Body and Soul

by Introvertia

Summary

Steve and Billy head back to Hawkins for the 10 year Hawkins High School reunion. Steve's coming all the way from Seattle, he's been on the west coast finding himself through art. Billy is coming down from Chicago, where's he's in the beginning phases of establishing himself as a recording engineer. They've not crossed paths for over a decade, at least not outside of their dreams.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

“What is the soul? What color is it? I suspected my soul, being mischievous, might slip away while I was dreaming and fail to return. I did my best not to fall asleep, to keep it inside of me where it belonged.”

Patti Smith - Just Kids
It had been ten years since Billy had graduated from Hawkins High School and the invitation to the class reunion had been sitting on Billy’s desk for one month. Max had been over when the announcement had arrived, and without Billy’s knowledge sent the RSVP with a check (stolen from Billy’s checkbook) paying the entrance fee. Neither of them lived in Hawkins anymore. Billy moved away shortly after graduating, and Max swore she would never move back home after she left for college.

Billy had been working steadily in Chicago fresh out of High School. At first Billy lived in his car for three long humid summer and fall months. Little by little things started falling into place, because he worked hard, he had to. He had no one to fall back on. It had been a stumble step into a career he hadn’t even planned on, or even ever thought possible. He’d started out working at a bar (he lied about his age, not that any one believed him, or cared). Billy’s first job was as a bar-back, doing menial tasks at first, then some bartending, then by accident or luck, he became in charge of setting up the sound system for the bands that played on the weekends, and before he knew it, he was loving what he was doing. He learned fast, and asked a lot of questions, he was too eager to be too proud about it. The bands that played took a shine to him, their managers and the tour bosses, and the local musicians liked working with Billy. He was smart, hardworking, and had an ever growing passion for all types of music. In the spring of 1987 Billy took some classes Harold Washington College, he was hungry to learn anything and everything about music, from theory to being a sound engineer. He struggled just keep up, not that he wasn’t smart, it was just that he was always working to get by, picking up breakfast shifts waiting tables at Lou Mitchell’s, then rushing off to school in the afternoon and most evenings he was working the bar late into the night. He used all his charm to network, he could be charming when he wanted to be. Eventually he was setting up mics in studios, sure he’d had to clean a few floors, scrub some toilets and go on food and booze runs for the talent; but it paid off.

Now he was a recording engineer, word had gotten around and work was coming his way, he was by no means wealthy, but he was making it on his own, and even starting to save up. He had a half formed plan in his mind that he’d buy a loft, or maybe a small house and build a recording studio in his basement. Sometimes at night he’d just lay in bed visualizing the layout. It would be all his, a nice functional space, with air conditioning, (he hated the Chicago summers) and quality gear, he’d save up and get the best, not the most expensive, just the best equipment.

Billy shoved his blankets off and leaned over and plucked up his ticket to the reunion it was
emblazoned with the school mascot, tiger with its maw stretched wide, he’d always thought it was ridiculous. Billy tossed the blue and white ticket on his battered desk next to his calendar book that was laid open with the date marked with a red inked question mark. The thought of going back to Hawkins made his stomach lurch. He sat up in bed, he’d been awake for an hour or so, but hadn’t had the motivation to move. His cat, was sprawled across the windowsill, hogging up the thin breeze that was blowing in, its fur glowing in the sunrise light. Billy frowned, “Freeloader.” The cat looked at him and squinted contentedly.

Part 2

The Hawkins’ Heights Country Club

Steve had spent the early afternoon at the country club with his parents, he was buzzed and bored out of his skull. He’d just finished his masters program by the skin of his teeth and was now drunkenly contemplating what that meant. He was pretty sure it didn’t mean anything. His mother was smiling too much, she’d had at least three mimosas, and his father was eyeing one of the waitresses so blatantly that Steve was embarrassed.

“Are you looking forward to the shin-dig tonight? I’m so proud of you.” Steve’s mother reached over and pet his hair, “You really should go see Cyrus, he’d give you a great hair cut, you know something really professional looking, you know, grown up.”

“I’m not cutting my hair, nobody cares about my hair, but you, mom.” Steve sounded like a petulant teenager and he knew it, which made him cringe internally.

“Well, you know, you do want the girls to recognize you, you used to care about looking, I don’t know, looking…”

“Like a man?” His father offered, with a vicious little smirk.

“My own son just called me dude, ha!” His father slapped the table and took a mouthful of whiskey from his tumbler, “You’ve been living on the west coast for too long, kiddo. How about a little respect, huh?”

“Yeah, how about it?” Steve stood up dropping his napkin on the chair and walked across the dinning hall and stepped out through the double doors and onto the veranda. He walked down steps towards the topiary garden and found a familiar bench that he’d been sitting on since he was too small for his feet to reach the ground. It was cement and had been smoothed by rain and snow, worn soft by the elements. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a cigarette, he’d quit over three years ago, but then during the crush to finish his masters thesis he’d started again. The grass was spring time bright, manicured to perfection flowers leaned lazily in the heat and Steve could hear the piped music coming out over the garden from the main dining area, it felt surreal to be there again after so many years. Steve reached into his back pocket and pulled out the folded invitation to the reunion and briefly ran his thumb over the corner of the thick laminated paper.

He had thought flying out to Indiana would be fun, or maybe just hoped that it wouldn’t be terrible?
He wasn’t so sure on either point. He pressed his long hair behind his ears and stared at his shadow on the grass. He could see how high his shoulders were, he was tense, he clasped his fingers behind his back and stretched, it didn’t seem to make a difference, but he forced himself to sit up a little straighter. He pulled a small journal out of his jacket and started to sketch random shapes, switching his cigarette between his teeth and his left hand.

Art had been his escape, his therapy and his biggest source of comfort, he always had ink on his hands, paint on his jeans, and ideas brewing in the back of his mind, but right now his mind felt empty, not an original thought in his head. Steve stared at the blank page, and screwed his eyes tightly shut. The sunlight painted the lids of his eyes red, he felt a soft tug at his heart and shivered. He looked back at the blank page and started drawing a detailed pair of eyes, haloed in thick black lashes. He colored the irises blue. Steve drew intently mildly aware of a few kids running past playing around the topiary garden.

“Look out for the monster!” A little girl’s voice trilled excitedly. Steve glanced up, and realized he was the monster in their game. He growled as a little boy ran past and heard the other children squeal and watched them dart about the garden, lost in their game.

Steve reluctantly went back inside after three cigarettes and finishing his sketch. The children had been herded away by a woman in a sun dress, she’d looked at Steve like she thought he didn’t belong there, and although Steve didn’t say anything, he agreed with her assessment whole heartedly.

