of a saint.”

“I bet,” Billy snorts.

“I was going to come by yesterday, to bring you dinner. But it was already past visiting hours, so I had to eat it myself.”

“You were bringing me dinner,” Billy repeats blankly.

“Yeah, fries and a milkshake from the diner. I know hospital food sucks, and I figured soft stuff would be good in case your jaw was still sore.” Steve narrows his eyes at Billy’s face. “But you look a lot less swollen today.”

Billy doesn’t know what to say to any of this, so he lets it go.

“I’m just glad my old man didn’t knock any of my teeth out. Would’ve ruined my smile.”

“That would have been a tragedy,” Steve agrees, “You have a great smile.”

Billy refuses to swoon. He refuses.
“I know, right,” he drawls instead, “It’s, like, twenty percent of my charm.”

“What are the other 80 percent?”

“My ass,” Billy deadpans.

Steve giggles. It would be idiotic if it weren’t so damn adorable. Jesus fuck - Billy needs to find out what they put into that IV.

Steve keeps smiling dumbly at him for a moment, before blinking himself out of it and clasping his hands together.

“So, I heard your dad will be on trial. For, uh, child abuse, I guess,” he says awkwardly. “How’s… uh, how’s that?”

Billy rolls his eyes. “Just delightful, Harrington, what do you think?”

“Sorry. I just – I hate that this happened to you, and Max, but I’m really glad he’s behind bars now. There’s no way he’ll talk himself out of this.”

Steve makes an aborted gesture towards Billy’s face – for a moments it looks like he’s about to touch.

He clears his throat. “Anyways, at least now you can finish senior year in peace.”

Billy’s eyebrows furrow. “Who says I’m doing that?”

Steve’s face falls a little.

“Uh – Lucas said that Max said that you’d be back home in no time, and I mean, what else would you do?”

Billy averts his eyes. “Honestly, now that my dad’s no longer part of the equation? I think I’m gonna tail back to Cali as soon as this,” he points at his knee, “is back in working order. Don’t tell Max, though, I don’t think she’ll be happy about it.”

Steve looks at him like he’s lost his marbles.

“And what exactly,” Billy all but seethes, “makes you think you can tell me what to do?”

“I’m not telling you what to do!” Steve exclaims, getting riled-up, “But I’m not gonna sit here and pretend everything is fine, either, when you’re about to throw away all the progress you made and

“Look. I know you don’t like this town, and I would’ve understand if you wanted to get out in order to get rid of your dad – but that’s over now. You’ve got a shot now, at a real family, at graduating without bruises on your face! I really think you should take it, and I really think you should heal up properly before you do anything.”

“And what exactly,” Billy all but seethes, “makes you think you can tell me what to do?”

“I’m not telling you what to do!” Steve exclaims, getting riled-up, “But I’m not gonna sit here and pretend everything is fine, either, when you’re about to throw away all the progress you made and
ruin your health by… by running away. That’s what this is, isn’t it?”

Billy bares his teeth, but doesn’t come up with a good comeback quick enough.

Steve throws his hands up. “I’m just trying to be honest with you, okay? Because friends don’t lie, and friends don’t let each other do stupid shit that’ll fuck them up even more than they already are!”

Billy snarls. “Oh, so we’re friends now?”

Steve abruptly shuts his mouth.

It came out really mean, and Billy knows it. Usually he wouldn’t care, but now Steve looks hurt on top of angry and that is surprisingly awful.

Steve pushes his chair back and gets to his feet resolutely, but he doesn’t storm out just yet. He does that terrible thing again where he looks at Billy like he expects so much more from him and then tells him truths he’s not yet ready to accept.

“You know what, Billy? I think you’re still scared. Yeah, your dad’s out of the picture, but that also means you have no excuse to be a dick anymore. No, now you’ve got people who actually care, who you need to treat differently in order to keep them, and you don’t think you can do it, so you’re just gonna bail on all of it. And you know what that means? After everything, you’re still a fucking coward.”

And then he does storm out.

Chapter End Notes

Please remember that I’m neither a doctor nor a lawyer - I’m trying to make this sound as logical as possible whilst being absolutely clueless.

Anyways, thank you so much for reading! I would always love to hear what you thought!
better than before (yesterday's gone)

Chapter Notes

Would you look at this, I finally made it to the end of this fic that was supposed to be done two months ago. It's also the first multi-chaptered fic that I ever completed and it's almost 50k long! Hooray, and moving on.

Not gonna lie - this is basically just fluff and ridiculous dialogue and no plot at all. But I wanted a happy, cheesy ending, and it was going to be like this from the beginning. So I hope you'll enjoy reading this last chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it, even if it took forever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hello?”

“You’re supposed to answer with your full name, dipshit.”

Billy wraps the cord of the ancient hospital phone by his bed around his fingers and tries to be glad that it was Max who picked up on the third ring. Otherwise he would have to make awkward small-talk with Susan right now, and he’s is no mood for that.

There’s a long-suffering sigh down the line.

“Hello, this is Max Mayfield of 5280 Old Cherry Road, Hawkins, Indiana. I’m afraid you have missed our official office hours, please call again sometime between fuck off and asshole. Thank you and good day.”

“Very funny.”

“I know, I’m hilarious,” Max says, “You okay?”

“Yes, I’m fucking fine.”

Max whistles lowly. “Someone’s bitchy. Are you mad because I didn’t show up today? I told you, Mom’s taking me to the Byers’s early so I can help with the food.”

“You’re a terrible cook, Max, you can’t even peel potatoes. What kind of help are you gonna be?”

“Wow, you really are mad,” Max comments after a beat of silence.