His parents had left the table, for a heartbeat he hoped they’d left him there, but his mother walked up behind him and linked her arm in his.

“Don’t be so hard on your father, he just can’t relate, he never had a hippie phase.”

“I’m not a hippie.” Steve groaned.

“Oh, well, you know what I mean.” She tittered and swayed in her kitten heels.

“There he is,” His father boomed, “Let’s get home, I’ve got a business call at two, can’t take a damned day off.”

“Carl, language!” His mother stood a little straighter, and smoothed her hair, her cheeks flushed.

Part 3

Byers’ Residence

Will Byers was sitting at his desk in his bedroom. His room had been repainted years ago, but of
course his mother still had his art up. Most of the pieces were recent, the older crayon ones were framed and neatly lined the hallway outside of his room. Will was lost in thought, drafting a story board for a new comic, he’d not published anything beyond zines, but his work was starting to get some notice, it didn’t really matter to him if people liked them, he just felt compelled to create them, fantastical stories with dragons and knights, and the heroes always won, after many fabulous struggles and adventures, they always survived, good had to triumph. It was the only way as far as he was concerned. His hair was falling in his eyes, he brushed his bangs back and squinted at the loose pencil lines of a knight swinging his blade, a very near miss, at a tentacled beast.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he heard the doorbell chime. He sighed and pushed away from his desk. His mother was out, and Will was dreading the idea that some bible thumpers were standing on his doorstep, come to ask him if he was aware that the lord christ his savior had a special plan for him.

When he opened the door he was certain it was a lost tourist, a thin slouching grunge dude was standing on his porch, paint spattered jeans, oversized sunglasses and lank dark hair topped with a beanie, in June.

“Hey, are you?” Will hesitated.

“Will!” Steve Harrington’s voice came out as clear as bell.

“Oh man, hey, hey, holy cow, come on in!” Will stepped forward and threw his arms around Steve, they were close in height now, Will heartily patted Steve’s back and was surprised by the strong embarrass he was caught up in, he laughed and returned the hug.

“Will! Man, did you get my email?”

“No, no, I haven’t been checking, I’m working on a new thing, you know.” Will stepped back allowing Steve room to enter.

“What, you didn’t like the hole in the wall?” Will teased, it had been patched up years ago but had been a running joke for ages now. “Are you here for the reunion tonight? I didn’t think you’d want to go.” Will headed towards the kitchen, “Can I get you a coke, or something?”

“Nah man, I’m fine, sorry, I should have called. I haven’t had access to a computer since I flew out from L.A. and I just assumed you got my email.” Steve took in the house, it felt fresh, like a peaceful well kept little domicile, there was a lingering scent of bacon and the pleasant woodsy smell of living on the edge of Indiana wilderness that was somehow different from the forested areas of Washington.

“Jonathan and Nancy flew in last night, they’re staying at the Wheeler’s house, Nancy wanted to do a girl’s day with Holly, um, I think Jonathan went down to the quarry to do some shooting, with a camera, of course, and I guess tonight they’ll be there too, you know.” Will smiled, he was a grown man but still boyish and kind eyed.

“What? They’re going to the reunion?”

“Well, Jonathan’s got the photographer job, and Nancy wanted to come see Holly, and you know, Mike’s in town too.”

“Oh, shit. That’s cool, great. I mean, I came to see you, I mean for the reunion too, I guess. I don’t know.” Steve pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down heavily, he suddenly felt a little dizzy, maybe it
was the lack of sleep, or the cocktails he’d had at brunch. He tried to logic his way through it all, but it all added up to the same, he felt like shit.

“Are you okay?” Will sat down at the table, his eyes heavy with concern.

“I think, I think it’s just jet lag, probably drank too much at lunch.”

“Are you sure that’s all?” Will leaned forward a bit.

“Did you have a liquid lunch?” Will squinted at him.

“What, no, my parents took me to the country club for the world’s longest brunch, and you know, it’s like one cocktail turns into three.” Steve shrugged, he wondered if Will thought he was a lush now. “I’m good, I swear!” Steve laughed and sat up a little straighter, “Thanks for sending me your zines and other drawings and things, I really just, man they’re so fantastic. I wish I was half as good as you.”

“Your art’s amazing.” Will smiled brightly.

“Well if anyone’s going to get it, it’s you.” Steve wiped a nonexistent crumb off of the table top, his gaze lowered.

“I think it means a lot of different things, to many people.” Will replied.

“Where’s your mom at?” Steve shifted uneasily, wanting to change the topic.

“Her and Hopper are out, they like to go on dates to the afternoon matinees.”

“They’re still just dating?”

“Yeah, I guess, I don’t know, they’re happy. That’s all that matters.” Will shrugged, “What about you?”

“Me? Man, I’m not, no, just you know, bachelorhood is fine by me, dating, yeah, that’s a big no thank you.”

“Okay. I mean, me too. Who has the time?”

“Not me.” Steve shook his head looking at his hands. He took a slow breath, and sat back, he took his cigarettes out of his jacket and turned them in his fingers, his nails were painted black and heavily chipped.

“So you’re into the whole Seattle scene now.” Will smiled.

“What, well, I don’t know, I’m not like hardcore anything, it’s just, I don’t know. I’m a little old to think of myself as being in a scene.”

“I think it’s cool.”

“Well, that’s cause you’re a cool guy.”

“Yeah, right, me, so cool.” Will laughed.

Steve put a cigarette in his mouth and paused before lighting it, “Is this okay?”

“Why don’t we sit on the porch.”
“Okay, thanks, sorry, I quit, but then this Master’s program, Jesus, it nearly killed me.”

“No problem.” Will said walking toward the front porch.

They both sat in on the steps, Steve smoked and looked around the yard, taking in the small changes but mostly seeing how little had changed. It was getting late and he needed to get ready to go to the reunion, if he was really going, but now he couldn’t help but think it was a waste of time, maybe he’d just needed to come all the way out here to decide he didn’t want to go. Now that it was just a short trip, he hadn’t expected Jonathan and Nancy to be there, and now he really didn’t know if wanted to see them, it wasn’t that he didn’t like them, he loved them, it just felt weird being around people that knew him, or knew him so long ago. He’d gotten used to being a stranger, no expectations from anyone was kind of liberating. Seattle had been intimidating at first, who are you if you let the people around you define you? Steve rubbed his face, and groaned lightly. He reminded himself he’d come here to talk to Will about one thing in specific, and he wasn’t about to let himself chicken out. He took a long drag and rolled his neck, trying to warm up to the subject.

“Do you, have dreams? Like, not dreams about the future, like literal dreams.”

“Yes, I mean everyone does.” Will turned to face Steve, a curious expression his gentle eyes.

“Okay, but dreams that just don’t feel like normal, not like the dreams you have before.”

“You mean, since the…”

“Yeah.”

“Um.” Will sat back, and closed his eyes.

“Mike has nightmares, you know. He’s told me about a few of them.”

“No, I don’t mean nightmares, they’re different.” Steve shook his head.

“I’m not the same.” Will declared, “None of us are, but it’s okay, we survived, we lived through it, we’re like, the part of the story no one talks about, we killed the dragons, or you know, we stopped the monsters, but no one talks about what happens after the victory, no one talks about anything but the happily ever after.” Will’s voice was slowly getting stronger, “No one gets to be the same, and I’m not broken, I’m not damaged, I just see things differently.” Will folded his arms tightly around himself.

“Hey, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I know you’re okay.” Steve reached over and squeezed Will’s shoulder, “I know you’re tougher than anyone on this planet, I didn’t mean to make you feel bad.” Steve sat up, he ground out his cigarette on the bottom of his boot.

“I don’t, I’m not upset.” Will’s voice softened. He sighed heavily.

“I’m sorry, really. Never mind.” Steve pulled another cigarette out of his pack and considered lighting it, or maybe he should go, the last thing Will needed was him showing up out of the blue and opening old wounds.

“So what’re you dreaming about?” Will turned, looking directly at Steve.

Steve shrugged and lit the cigarette. He wondered if this was just too much for Will, or maybe it was just too crazy to actually put into words, he hadn’t told anyone about it. He could tell by the way
Will was looking at him that the conversation needed to happen, for both of their sakes, if Steve back peddled now, Will would be asking him about it forever, and Steve would regret not spitting it out.

“I don’t know, these dreams just feel so different,” Steve took a slow breath, and then closed his eyes, “It’s like they’re real, when they’re not, of course, and I’m flying, but I’m outside of my body. I am hurling across the sky, like really, really fast and traveling, like a ghost or some weird shit. Sometimes, I’m just floating, in my room and I look down and I can see myself laying in bed. The first time, it scared the shit out of me, well, honestly, the first few times. I swear I’m not doing drugs, well, I mean, not anything heavy, like acid or peyote, I mean, I smoke out now and then.”

“So where do you go?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you’re astral projecting, and traveling really fast, where are you going?”

“Um, places, like here, or the house, my parent’s home.”

“Here, as in my house?”

“No, like around Hawkins, or the lab, or the woods and sometimes Chicago.” Steve bit at his thumbnail, he almost said to Billy’s place.

“Huh.” Will nodded slowly, “I don’t dream like that.” Will shook his head, “So are you like just, floating around?”

“Kind of, like I’m invisible, like no one seems to know I’m there, for the most part.”

“For the most part?”

“Well, yeah.” Steve felt his face growing red, he rolled his shoulders.

“I just wondered, if other people, like you, or the others, had been experiencing that kind of thing. It might not have anything to do with what happened.”

“Hm.” Will leaned back on the porch, resting his weight on his elbows.

They sat in silence for a bit Steve chewed his lip, feeling foolish for bringing it up. He scratched at his wrist, and then ran his thumb over an old scar and then continued speaking.

“Can you not mention this to anyone? Do you really think I’m astral projecting?”

“I won’t, it’s not a big deal. I won’t tell anyone. Astral projecting is just like a name, for that, for what you’re describing.”

“That sounds so New Age. I guess it’s a good enough thing to call it, it really does just feel like my soul just goes off on its own. It’s not all the time, maybe once a month, although it’s been more frequent over the last few weeks.” Steve ran his hand over his mouth as if he could wipe away the words he’d just said.

“It sounds, special, like Jane is special.”

“I don’t want to be that kind of special.” Steve looked at Will very seriously.

“Well, people have been recording those kinds of experiences for like thousands of years, so maybe it’s just something more normal, like lucid dreaming. After all the stuff, you know, with the… well, I
looked into some stuff, and there’s some sleep studies. People can have really weird experiences, they call it sleep parasomnia. It’s when you wake up and you can’t move, or you think someone is on your chest, I think that’s from sleep apnea.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Steve nodded, completely unconvinced that whatever he was experiencing was normal.

Will watched Steve, he looked restless, maybe even a little nervous, he kept picking at a whole in the knee of his jeans, and looking around the parameter of the property. His eyes would dance a little. Will hadn’t really known Steve all that well before everything had changed, he wondered if they hadn’t gone through all of that, if they’d ever have been friends, or even on speaking terms. Steve had been such a douchebag, of course he changed, he’d become a hero, Will’s hero.

“Do you want to see my latest storyboards? They’re really rough, but I’d like to get your opinion, you know, just like, see what you think.”

“Yeah.” Steve stood up, feeling relieved. The pair of them went inside, soon they were flipping through pages and pages of Will’s art, they put on some music. Will had just discovered Soundgarden so they listened to Superunknown, and chatted about art. Steve and Will had never been close until Steve had been sent one of Will’s zines by Jonathan and that had almost instantly created a stronger bond. They’d send each other hand drawn postcards, and goofy sketches. Not all the time, but fairly regularly. Steve had a pretty good collection of Will Byers originals, and he treasured them. They were both passionate artists, Steve was a late bloomer by comparison, he’d never imagined there was any point to it, but after nearly dropping out of all his classes outside of his life drawing class in his first semester of college he realized it was important to him, it was a way to breath, a way to focus.

Will asked a few questions about getting an MFA. Steve answered honestly, but really tried to drive home to Will that he didn’t need it. It was meaningless in Steve’s mind.

“Honestly, it was just a way to stay in school, I don’t know what’s next, I’m not good at schmoozing, I don’t think my work is really gallery material, and I sure as hell couldn’t be a college art professor.” Steve neglected to mention the trust fund he was living off of, and that it had just ended since he was officially done with school and he wouldn’t see another cent till his father was dead.

“I would go to your see your art in a gallery!” Will shook his head at Steve, “You’re amazing!”

“Well, you’ll be the first to know if I get a show together, I mean I’ve done plenty of group stuff.”

“Have you sold stuff?”

“Yep, a couple pieces, not for a lot.” Steve lied, he’d sold exactly fifteen pieces, the smallest going for four-hundred and the largest piece for five-thousand.