“No, I’m not mad. At least not at you,” Billy amends, rubs is face tiredly. For a moment he wishes he could talk to her about the Steve thing, just to get it off his chest. “These fucking people don’t want to discharge me, even though I feel fine.”

“Those people are doctors, Billy,” Max says patiently, “They know what they’re doing. You still look like you got hit by a bus – did you know I counted nine different colors in the bruises on your face yesterday? And the only reason you’re not in any pain is because they’ve been pumping you full of drugs.”
“Exactly, which is why I’m only waiting for them to bring me my next prescription, and then I’m out of here. This isn’t a prison. I’m discharging myself.”

Max sounds very unimpressed now. “You’re what?”

“Leaving, is what I am. It’s New Year’s Eve, isn’t it? Time to celebrate my freedom at last.”

“You’re still a minor, Billy – you can’t discharge yourself.”

Billy scoffs. “That’s what they told me. But no one’s gonna stop me. I’ll sneak out after the 5 p.m. check-up.”

“That’s fucking stupid,” Max exclaims, voice going high enough to hurt. “Where are you gonna go? Jesus fuck, please tell me your coming to Will’s? For the party? Mrs. Byers will make sure you don’t die on me.”

“Yeah, no. I’m not spending New Year’s with your bunch of losers any more than I’m spending it with Nurse Betty. I’ll find myself a party and get drunk. I think I deserve it.”

Billy purposefully neglects to mention that he plans to leave town as soon as he’s sober again.

“Are you insane?” Max shrieks into his ear – soon only the bats will be able to hear her. “Do you have a death wish or something? You’re only just starting to feel better, and now you’re gonna throw it all away for what? Passing out in your own puke? Do you have any idea what mixing alcohol with your dose of pain meds will do to your body?”

“Jesus, Max, shut up! I’m just telling you so you won’t freak out when they inevitable call your mom tomorrow. You can’t stop me, dipshit.”

“Oh, watch me! I’m not letting you do this!”

“Uh-huh,” Billy snorts, “Show us what you got, then, little girl.”

With a last, decided “Fuck you,” Max hangs up on him.

Billy almost feels sentimental for the good old days (read: last week), when that was all Max ever said to him.

---

Several hours of disgruntled sulking later, Billy is fucking ready to leave.

The drugs they gave him are fantastic – when he sits up and pulls on the jacket Max brought, the pain in his ribcage is merely a dull ache – nothing compared to the terrible burning from a few days ago. The coast is as clear as it will get, too: visiting hours are over, the doctors still haven’t finished their rounds, and Nurse Betty is already off work.

But when he gets to his feet, Billy remembers one distinctive problem that he’s forgotten to consider in his brilliant plan: his knee is still very much fucked up. Sure, with the pain meds and the bracing and the lying down all day, it felt fine, but walking is decidedly not fine.

And so Billy hobbles down the hospital hallways, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible.
One young nurse frowns at him as he limps past, but he gives her his most charming smile and she looks away, blushing. At least that trick still works, despite his rainbow-colored face.

The elevator is blessedly empty and the nurse at the front desk is too busy talking animatedly on the phone to notice Billy. Finally, he makes it outside, knee hurting badly from the exertion, and breathes in the chilly air. Promptly, his skin breaks out in goosebumps, and he has really imagined his break-out to be a little more triumphant.

Before Billy even has time to execute the next step of his carefully thought out escape plan (which includes hailing a cab he can’t pay for to drive him around Loch Nora until he finds a place that looks like bad music and booze), he spots something that makes him stop in his wobbly tracks.

Right there on the curb in the no-parking zone, maybe twenty feet from the main entrance, parks that stupid Beemer and against it leans Steve Harrington.

He’s got his arms crossed over a lined jean jacket, red jumper peaking out beneath it, hair perfectly quiffed, and Billy wants to die a little. Of all the people to see him stumbling out of a hospital like this, it just had to be him.

Steve looks cold and pissed-off and perfect. Goddamnit.

There’s no way Billy can ignore this – Steve is clearly waiting for him – so he grits his teeth and hobbles over with as much dignity as possible.

“Look who it is,” he says sharply, once he's only a few feet away, and runs his tongue along his front teeth. “Hey there, pretty boy.”

“Max called,” Steve says impassively.

“Of course she did,” Billy says and诅咒 under his breath.

“She told me to give you a message. She made me write it down word for word.”

Steve pulls a folded-up piece of paper out of his back pocket and waves it around a little.

“Fucking hell.”

Billy looks up and down the street and wonders how far his shitty knee would get him if he made a run for it. He estimates a hundred yards tops, which is pathetic, plus the added embarrassment of trying to run from Steve Harrington just so that he doesn’t have to give in to his stubborn little sister. Who might’ve been right about his plan being really fucking stupid.

Billy sighs. “Alright, let’s hear it, then. What’s the little shit got to say?”

Steve’s eyebrows twitch, but he obediently shakes the paper open and starts reading.

“Billy — Steve is taking you wherever you want to go, as long as it’s either home or Will’s place. Those are the only options you got; you’re way too fucked up to take on Steve right now, so just deal with it. You’re lucky I’m giving you a choice at all, you absolute shi*head, instead of just having Steve take you back into the hospital (where you belong) and make them tie you to the bed.”

“That’s charming,” Billy says mildly, but Steve ignores him.

“So if you want to go wallow in your room like a lonely loser, I can respect that — my mom will look after you. But if you want to spend New Year’s Eve with your favorite little sister and eat something
that’s not hospital grub, come over. I promise it’ll be nice.”

Billy rolls his eyes at favorite little sister. Favorite little brat, if anything.