Part 4

Southbound on the 65
Billy was flying along the 65, traffic had finally thinned out now that he was out of Chicago. His Camaro was running strong, he’d kept good care of it, and it was eating up the road on fresh tires, he hadn’t wanted to spend the money, but the treads on the last set had been nearly bald. His hair was just a bit past his shoulders, layered waves of golden curls whipped in the breeze, he wore his favorite sunglasses, they were large, very dark, and protected his baby blues. He watched the trees fly by, blurring into a wall of grey and green, and the sky was getting clearer, long hot days felt best on the open road. He hadn’t left Chicago in ages, he had a thrill turning in his guts, it was like a live thing, it wasn’t a horrible sensation, he hadn’t been this nervous in ages. It wouldn’t be long before he arrived back in Hawkins and he kept a steady pace just above the speed limit. He bumped up the volume on his stereo, checked his watch to time his drive, he planned to make a game of getting back faster than it took him to arrive, although he had his reservations about his destination, he rushed nonetheless.

As Billy drove, he wondered if he’d cross paths with Neil when he got into town. They hadn’t talked in years, hadn’t seen each other in person since the summer after his graduation. Things had gone from bad to worse, and Billy had finally just left the house and swore to never look back. He and Max had been building and unsteady alliance and somehow the distance made it easier for them to be honest with one another. Maybe it was because Max wasn’t around to witness Billy at his worst that she had time and space to forgive him for his temper and his mood swings. He wasn’t sure how it happened, but he loved Max, and would do anything for her, not that he’d ever tell her. There were many things they never spoke of, they were both guilty of withholding, but it was as if there was a silent agreement, that they’d never push or demand of each other, it was a complicated friendship and Billy wondered if she really knew how much he loved her. She was more than a sister, they weren’t bonded because of blood, they were bonded by choice, it made Billy feel pretty good when he thought about that. He smiled and adjusted the rearview mirror. Thinking about Max filled him with pleasant kind of comfort, a gentle confidence that he could handle whatever happened in Hawkins.

**Part 5**

**Harrington Residence**

Freshly showered Steve stood in front of the mirror and combed out his wet hair, the weather was warm, it’d probably be dry before he got to the reunion, not that he was worried about it. He slipped into some black jeans, the knees were still intact, and the cuffs weren’t too frayed. He put on a slightly oversized white button down shirt, and a dark red velveteen dinner jacket over that, it was his favorite Salvation Army find, and the sleeves were long enough for his arms. As a finishing touch he put on a paisley tie, first he knotted it just right, then with an artist’s eye, loosened it just enough to look casual. He stuffed his beanie in his inside breast pocket. He put on an old leather belt, and decided to leave the wallet chain off, but wore his broken in steel toed boots. He turned around in front of the mirror, took a step back, and then threw himself on the bed. Maybe he’d just drive over to Carterville and get drunk at the dive bar, he felt the press of anxiety. *When did being alive get so complicated,* he wondered.
His bed room had been transformed into a guest room, the funny thing was that other than the wall paper and the curtains, it really wasn’t that different from before, sure they’d put in a new carpet and taken down the old framed posters, but it looked kind of the same, just impersonal in a different way. Everything with them was always for show. He twisted over on his side looking around the room. He’d never even put up drawings, he’d just shoved them under his bed. All his life, his parents had shown no interest in his art, his father approved of him being good at sports, needled him about his mediocre grades, but never gave anything but a passing nod or at best a grunt when Steve had shown him his art.

Steve turned onto his stomach and reached over the side of his bed and grabbed his duffle bag, he pulled out his sketch book and shifted till he was sitting lotus, with it opened in his lap. He started working on a sketch he’d roughly outlined on the plane flight over, it was images from one of his dreams. A battle scarred tomcat stretched across a windowsill, it’s jowls squared, ears nicked, its eyes squinted in that manner that cats have, when they’ve seen it all and they’re not impressed, but perhaps amused. Steve fuzzed out the pencil around the fur, trying to work in a bit of glow and light play, he shaded in a shadow being cast by the cat, and got lost in the details. It helped, drawing took him away from his anxiety, and he’d seen this cat many times in his dreams, the dreams where he was a ghost, or if Will was right, the times that he’d astral projected.

“Astral projecting, my ass.” Steve mumbled to himself. He heard a sharp wrap on the door frame and looked up. He hadn’t heard his mother open the door.

“Is that what you’re wearing tonight?” She was trying to smile, but appeared as though she had just contracted lock-jaw.

Part 6

Hawkins High School Reunion

Steve arrived an hour after the invitation suggested. The parking lot was looking rather full, but he found a convenient spot near to the entrance. He wondered if someone had left early after walking in and seeing the state of things. He got out of his car, and peered around the lot. He had half expected to see familiar cars, but then had to laugh at himself. It had been ten years, and everyone had probably gotten new cars. Steve had left his car in Hawkins, and was planning on driving it all the way back to Seattle. He was fairly sure that he was one of the few people that had the same car. He’d had a VW beetle in Seattle, but just a month ago it had finally given up the ghost, he just couldn’t justify pouring more money into it, and he’d sold it for parts.

He leaned on the hood of his car and lit a cigarette, his hand was shaking, he watched the flame of his lighter dance before his eyes, as he inhaled to ignite his smoke. His stomach felt tight. It was only nine he and wondered if he was too early, he considered leaving and coming back in an hour, but knew if he got on the road he might end up on the highway and heading west towards his Seattle apartment, his home. Home was a funny concept to Steve. He wondered if it was the right word, he never felt at home, not anywhere. He was pretty sure a place called home was somewhere you felt
you belonged, you felt safe. He felt far from safe anywhere.

Steve took in his old stomping grounds, it was a lot like seeing the Byers’ front yard for the first time in years, alien and familiar at the same time. The parking lot had been paved with black top the parking spaces were clearly defined, a few trees had been added, it was a nice touch, although he doubted he’d have appreciated them as a teen. The buildings looked untouched for the most part, maybe some fresh paint here and there. For Hawkins it was a relatively cool spring, but Steve was starting to miss the cloud canopy that was almost always hanging over Seattle. He felt exposed under the dusky summer sky of Indiana.

Part 7

9:30PM

Hawkins High School Reunion

Billy pulled into the lot, his engine was pinging softly from the heat after hauling ass from Chicago. He parked at the far end, and got out of his car. He stretched himself long, the sweat on his back had pasted his shirt to his back, he pulled his T shirt off over his head and wiped the back of his neck. It wasn’t that hot, but he’d been sitting in his car for too long. He rolled his neck, and shook out his hands. The parking lot was crowded with sedans and family vans. He imagined everyone was going to be soft in the middle and yapping about their kids, bullshitting about their incomes. He pulled a black button down shirt he’d had hanging in the backseat of his car and slipped it on. He ran his hands over his head, trying to tame his windblown locks, then dug his fingers into his hair and shook it out again.

“Fuck it.” He said aloud, and stalked towards the school. He was nearly at the front entrance, he could hear Oingo Boingo playing inside, he rolled his eyes and glanced around the lot and that was when he realized he was walking past a familiar looking car. He stopped dead in his tracks and took three large steps backward. It looked like Harrington’s BMW, it was preserved to near perfection. Billy had hated that pretentious car when he’d been a teen, but looking at it now, it was like an artifact of his youth. He walked around it slowly going widdershins, no dings, no scuffs, somewhat faded, but for the most part, it was cherry. The license plate was the same and his stomach flopped. Steve had to be inside.

Billy walked in through the old double doors, a quartet of familiar faces were seated behind a table festooned with balloons and crepe paper streamers. There were balloons running down the hall towards the gym entrance, the music had switched up to ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ and the ladies at the table were bopping in their seats.

“Hello girls, I came for the reunion, but it looks like this is Prom night, you’re all too young to be
“here,” Billy smiled as he leaned over the table his palms spread wide, “Is that alcohol you’re drinking, I’m going to have to report you.” He winked and grinned wolfishly.

A few of them tittered and appeared genuinely flattered.

“And you are?” Marissa, a former hardcore math-lete that Billy recognized stared at him with a bored expression, his charm was lost on her, which amused him tremendously.

“Hargrove, Billy. I remember you Marissa. You were always such a tease.” He licked his lip at her and wagged his eyebrows. He watched her flush brightly and look down at her list, clearly flustered.

“I, I um, here you are.” She crossed out his name with a bright yellow high-lighter as one of the other girls quickly picked out his name tag. His name was written in gold ink, Varsity Basketball MVP underneath in neat black ink.

“Thank you. Heather, right? I remember those big brown eyes.” Heather melted back into her seat, clearly astonished and pleased that he recognized her. She reached up and removed her glasses, smiling at him.

“Good to see you back in Hawkins, Billy.” She simpered.

“What can I say, ladies? It’s good to be seen.” Billy swaggered towards the gym.

“Some people never change.” Marissa scoffed.

The gym was lit up like a cheap disco, a band was set up on a little makeshift stage but it was clearly their break, or maybe they hadn’t started yet. A DJ that looked well passed 50 was nodding along to the music. The room was hot, and men and women were standing around swaying to music, eating finger foods. Billy surveyed the room, cheap suits and too tight cocktail dresses as far as the eye could see. Tables with and folding chairs were crowded on one side of the gym. The bleachers were collapsed back to make space. There was a line to get photos taken and Jonathan Byers was behind the camera, his narrow gaunt face looked untouched by time, maybe a little more tired around the eyes, his hair was in some kind of Brit pop shag that made Billy snort with laughter. Billy walked over to the makeshift bar and ordered a beer, beer and wine were the only things on the menu. He wished he’d brought a flask.

Billy kept scanning the faces in the room, giving every guy of a certain height, and with dark hair a double take, making sure it wasn’t Steve.

“You’re not wearing your name tag.” Vicki Carmichael had walked up to him, her hair was swept up with a fall of curls highlighted with streaks of blonde and blown out to perfection, she looked like a cable channel news caster.

“Did you forget my name?” He tilted his head at her. He tried to decide how he felt about seeing her, they had dated after all.

“Ha. Right,” Vicki rolled her eyes. “So, where’s your brag book, you know, a bunch of pictures of your kids? Maybe a story about your ex-wife, that’s a crazy bitch? I’ve seen and heard it all tonight.”

“I don’t have those kinds of problems. You?”
“What?” Vicki sounded genuinely surprised, “I have kids, you know. Three, and I’m married.”

“Congratulations.” Billy tapped his beer cup to her wine, “So who’s the lucky guy?” Billy scanned the room, still hoping to spot Steve.

“Connor, he’s over there with Tommy.”

“No kidding, I don’t remember Connor, but that sure is Tommy.”

“Connor’s from Carterville, I don’t think you guys ever really met. I met him at Starcourt. I don’t know, I guess you’d already left.” Vicki shifted her weight, she touched Billy’s forearm.

“It’s good to see you, you look great. You look the same, I mean, maybe a little thinner, but you’ve always been fit.”

“Vicki…” Billy looked at her for the first time, really looked at her. She looked lost, like she wanted something, he didn’t know what it was, but he wanted to give it to her.

“I was a fucked up kid, I think now I’m just a fucked up adult.”

“Whoa, wow. That’s heavy. That’s like a really um, you weren’t fucked up. I never thought that. You were just you know, you did things your way. I kinda got the feeling your dad was a hardass, and I guess moving across the country to nowheresville probably pissed you off.”

Billy nodded, listening. He’d thought maybe he could be honest with her, tell her he was gay, tell her he led her on because he didn’t want people to figure him out, but she clearly couldn’t even handle him telling her he was fucked up, it was making her uncomfortable. Suddenly he didn’t care what she wanted or needed anymore.

“Have you seen Harrington around?” Billy just didn’t care what she thought, or what she’d say to anyone else.

“Oh my god, yes! I swear he’s turned out to be a total-freaking-weirdo, like I don’t even know what happened to him. I always thought he was like this kind of all American jock, and then, in his Senior year, I mean, he changed. Kind of became really aloof, but I’d never have guessed what he’d be like now, not in a million years!” She covered her mouth and laughed looking around the room.

“Where is he then, I mean he’s here right?”

“Yeah, he’s somewhere. Why do you want to know?” She smiled brightly, it was like blood in the water and she was a shark, clearly she was sniffing for drama and gossip.

“You know what, never mind. I’m gonna go take a piss.” Billy left the gym and headed towards the boys’ room. He tossed his empty beer cup in a trash can and went into a stall and shut the door behind him. He thought about leaving, but told himself no way, not until he got to talk to Harrington.

Part 8
Steve sat down at the table furthest from the action. He’d said hi to Nancy and waved at Jonathan, who was all tied up with taking pictures. Nancy had seemed happy to see him, sometimes he still felt unsure about their friendship. Their relationship hadn’t been really built on much beyond a mutual attraction that clearly hadn’t sustained the relationship. She was really the best person he’d ever been involved with, and that was a life time ago. He’d half listened to her as she told him about New York, Holly and Mike, and her life with Jonathan, but being there in the room with the shitty speakers blasting the music of his youth and people milling about put him on edge. As soon as one of Nancy’s old classmates walked up to say hello, Steve used the distraction to back away from the conversation.