“That doesn’t sound like she was finished. There a P.S.?”

“Yes: Don’t be a dumbass, dumbass.”

“There we are. So, just let me get this right: you’re my personal chauffeur and we’re going to a lame middle school party?”

Billy’s not even thinking about spending New Year’s with his step-mom in the house he got beat up in. He’s not that much of a loner yet.

“Basically,” Steve agrees and opens the passenger door. “Ready to go?”

“I’m gonna kill my sister for this,” Billy says through gritted teeth, as he has to endure Steve Harrington helping him into the car.

It’s a new low.

“No, you won’t,” Steve sighs and bangs the door shut.

He circles ‘round the Beemer and drops into the driver’s seat with an annoyed huff. Billy has had it up to here with him, and Max, and just people in general.

“Goddamnit, Harrington. Neither of us want to be here. Why are you doing this?”

In lieu of answering, Steve puts on his seatbelt as angrily as it is possible to do so, and starts the car.

They drive through the deserted streets of Hawkins for 10 minutes at least, before Steve opens his mouth again. Billy is long since slumped in his seat, trying to ignore the twinge in his awkwardly angled knee and dreading everything about this so-called party.

“I’m doing this because Max needs you.”

Billy blinks in surprise. He wasn’t expecting an answer anymore, let alone one as stupid as this one.

“Hell no, she doesn’t. Have you met her? That little brat doesn’t need anybody.”

Steve breathes heavily through his nose and drops some of his annoyance (with obvious effort).

“Think about it. With your dad gone – and good riddance – Susan is basically a single mom now. She’ll have to pick up extra work, state support is not going to be enough, if she even gets any. Somebody needs to be there to look out for Max.”

Billy snorts with disbelief. “Yeah and that sure as hell ain’t gonna be me. My dad’s no longer around to make me take care of her. You do it, Harrington, you’re the top notch babysitter around here.”

“And you’re not listening,” Steve sighs, “Max doesn’t need a babysitter or someone to take care of her; we both know she can take care of herself. But you can’t tell me you wouldn’t feel bad if she were home alone all the time. Somebody needs to look out for her. You know, be there for her, chew out anybody who hurts her after she did it herself, that kind of thing.”

Billy shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Anybody touch a hair on Max’s head and he’s gonna rip them to fucking shreds, but Steve doesn’t need to know that.
“She’s got the nerd squad,” he evades.

“Yep,” Steve says patiently, “And she’s got you. Her big brother.”

“That’s—I’m not… that. She doesn’t want me to be that.”

Steve rolls his eyes into eternity. “Jesus, stop tearing yourself down, of course she does. And don’t pretend that you don’t want to be. I heard you call her your sister. Without the step.”

“Shut up.”

“And what’s even more important than all of the above,” Steve continues unperturbed, “is that you definitely need Max.”

Billy’s jaw drops. “Excuse me?”

“No offense, Bill, but look at you. You’re a wreck. She didn’t come to visit for one day and you already made a pretty good attempt at self-sabotage. And she’s the main reason you even bothered to be less of an asshole in the first place. She makes you a better person.”

Billy scratches his neck and looks out the window. “I think she’s not the only one.”

There’s a beat of silence, and Billy wants to bite his tongue off.

“Yeah, about that,” Steve huffs eventually, “I wanted to apologize for yesterday.”

“What? I thought you were still angry with me.”

“Oh, no, I am. I still think your plan was fucking stupid – and I really hope you being here means you changed that plan – but I realize it wasn’t my place to tell you that. You just got rid of your dad, you don’t need another person telling you what to do. It’s your life.”

As Steve turns into the Byers’s driveway, Billy gapes at him, lost for words.

“I – It’s cool, mate? Thanks?”

He feels completely out of his depth, and once the car is parked in front of the brightly lit house, everything is suddenly a little awkward.

“Still fucking stupid, though,” Steve tacks on quietly, because he just can’t let anything go, can he?

Then he climbs out and rounds the car to help Billy out and onto his unsteady feet.

"I really wanted to punch you, though, yesterday," Billy teases, just to get rid of the awkwardness.

Steve smiles a little sadly. He still hasn’t stepped away, and Billy is more or less stuck between him and the car.

"Why didn’t you?"

"Wouldn't want to mess up your delicate features, pretty boy."

Billy tries for his usual swagger, but it sounds really dumb. Is Steve standing closer to him than strictly necessary? Billy is starting to feel a little hot, somehow.

"My face is the best part or me," Steve agrees, taking pity, "Right after my hair. But I think you just
didn't want to hurt me. I think you don't want to hurt anyone, anymore."

Yep, he's definitely coming closer. Billy is not sweating. He's totally cool.

"Better not be too sure of that," he says lowly, sharp signature grin in place, "I could eat you alive, Harrington."

"Oh yeah?" Steve grins right back. "Show me, why don’t you?"

Now is the moment to take a step back and kick his ass, but Billy is somehow glued to the spot. Even his good leg won't move. He can't do anything but kind of stare into Steve's eyes? This is weird, mostly because Steve is not looking away.

They're frozen like that for a few moments, only a few inches between them, both a little slack-jawed.

Then Steve quirks a sudden smile, claps him on the shoulder, and starts walking towards the front door.

"Coming, Hargrove?"

"Yup. Sure. Absolutely."

Billy swears to god, if he doesn't get his former fury back soon, somebody is going to get hurt. Or not, which is so much worse. Billy can't go soft. He's got a reputation to hold up, for fuck's sake.

Jonathan opens the door, awkward as always, and lets them inside. The house is full of noises and smells, but before Billy can register anything, Mrs. Byers pops up next to Jonathan.