The room was loud and warm. He loaded a plate with finger foods, for something to do and found a place to hide. He leaned back in his chair and pulled out a ball point pen and did a quick little sketch of the view from his seat, rough human figures, half arcs and ovals of faces and tables and balloons. In one corner he drew himself, it was no more than a shadow of a human figure, but he added a little detail of lank hair and a beanie, even though he wasn’t wearing his hat at the time.

“Holy shit. Steve. Man. What the fuck happened to you?” Steve put his sketch book in his pocket and looked up. There was Tommy. He’d hardly changed at all. Steve stood up and put out his hand, not sure what else to do, he didn’t just want to sit there with Tommy looming over him.

“You’ve been gone a long time, I keep expecting to see you visiting over the holidays.” Tommy shook Steve’s hand taking him in with an amused expression.

“I haven’t been back much.” Steve admitted, he looked around and back at Tommy.

“Man, King Steve, you look like an art faggot.” Tommy laughed at his own joke.

“You look like an ignorant hick, I guess things don’t change much around here.” Steve casually picked up a celery stalk from his plate and chewed it.

“You think you’re high class Harrington, what is it you’re doing now? Pan handling?” Tommy sipped his beer, he was standing with his feet wide apart, taking up space, his chest pushed forward.

“Nothing that would interest you, Tommy. You still working for my dad?”

Tommy opened his mouth to reply, but Carol appeared interrupting whatever snide little comeback Tommy had on the tip of his tongue.

“Steve Harrington, are you in a grunge band now?” Carol laughed and smiled, her eyes twinkling with wine.

“Carol, how are you?” Steve nodded not sure why he was bothering to be polite.

“I’m great, you know, me and Tommy have two boys now?”
“No kidding, congratulations, I didn’t know. That’s great.” Steve nodded vacantly. He started to feel like his father, just spewing out whatever socially acceptable answer was expected, being fake and just coasting through human interaction.

“Did you get married? You know Tina’s divorced now. She always liked you.” Carol waggled her eyebrows.

“No, no wife. Single and happy. Thanks.” Steve picked up his beer and drained it.

“C’mon Steve, you were always dating. Are you really a happy bachelor?” Carol poked his arm, “I know things kind of fell apart there at the end, but you know, we’re all still cool.” She turned to Tommy and stroked his smoothed down his his neck-tie, “Right?”

“Totally cool, right.” Tommy wasn’t convincing anyone, nor even bothering to try.

“Don’t be a child.” She breezily chided him and looked back at Steve, “You should come by and visit, it would be nice to have you over.” Carol smiled softly, but Steve noticed it didn’t reach her eyes at all.

“Thanks, I’m not going to be in town long.”

“Just come by for lunch, you can meet my boys, Ray the eldest and little Tom, named after you know who.” She kissed Tommy’s cheek and rubbed her thumb across it to wipe off the dark red lipstick mark she’d put on him.

“Thanks Carol, I wish I had more time. I’m sure they’re great kids.” Steve nodded, “I’m going to get another drink, excuse me.”

Steve walked around them both, he could feel their eyes on the back of his head. He pulled at the already loose tie around his neck as he moved up to the drinks table. He felt someone take his arm. He looked over with raised brows and was surprised to see Nicole standing next to him, her hair was still very long, she had it swept over one shoulder and was wearing an ice blue dress that was very low cut.

“Steve Harrington, good to see you.” Nicole smiled her cheeks were flushed.

“Nicole, hey. Nice dress.” Steve nodded, he suddenly felt as if he could trust no one, which wasn’t unlike the entirety of his senior year. Steve and Nicole had never had problems, but Steve thought, who knew what the hell she said to the other girls.

“I didn’t expect to see you, but I’m kind of happy that you came.”

“Well, life is full of little surprises.”

“Boy I’ll say. Check out your nails. Black? You going goth or something?”

“Nah, I just like the color, what do you think, should I have gone with red or hot-pink instead?” Steve glanced down at his nails and wiggled his fingers at Nicole, making her snort a laugh.

“I think you’re the kind of guy that can pull off any color.” Nicole smiled.

“Glass of merlot for the lady, and a beer for me.” Steve told the guy pouring drinks.

“I do like merlot.” Nicole looked pleased. Steve didn’t tell her that he could smell it on her breath, he
just shrugged, “Guess I’m a good guesser?”

After they got their drinks Nicole stepped to the side with him, she actually took his hand, which surprised Steve, but he also felt oddly relieved. They’d never been close, but it was nice to feel like he might actually have a real conversation with someone that wasn’t trying to impress him, or mine him for gossip, someone that was just glad to see him.

“So are you still doing photography?” Steve asked, it was one of the few things knew about Nicole.

“Yeah, mostly nature stuff. In high school I thought I’d become like, I don’t know, a big fashion photographer, and live in New York. But well, here I am still in Hawkins.”

“There’s no shame in that.” Steve said thoughtfully, “there’s a lot of good people here, and it’s your home.”

“Yeah, I keep thinking I’ll move away, but for now, this is good.”

“If you really want to move, you will.”

“You make it sound so simple.” Nicole laughed, she coiled her hair around her index finger and looked at him.

“You look really, different.” She smiled, and shook her head “It’s not a bad thing, I’m just surprised.”

“I’m still me.” Steve sipped his beer, and glanced around the room. The thought that he was still himself somehow depressed him.

“You changed a lot in your senior year, you know that. After you and Nancy broke up, it was like you tried to vanish. Although I still have fond memories of Sailor-Steve!”

“Oh, god. That was a long time ago. I guess I just did some growing, and you know, people can and do actually change.”

“It was sudden with you though. And all that weird shit out of the lab. Poor Barb.”

“Were you two friends?”

“No, but she was, nice, you know, awkward but always kind. I think she just never really fit in, of course her and Nancy were best friends, but Barb always kept her head down, like she was afraid of the world.” Nicole shook her head, “Oh my god, I’m such a downer, god, no wonder I’m single!” Nicole laughed and took a slug of her wine.

“If you’re single it’s because no one around here is good enough.” Steve said into his beer cup.

“Wow Harrington, thanks, that’s very sweet.” She smiled at him, her expression shifting towards coy.

Steve looked away, he didn’t want to get tangled up with her, didn’t want her to think he was leading her on. Everything was so complicated, he wondered if he should just call it a night and leave now. A girl he recognized as Theresa was stepping up on the stage she started addressing the room, asking everyone to gather round. A projection screen was set up and it was clearly time for some kind of horrendous walk down memory lane.