“Steve, oh, how wonderful,” she exclaims, “you brought the rolls!”

“Of course I did, Mrs. Byers.”

“Put them in the kitchen with the rest of the food, will you? We’ve already got enough to feed a small army…”

“Sure thing,” Steve says gallantly and then he fucking marches through the next door and leaves Billy alone with Jonathan and Mrs. Byers.

The latter finally turns to look at Billy, who is immediately very aware of the fact that he’d never be able to charm her the way he did Mrs. Wheeler.

This woman is small and inconspicuous, but one look at her and Billy knows that she’d rip him to shreds if he ever touched a single hair on either of her sons’ heads. For Max-related reasons, Billy can totally respect that, but it’s still scary as fuck.

As she observes him, Billy involuntarily remembers that he broke one of her plates over Steve’s head. She probably wasn’t very happy about that.

“So – you must be Max’s brother.”

Billy gulps. “Uh, yes, ma’am. I’m Billy. The, uh, the kids invited me. Hope that’s okay.”

“Sure it is. I heard the last time you were here, you ended up unconscious on my kitchen floor?”
Shit.

“Yeah… my sister knocked me out. Rightfully so, but I guess you… heard about that.”

Mrs. Byers raises her eyebrows. “I just hope there won’t be any need for that tonight.”

Billy has to repress the sudden urge to lower his head in shame. “No, ma’am.”

At that, she gives him a warm smile, and Billy instantly feels better.

“Okay, then. Make yourself at home, dinner will be a little while. I know you were hurt pretty badly, so if it ever gets too much in there,” she points her chin at the room Steve just walked into, which already a lot of noise is coming out of, “feel free to take a break. I reserved the sofa for you.”

“Uh, thanks, ma’am, that’s… very thoughtful,” Billy says awkwardly, and then they all just stand there.

Mrs. Byers keeps smiling, Jonathan is definitely seizing him up and Billy feels endlessly out of place.

But then thankfully, Steve comes back, shepherding all the kids, including Max.

“Billy!” she calls out. She looks delighted to see him, which is an entirely new experience all around. “Thank fuck, I didn’t think you’d come!”

Then, to Billy’s utter horror, she weaves her way past Mrs. Byers, Jonathan and Steve, until she reaches his side and wraps her arms around him in a soft hug, mindful of his ribs.

Instinctively, Billy’s arms come up to wrap around her shoulders, and everyone goes quiet.

“Hey, squirt,” Billy says into the silence, feeling awkward as hell, but also kind of proud.

Max has never hugged him before. This is a huge fucking milestone.

Then, Mrs. Byers fucking coos at them.

This settles it. Billy is going soft. What a nightmare.

Over the top of Max’s head, he sees Steve smiling at him.

Screw it.

As Max detaches herself to punch all of her snickering friends in the shoulder, Billy smiles back and throws his reputation in the wind.

---

“You’re still a fucking dumbass, you know that?”

Max is helping him out of his jacket. Everybody else has disappeared into the kitchen or the living room, including Steve. Billy is kind of glad to catch a break.

“Yeah, whatever,” he grumbles and flicks Max’s temple
She bats him away and struggles to hang up his jacket on the already overstuffed coatrack.

“Not whatever. I really thought you were going to do something stupid. And by that I mean something even more stupid than discharging yourself.”

“I think I might have. If you hadn’t stopped me. How did you know I was going to go with Steve Harrington, of all people?”

“I didn’t,” she says, way too quickly, “But it’s not like I could’ve come get you myself. I can’t exactly drive yet, Billy.”

“And thank god for that. You’d be a menace out on the streets.”

“Oh, you mean like you?”

“Exactly like me, sis.”
Max rolls her eyes into eternity and they get stuck on Billy's feet.

She points. "You need help getting out of your shoes, too, or can you bend down?"

Before Billy can answer, something else catches their attention. The chatter from the next room almost drowns out the sound of an engine rumbling closer, but the bright beams of headlights cut through the dim hallway. Max rushes to the nearby window and peaks out.

"It's the chief," she reports, "be cool."

*I'm always cool*, Billy almost says, but Max is wrenching the front door open before the doorbell even rings.

In walk, to Billy's surprise, two people.

One is Chief Hopper, alright, the other is a little girl with too big clothes and short, curly hair. She shuffles inside after the chief, smiles slightly at Max, then turns her big doe eyes on Billy.

"Happy New Year's Eve," she says carefully, like she practiced it. "Who are you?"

Billy blinks.

"I'm Billy," he says, points at Max, "This little shit's big brother. Who're you?"

Max grimaces and waves her hands around. "Billy, this is, uh..."

She trails off, eyes the newcomers warily, and Billy wonders what the heck is going on now.

"Uh, Jane Hopper?" Max decides on, at the same time Hopper says, "This is my daughter Jane," and the girl says, "My name is El."

The chief glares at her, then sighs in resignation. "This is Jane, who likes to be called El."

Yeah, like that makes sense.

*Long story,* Max mouths to his left, *don't ask.*

"Didn't know you had a kid, Chief," Billy says slowly, acutely aware of the fact that he's definitely missing something, here.
Hopper clears his throat roughly and sets a heavy hand on top of the girl's head. "She's adopted. It's a new thing. We're still adjusting, so I'd appreciated if you didn't spread it around."

"I've got to stay secret," El shares, unbothered, "so the bad men won't find me."

"Jesus, kid!" the chief goes.

"It's okay, Jim," she says, and this girl has got to have more cool than the rest of them put together. "I think he's save."

That could be considered a compliment, probably. Billy understands nothing about this kid, but nonetheless, he kind of likes her. Sure, she seems endlessly screwed up, but who is he to judge?

"Uh, thanks, kid. Secret's save with me."

That earns him a bright smile and a vaguely approving huff from Hopper.

El turns to Max and asks, "Mike?"

Max visibly shakes herself and points her thumb over her shoulder. "Kitchen."

El nods her thanks, toes her scruffy shoes off and trails away. There's a bout of cheering when she joins the other kids in the next room.

Max sighs and Billy frowns. He's got a bunch of questions and somehow knows exactly that nobody's gonna answer them.

The chief shrugs out of his jacket and gives Billy a suspicious once-over.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you back on your feet, kid," he says, "but are you supposed to be here?"

"No," Max blurts out immediately, the little traitor. "He's just being an idiot."

Billy wants to put her in a headlock and mess her hair up, but his shoulder and chest probably aren't up for it yet. Pity.

He settles on a pointed glare, but to both of their surprise, Hopper just chuckles. "Alright. When the hospital calls, I haven't seen you. Try not to faint or whatever."

With that, he heads after his daughter and leaves them alone again.

"Am I the only sane person in this place?" Max says under her breath as she watches the chief disappear into the kitchen, shaking her head.

Billy grins and, without thinking, tries to bend down to finally get out of his shoes, and promptly curses with pain.

Max sighs deeply, drops to the floor beside him and starts to untie his laces.

"What would you even do without me?" she snarks.

"Crash and burn," Billy answers, more or less sarcastically.
Much like she has done all week, Max stays glued to his side for the next half hour, glowering so much at anyone who looks at him the wrong way, it’s actually impressive.

It’s also unnecessary, because he might be stuck in a house with a bunch of people who’d have every right to hate his guts, but apart from the side-along glances, they’re all surprisingly nice.

Mrs. Byers assigns him a seat at the mismatched table and has Jonathan help him into it (sitting down and getting up is still a bitch). Little Byers hands him a napkin with a shy smile, and Sinclair puts down a can of soda in front of Billy and gives him a solemn nod, as if he’s thirty instead of thirteen.

Also - he’s still Billy Hargrove. He doesn’t need protection from a thirteen-year-old girl.

“Max,” he says, when she takes the chair next to him and asks him what he wants to eat, “you’re being clingy.”

“I’m trying to help you, you ungrateful piece of shit,” she grumbles, flinches a little when Mrs. Byers loudly declares the buffet open behind her.

The cheers from her little friends as they start towards the food drowns out her continuous cursing. She really shouldn’t be stuck with him.

“I know, but you can leave me alone for five minutes and be fucking sociable. Go, fight the little nerds for food or whatever, I don’t care.”

Max narrows her eyes and doesn’t look convinced, so Billy sighs and pulls out the big guns.

“No one’s gonna beat me up around here, okay, Maxie?”

Promptly, her jaw drops in hilarious offence.

Mike Wheeler, walking past with three kinds of bread rolls stacked in his arms, sniggers at them.

“I told you not to call me that!” Max hisses at Billy as she flips Mike the bird, “Good luck finding somebody else to get you food, asshole.”

She aims her finger at him next and off she is. There we go.

In what might be the most unexpected turn of events yet, Nancy’s the one who ends up getting him food.

While everyone else is busy choosing what to try, she fills a plate with a bit of everything and carries it over. She drops into Max’s empty chair and carefully sets the food down in front of Billy.

“Thanks?” Billy goes, concerned.

Nancy hands him a fork and knife.

“You good?” she asks, rather sharply.
Billy raises his eyebrows. “You mean am I going to enjoy this food you brought me, or am I going to snap and randomly beat someone up?”

“Definitely the latter,” she shoots back unabashedly.

She’s still fucking rude, but Billy can appreciate at least one person in this crazy lot being reasonably cautious and asking the hard questions.

He looks her straight in the eyes and says, “I’m good.”

Nancy studies him for a moment, then nods. “Okay.”

She steals a green bean off his plate and leans back.

“Get your own,” Billy snarks.

“I will, but not right now,” Nancy says, “you think I want to get in on that again?”

She points to where most of the kids are still crowded around the buffet, fighting to take first. Point.

So she stays, which is awkward. Billy doesn’t know what to do with himself, so he nods at Jonathan, who is taking close-up shots of the mashed potatoes with intense concentration.

“My boyfriend is still weird.”

Nancy snorts, point her chin to where Steve is battling Dustin in a thrilling contest of who can balance a bread roll on their forehead longer.

“So is yours.”

Billy promptly chokes on his food. His chest explodes with pain and he has to watch a sniggering Nancy get up and walk away through watering eyes, before he can even begin to point out that he is not, in fact, dating Steve Harrington, what the fuck.

It takes another twenty minutes for everyone and their overstuffed plates to settle down (this kitchen is way too small for a dozen people) and then it’s relatively quiet for the first time since Billy got here, because the kids are too busy stuffing their faces to talk much. The chief’s weird but arguably adorable daughter has ended up on Billy’s other side, and he can’t help but watch her as she carefully examines everything on her plate.

“You don’t like peas, do you?” he asks, when she’s pushed them around for five minutes straight.

El startles and looks up at him, always with the wide eyes.

“They’re mushy,” she whispers.

Billy hums in understanding. He glances her at Hopper, who’s preoccupied with telling Mike off for speaking with his mouth full and spraying him with food. Billy swiftly pulls El’s plate closer, then uses his fork to scoop the peas over onto his own plate.

Casually, he starts to eat them, and El looks at him as though he just personally hung the moon. Billy reckons he’s doing pretty well here, all things considered.