“Excuse me for a minute.” Steve gently touched Nicole’s back and went towards the side exit. He
headed for the field he wanted to sit on the outdoor bleachers and have a smoke. He wasn’t sure if he would come back, but he had a feeling that if he said good night to her she might protest.

He wound his way through the boys’ locker room, it was the shortest way to the field, he hoped he wasn’t locked in. He walked passed his old locker, it had stickers on it, new names scratched into it. He paused at the bench nearest it and ran his fingers over an etched heart with NW in the middle. It was his work of course. He’d worked on it little by little, there was still room for his initials underneath it, but she’d dumped him before he could finish it. He traced it once with middle and index fingers and then walked towards the doors, he pushed on the handle and was relieved when the double doors clicked open. He dragged a trashcan over so he wouldn’t be locked out and wedged it between the heavy doors.

It was a quiet spring night, the lights above the field were out, and he could see a swath of stars up above. It wasn’t cold and yet he felt a small shiver run down his spine. Even with everything done, the gate is shut, the Upside Down locked away, it felt dangerous to be out alone at night in Hawkins. Talking about Barb had brought bad memories that he’d pushed back to the furthest and darkest corners of his mind. He climbed up to the top of the bleachers and lit a smoke. Leaning back he tried to come up with a plan. He’d go back to the house. Get some sleep. Have breakfast with mom in the morning and then drive all the way back to Seattle. There was a particularly large painting that was giving him trouble, it was oil on canvas, he loved and hated painting with oil, but he just couldn’t get the image where he wanted it to be. It was like wrestling with a foreign language, he just wasn’t hitting the right nuances.

Steve wondered where Billy was tonight. Steve could still see him, the way he had in his dreams, that weren’t dreams. His hair haloed around his head as he lay on the pillow beneath Steve, his eyes half open, somewhere between waking and sleeping. Steve could almost taste the kisses he’d stolen from dreaming Billy, whiskey and salt, Steve shivered feeling the ghost of Billy’s tongue in his mouth, the prickling texture of his upper lip.

“One hell of a dream.” Steve whispered to himself.

As Steve sat there with his head tilted back and his eyes closed he heard the steady sound of footsteps coming up the bleacher. He wondered if Tommy had followed him out, it certainly wasn’t Nicole by the sound of the steps. Steve sighed but remained where he was. They were adults now, there was no need for all the bravado and bullshit. Steve took a drag off of his cigarette and blew three rings skyward. He lifted his head and looked over expecting to see Tommy, but there was Billy Hargrove, his face framed in wild wheat colored curls, his jaws a little leaner and shadowed tawny stubble.

“Hargrove.” Was all that Steve could think to say as he sat up. Billy was still fit, his clothes tight showing off his muscular legs, and his flat belly.

Part 9

10:15 PM
Steve’s hair was long, a little bit passed his shoulders, he had stubble on his chin and upper lip, his nails were painted black. Billy stood there taking him in, his body responded before his mind did and told him that he liked what he saw very much.

“Been looking for you.” Billy uttered as he sat down.

“You found me.” Steve sat up a little, he’d been leaning back, but now he rested his elbows on his knees and looked at Billy, his wide eyes blinking slowly. He didn’t appear drunk, but his movements were languid. Billy studied him, and leaned forward.

“You got a light?” Billy had his lighter in his jacket, but wanted to see what Steve would do, if he was going to flinch away.

“Sure.” Steve reached into his jacket and pulled out a zippo, he ignited it and lit Billy’s cigarette for him instead of handing over over the lighter, which Billy liked. Billy sat down next to Steve and took a draw on the cigarette. Billy sat close enough that their bodies connected at the shoulders and knees.

“You look good, Harrington. Just like I thought you would.” Billy smiled at Steve, it wasn’t his usual full force predatory grin, he was suddenly feeling too shy to pull that off. Billy shook his head just a fraction, and then tensed a bit feeling on edge. Steve hadn’t responded to the compliment.

“How’s life?” Billy prompted, he wanted Steve to talk, or he’d just start rambling to fill the air between them with something.

“Well, as far as I can surmise, it’s still going on.” Steve looked up at the stars, he drew on his cigarette slowly.

“So you’re a philosopher now? Or it that just a bullshit answer to avoid talking to me.” Billy could hear the anger simmering in the back of his throat. Steve had set him off in less than 30 seconds despite nearly ten years having passed since Billy had seen him. Steve just had that affect on him, he drove him crazy, it just never manifested in the way Billy wanted it to.

“No, you’re right. It’s bullshit. I don’t mind talking to you, at least with you I always knew you’re going to tell me what you really think. You were never fake, Hargrove. I appreciate that about you.” Steve’s eyes looked into Billy’s and Billy blinked and looked down at his cigarette.

“So, are you going to answer the question or not?”

“Yeah. Why not. Life is good enough, I think I’m doing what I should be doing, making art. Got an apartment I like, over in Seattle, it’s nice there.”

“Great music scene.”

“Yeah, there’s a tons of writers and artists, and musicians, it’s a good down to earth kind of place, although I think I’m a bit older than most of the kids, you know, the ones with real, fire in their bellies’,” Billy saw Steve side eye him and give him a little wink before continuing, “I’m just kind of existing. Just got my MFA, so it’s either start working towards a PHD, teach or I don’t know what.” Steve shrugged.
“Do you like Seattle?”

“I do. I kind of love it there. I didn’t expect to. Everyone said the weather was going to depress me, that there was nothing to do, but go to the local markets and smell the hippies and the lumberjacks. You know, sit around and be morose while drinking black coffee. I mean, that’s all kind of true, that’s stuff I do at least five times a week.” Steve chuckled, “But I got my place, and I’m not anyone to anybody but a transplant from the far east of Indiana that paints.

“No little wifey?”

“Nah, I’m not cut out for relationships.” Steve shook his head.

“Huh.” Billy nodded. He didn’t know what to say. There was so much he wanted to know, so much he wanted to say, but none of it would come out. He shifted his feet on the bleacher bench below the one they were perched on. His palms felt a little itchy.

“So what about you, how’s life going?” Steve asked softly, nearly a whisper as if they were in church or a library.

“Good. Fuckin’ great. I’m in Chicago, got a little place to call home, I work a lot. I’m planning on opening my own recording studio in a year or two.” Billy nodded, trying to sound confident, yet he was feeling a little bad not having any academic achievements worth noting.