At the other end of the table, Mrs. Byers is apologizing for her mashed potatoes
“One day, I’ll figure out how to make them less runny,” she says. “That’s going to be my New Year’s resolution. No more runny potatoes.”

A few of the kids snigger.

Next to Billy, El frowns and pokes his elbow.

“What is resolution?” she asks.

Jesus, did this kid grow up in a cave?

“Um, it’s like, shit people say at the end of the year. Something they want to do better the next year,” Billy tries to explain. “Like a promise they make to themselves, you know.”

“Resolution is… a promise to yourself?” El repeats uncertainly.

“Yeah, sure. Most people just tend to break those resolutions.”

She furrows her eyebrows. “What’s your New Year’s resolution?”

Well, shit.

Billy can feel the eyes of everyone else on him. But hell if he’s gonna lie to this little girl.

“I’ll... try to be less angry. I wanna be a better man than my dad was, you know?”

The table goes very quiet, and El smiles a sad little smile.

“Yes. What else?”

Billy shrugs. “Guess I’m also gonna try and be a better brother to this little shit right here,” he says and jerks a thumb over his shoulder, at Max.

El nods like she approves of that. Unlike Billy, she seems to be blissfully unaware of the heavy silence that has settled over the whole room. Billy keeps smiling at her, though, because he doesn’t think it’s safe to look at anyone else, yet. Especially Max.

Surprisingly, it’s the chief who comes to his rescue.

He clears his throat. “My resolution is to eat less Eggos, because someone,” he raises a playful eyebrow at El, “thinks I’ll get fat.”

El giggles, and Mike, who sits directly opposite her, grins broadly.

“Hey, El, wanna know my resolution? I’m going to spend as much time as possible—” his gaze wanders from El to Hopper and suddenly he’s not grinning anymore. “—studying! Yeah, studying, mh-hmm. Next.”

That does the trick – everyone laughs, even the chief, and suddenly they’re going round in a circle.

“I’m actually going to try and spend more time studying, so I can get into college,” Steve contributes and winks – actually winks – at Billy across the table.

Next to him, the Henderson kid raises his arms over his head.

“I vow to reclaim all my high-scores at the arcade!” he exclaims to general amusement.
“I’ll get a lock for my door so my little sister can’t get in anymore,” Sinclair grins, and Billy has to suppress a groan, because now he can relate to the kid that has most definitely kissed his little sister, and that is so not cool.

“I’ll try not to get lost in the woods again,” Little Byers says drily, causing his mother to tear up a little.

Billy doesn’t even want to now.

“Potatoes!” Mrs. Byers repeats then, wiping at her eyes “Also, less smoking. Never works, but maybe this the year.”

On her other side, Jonathan chuckles weakly. “I’ll try to spend more time outside the photo lab.”

“I’m gonna get that internship at the Hawkins Post,” Nancy says confidently and then everyone looks at Max.

She’s impaled a baby carrot on her fork and is studying it with great interest.

“I will make sure that Neil Hargrove never gets anywhere near my family ever again,” she says lightly, and Billy’s throat closes up.

Now, nobody’s laughing anymore.

Again, it’s the chief who takes the attention away from them.

“Alright, kid,” he says and pats El’s arm. “Got enough examples now. Any resolutions of your own?”

“I am going to learn more words,” El says determinedly and looks delighted with herself.

The nerds cheer at that, and then they all just go back to eating.

Idle chatter starts up all around Billy, which is good, because he’s still reeling a little from what just happened. Only when every single person at the table is preoccupied with their food (or, in Steve’s case, busy dodging food that’s being thrown at them), does Billy risk a glance to his left.

Max is already looking at him, eyebrows raised.

“Alright?” she asks and points her carrot-adorned fork at him.

God, Billy doesn’t deserve her.

“Yes, dipshit,” Billy says and steals the carrot.

Max makes a face at him and Billy makes one right back. Then they go back to eating and that is that.

The rest of dinner is less group therapy and more feeding of the predators, what with how much food they manage to polish off between the twelve of them. The nerds are also inadvertently hilarious, and Billy is having more fun watching their antics than he cares to admit. (Steve still has several small broccoli florets stuck in his hair and Billy doesn’t know how much longer he can keep a straight
Eventually, however, all the excitement is starting to get to him, and his ribs are slowly starting to act up again, but it’s not late enough yet to take more pain meds.

Billy excuses himself to the bathroom, and when he emerges ten minutes later, he finds himself face to face with both Steve and the Henderson kid.

Very slowly, Billy raises his eyebrows at his reception committee. “Could’ve knocked if you needed to go so badly, Harrington.”

Steve crosses his arms with a huff. “I was just getting worried you fell or something.”

“I wasn’t,” the Henderson kid cuts in, “I just wanted to let you know that I’m watching you, Hargrove, so you better keep behaving, hear me?”

“Jesus, Dustin, seriously?” Steve deadpans.

“Yeah, Dustin, seriously?” Billy mocks and leans against the doorjamb – out of coolness and not exhaustion, at all. “What do you even want from me, kid?”

"Look, just because you've charmed everyone else into rooting for you doesn't mean you've got me fooled as well."

Billy rolls his eyes and tries not to care about what this tiny dweeb thinks. "Don't worry, you little dickhead, I’m not gonna hurt Max."

Dustin laughs exaggeratedly. "Oh puh-lease. I'm not worried about that, we all know Max can kick your ass. But Steve is my friend, and if you ever punch him again I will end you, and then immensely enjoy telling everyone that I called it."

He turns on the spot and marches off.

Billy shoots an amused look at Steve, who's glaring after Dustin with a mixture of exasperation and fondness. Billy's seen that look on his face a lot when he talks to or about those kids.

"Well, that was very encouraging," Billy comments lightly.

"Ah," Steve goes, "don't take it personally?"

"I don't think there's any way not to take that personally."

Steve grimaces. "Give him time. He's a little overprotective, but he'll get over it."

“Well thank god that gaining the approval of thirteen-year-olds is not on the top of my priority list right now.”

“Yeah, sure,” Steve says, “You know what should be on top of that list? Taking a nap. Joyce said you were about to fall asleep in your chair. She says to get you on the sofa.”

“And we do what Joyce says, huh?”

“Damn straight we do. Now come on, a little hustle."

It’s testament to how absolutely beat Billy is that he doesn’t protest anymore, just follows Steve into the living room and lowers himself gingerly onto the ancient sofa.
Steve bustles around him a little, brings him his drink from the kitchen and tries to tuck him in with a patchwork quilt (which is where Billy draws the line and makes him stop).

“Just yell if you need something,” Steve says, and Billy doesn’t even hear him leave. He’s out like a light in a matter of seconds.

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Billy wakes up to somebody flicking his forehead.

“Fuck off, shitbird,” Billy grumbles and blinks his eyes open.

Max is looking down at him over the rim of a gigantic bowl, shoveling handfuls of popcorn into her mouth.

“It’s a quarter to midnight.”

Billy can almost feel the crumbs land in his hair and thinks he should be way more disgusted. He shoves at her legs either way.

“So?”

“So, I thought you probably don’t want to miss it? I’m being considerate, Billy, catch up.”

“Oh, come on,” Billy teases, “you’re just hiding from the nerds because you stole all of the popcorn.”

Max grins down at him innocently and shrugs.

“I also found these in your jacket.” She drops his little box of pain meds into his lap, “I think it’s probably time you took some more.”

“Thanks.”

Billy grabs is drink from where it’s still sitting on the table next to him and swallows the pills down in one go.

Meanwhile, Max has walked down to the other end of the sofa and is carefully folding herself into the little space between his legs and the backrest.

Billy tries to sit up a little and make some more room for her, but his ribs protest heavily.

“Listen, I’m not gonna tell you you belong in the hospital and say I told you so - but, you know,” Max starts, deadpan, and waves her arm at Billy’s entire body, “You belong in the hospital and I told you so.”

“Leave me alone,” Billy tells her with no heat. “Are you having a good time, twerp?”

“The best,” Max says, eyes shining, and apparently she’s not all that hung up about the hospital thing.
Billy’s pretty sure she just didn’t want to pass up on the opportunity to be right.

“Mike made this D&D campaign specifically for New Year’s, which is obviously the nerdiest shit ever, but it was actually really cool. We only finished, like, half an hour ago. In the end Lucas and I teamed up and saved all the… well, everyone, basically, and Dustin got so excited he had soda coming out of his nose, which was disgusting. And one time, Will used a sparkler as a wand, and El had never seen one before – a sparkler, not a wand, obviously – and at first she got super scared but now she’s obsessed with them…”

Billy watches his little sister ramble on excitedly about her friends and thinks that the Billy from a month ago would’ve regretted asking.

Not that the Max from a month ago ever would’ve talked so much to him in the first place.

Billy has to bite his lips to stop from smiling like a dumbass. For the first time since their move, Max looks genuinely happy, curled up right in his space nonetheless. She hasn’t jostled his bad knee once, but she is kind of sitting on his left foot and Billy finds he doesn’t mind. Somehow, her weight grounds him.

"Hey, Max?" he speaks up, when she takes a break from her chatter to eat some more popcorn.

"Hm?"

"Thanks."

She blinks at him, then at her bowl.

"Oh no, forget it, I'm not sharing this with you," she pops a piece into her mouth cheekily, "all mine."

Billy snorts. "That's not what I meant, dipshit."

"Well, what did you mean?"

"I just meant, thank you."

Max looks at him like he's crazy. "You know you’re not supposed to drink alcohol while you’re on those painkillers, right? What's in your glass? Let me see."

"Coke, you nutjob," Billy says and holds it under her nose, "Will you shut up? I'm trying to say something meaningful, here."

Max eyes his drink suspiciously, then pulls it out of Billy's hand and takes a sip, probably to check that there's no rum in it or whatever.

"Which is?"

Billy steals his glass back and gives her a shit-eating grin. "Thank you."

"Billy, I swear to god, I'm gonna leave-"

“For giving me a second chance,” Billy blurts out and gets the rest out quickly before he loses his momentum: “And for sticking up for me with Neil and staying with me in the hospital and making me come here tonight. You really came through for me and I appreciate it, shitbird.”

Max’s jaw drops a little, which looks ridiculous and distracts Billy a little bit from the terribly cheesy
shit he just said.

Then she closes her mouth with a pop and shakes her head at him.

“It honestly says so much about you that you had to make a joke out of this instead of just saying it. We need to work on your emotional openness.”

“How about you give me an emotionally open answer, then, instead of deflecting? That honestly says so much about you,” Billy parrots, trying to save his dignity and failing epically.

Max rolls her eyes and sighs dramatically, but Billy would like to think that there’s some fondness in there somewhere.

“I guess you’re welcome, then, asshole.”

She holds out her popcorn for Billy and smiles at him.

Billy smiles back.

Then, with a significant eyebrow-wiggle, she glances at something behind him.

Billy cranes his neck to follow her eyes and is not at all surprised to see Steve creeping around by the doorway, watching them with a faint smile.

“I think I’ll go get some more salt for my popcorn,” Max says, voice layered with humor, “Have fun.”

“You, too,” Billy grumps as she leaves, embarrassed, then thinks on it for a second. “Hey, but not too much fun! Max, you hear me? I’m keeping an eye on you and Sinclair!”

“Fuuuck youuu,” Max singsongs without turning around and Billy deems her a lost cause.

Steve wanders over to stand behind the sofa and grins down at him almost smugly.

"You're really embracing this whole big brother thing now, arntcha?"

Billy lazily tilts his head back to look up at Steve.

"I guess I'm just enjoying it while I can."

"That's not a very optimistic mindset, though, is it?"

"Well Steve, I dunno if you noticed, but I'm not a very optimistic person."

"Really? I always thought you were such a ray of sunshine."

Billy groans. “Don’t make me laugh, man, it fucking hurts.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Steve leans down and lowers his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "The kids are driving me crazy. I need some air. Wanna come?"

Sneaking out the back with Steve Harrington approximately ten minutes to midnight on New Year’s Eve? Count Billy in.

“Yes,” he says coolly, “But you’re gonna need to help me up. I’m injured, remember?”

“Sure,” Steve echoes with a somewhat fond eye-roll and circles around the side table.
He firmly grips Billy around the elbows and pulls, and gently as possible while also taking on about 90 percent of Billy’s weight.

Billy holds his breath and clenches his teeth against the pain, but makes it to his feet. Only when the pain fades does he notice Steve’s hands. While one’s still steadily gripping his arm, the other softly lays against his ribcage.

“You okay?” Steve asks hoarsely, eyes on Billy’s chest as though he could see right through to the bone and check for himself if only he looked long enough.

“I’ll live,” Billy murmurs.

They have another one of their frozen-and-staring moments (Billy’s gonna go mad if someone doesn’t do something about that soon), before Steve clears his throat and dashes away to get their jackets.

Billy grabs an extra blanket off the sofa, and then they settle (with some difficulty on Billy’s part) on the back porch stairs.

For what might be the first time this winter, the night sky isn’t grey and milky with bulging clouds threatening to bury them in snow once more. Instead, it’s frosty and clear, with about a million stars scattered over the firmament. It’s perfect for watching fireworks, or star-gazing probably, and Billy’s sharing a blanket with Steve Harrington.

He can hear almost hear Max teasing him, *how romantic, dumbass*, and wishes he could kick himself.

“You okay like this?” Steve asks, still fiddling with the blanket to make sure it covers all of them.

“Never better,” Billy answers honestly.

“Are you cold?”

“Nah. You run pretty hot, King Steve,” Billy says languidly, but instead of blushing or, you know, flirting back (because that’s definitely what Billy is trying to do, here), Steve just eyes his legs with worry.

“You sure your knee is okay like that? It looks kind of uncomfortable.”

“Jesus, Steve. I’m fine.”

“Alright, alright. Can ask you are question, though?”

“Another one?”

“Fuck off,” Steve huffs embarrassedly.

Billy chuckles. “Ain’t nobody stopping you, pretty boy.”

“Are you still going to leave town?”

“Nope,” Billy says, without having to think about it. “Don’t think so.”

“What made you change your mind?”

Billy tilts his head a little. “Max.”
Steve smiles knowingly. “Because of what she said her resolution was?”

“Kind of. It reminded me of something she told me a while ago. About how our family was a disaster, and that I didn’t get her to leave her alone with it. And, even with my dad gone, we’re still pretty much a disaster. But she’s not leaving me alone with any of it, so I figured I owe her the same.”

In the dim light of the back porch lantern, Steve blinks slowly. “That’s…”

“Dumb, I know.”

“No, hey,” Steve extracts a hand from under the blanket and gently claps it on Billy’s good shoulder. “Not at all. I think that’s really cool, Billy.”

Their eyes meet for just a second, but Steve looks so sincere that Billy’s mind goes blank for a moment, there.

Steve clears his throat. “And you can just admit that Max has grown on you, you know,” he teases gently, “I’m not judging.”

Billy closes his eyes for a moment. “You know, I’m thinking she might not be the only one that’s grown on me.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Oh yeah?” Steve says then, lowly.

Quite suddenly, the air between them changes. Billy can feel a grin tugging at his lips. He’s pretty sure that this is it.

“Mh-hmm.”

Steve angles his whole body towards Billy and purses his lips against a grin of his own.

"One last question: you're committed to not punching me again, aren't you?" he whispers, cocky and confident, slightly amused, and a tiny little bit nervous underneath it all.

"Why?" Billy whispers back, "are you gonna do something that'll make me wanna punch you?"

Without conscious effort, their faces are steadily inching closer together, while Steve is staring at Billy's mouth and Billy is staring at Steve's eyes.

Inside the house, everyone’s starting up a loud, excited countdown – ten seconds to midnight, but Billy couldn’t care less.

"Maybe," Steve admits, and now he's so close Billy could count all the tiny specs of gold in his eyes.

"Good."

Their eyes meet and Steve's mouth curves into a small, private smile. Then he finally closes the distance between them.

Billy can hear the rugrats shouting inside, fireworks exploding in the distance, but it all fades away as Steve kisses him, just on the right side of rough, but with that tiny, barely-there smile still on his lips.

Happy New Year, indeed.
If you have made it this far, thank you so much for reading.

Also, a very big THANK YOU to every single person who has ever left Kudos or a comment on this story. The last couple months were hard on me - writing this has allowed me to take my mind off things, and your kind words have meant the world to me.

All the love x

Thank you for reading!
If you'd like, please leave a comment, I would love to hear your thoughts.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!