“Recording engineer, shit. That’s really cool. Are you a musician?”

“Yeah I play, a little. I picked up bass after high school, and you know I can pick up guitar licks pretty fast, but guitarists are a dime a dozen, bass players and drummers are the ones that people need.” Billy looked at Steve, Steve was focused on him, a soft smile playing on his lips.

“That’s so good, that’s really good to hear. I don’t know, I never really knew what you wanted to do after high school, I just, I had no idea, but this is better than anything I would have guessed. You always loved your music, it would arrive at school before you did, you played it so loud.” Steve smiled, his expression reflective, even nostalgic in Billy’s eyes.

Billy sat back, he took a drag on his cigarette, he was feeling something in his chest, his stomach, hell all the way down in his balls. He didn’t want another decade to go by before he saw Steve again. Billy flicked his cigarette across the bleachers all the way down to the oval track.

“Nice distance.” Steve murmured around his own smoke.

“Thanks.” Billy reached down and grabbed Steve’s hand in his own and got up towing Steve down the steps. His heart was in his throat. He was practically running down the steps, and he kept waiting for Steve to slow, or to stop dead in his tracks, but he kept pace.

“Where’s the fire?” Steve inquired laughter infused with words.

By the time they hit the ground Steve was practically running beside him. That was when Billy realized he wasn’t dragging Harrington along, Steve was gripping his hand back. Billy turned towards the entrance to the boy’s locker rooms and shoved the doors open and tipped over the trashcan, after a few stumble-steps into the low lit interior of the locker room Billy spun hard facing Steve so they collided and grabbed Steve by the hair at the base of his neck and pulled him into a kiss. Steve braced his palms against Billy’s chest to soften the impact but they quickly roved up and around Billy’s neck, and over his shoulders and down his back. Steve’s lips parted willingly and Billy explored with his tongue, he’d dreamt of this a hundred times before, and was caught up in a wave déjà vu.
Every ion in Billy’s body was charged and they were bursting just under his skin in a microcosmic electric storm, he’d never felt anything like it in his life.

“I swear to God,” Billy breathed into Steve’s ear, his voice low and hungry, “I should have done this a decade ago.” He shoved Steve back into a locker pinning him, he felt Steve’s hands clamp on his hips and pull him forward encouragingly.

“You would have scared the shit out of me.” Steve bit and licked up the side of Billy’s neck and gripped his hips.

“You feel so good, so good.” Billy ran his down Steve’s chest, and up again, he liked Steve’s long hair, and dug his hands into it pulling his head back exposing his neck. Billy pressed his tongue over Steve’s neck, grazed his teeth over his Adam’s apple, and ground and hitched his hips up hard against Steve’s.

The secondary fluorescent locker room lights blinked into life above them, Billy clamped one hand over Steve’s mouth and pressed the other down his belly, below his belt and over his stiffening cock. Steve closed his eyes, his breath was coming quick and short through his nose, Billy watched closely, kept his hand moving and rubbing and squeezing.

“Oh my god it smells the same in here.” A drunken voice bounced off the hard surfaces, it was coming from near the entrance to gym.

“I’ve never been in here before.” A woman’s voice bubbly and little slurred chimed in.

“Yeah right, you never came into the boys’ locker room?”

“No, why would I? God, did everyone think I was some kind of super-slut in High School? I didn’t lose my virginity till I was 26!”

Billy pulled Steve away from the locker and kissed him hungrily, he could feel Steve return the kiss, and then start pressing him away. Billy pulled back and winked at Steve, Steve looked like a startled hare, his big brown eyes shifting uneasily, his pulse jumping in his neck.

Billy smiled broadly at Steve and touched an index finger to Steve’s lips.

“Shh.” Billy whispered. He couldn’t take his eyes off Steve. It had been so long, a lifetime really, since he’d seen Steve, the boy, now a man, the one he’d thought had been his nemesis when the only enemy Billy had outside of his father had been himself.

The scratch of lighter could barely be heard, and seconds later the scent of Cannabis tickled Billy’s nose.

“You don’t have a pipe?” The woman’s voice carried, the sound of locker doors being opened could be heard, as well as the slow click of her heels, it sounded to Billy as though she was pacing.

“I forgot it in my work jacket.” The man replied sounding irritated. Billy could tell he was holding a lung full of smoke.

Billy pulled Steve gently towards the door leading out to the field, he pressed him close to the wall near the door and leaned in, their noses touching, he could smell the shampoo in Steve’s hair, it was different than what he remembered, he leaned in deeper into the dark locks and inhaled slowly. He could feel Steve tremor.

“Did you see Harrington? Jesus, what the hell happened to that guy?” That’s when Billy recognized the voice, it was Tommy.
“I saw him talking to Nicole, he looks weird.”

Billy could feel Steve trying to slip out of his grasp, he didn’t know what Steve was planning on doing, but was pretty sure he had a better idea. He leaned in a nipped Steve’s jaw sharply making Steve gasp audibly. Billy reached up next to Steve’s head a pulled down the fire alarm.

**Part 10**

**Celestial Bodies**

Steve was still running, he had Billy’s hand in his, wasn’t even sure when he’d grabbed it or if Billy had grabbed his, they were racing across the field like teenagers. He could still hear the fire alarm ringing. Billy cackled as he ran beside him. They’d crossed the field in record time and Steve released Billy’s hand and leapt up to get a hand hold on the top of the chain linked fence, he had just enough adrenaline to get him over the top and onto the other side. Billy landed beside him a second later, they ran another few yards and then both flopped onto the spring grass. In the distance the fire alarm bells weren’t as loud as the singing crickets, Billy propped himself up on his elbows chuckling.

“I always wanted to do that.” Billy laughed and tilted his head back his halo of curls shaking. Steve couldn’t take his eyes off of Billy, he was stunning, with his sparkling eyes and his beguiling bright wide smile.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Steve laid back and looked up at the stars between the branches “I hope they blame Tommy.” Steve released a small giggle making Billy laugh loudly.

“You just giggled.”

“You just pulled the god damned fire alarm at our high school reunion.”

“Sure as hell did. Never would have done that when I was a student, now seemed like a good time.” Billy twisted on his side looking at Steve and then laid back their heads nearly touching.

“You were always so fearless.” Steve mumbled, he let his voice trail off. He closed his eyes thinking about Billy. The word feral came to mind, Billy was like a feral tomcat.

“I forget how many stars can be seen from this place.” Billy said softly.

Steve opened his eyes and extended his arm pointing up at the sky. He tilted his head a bit, he could feel heat radiating from Billy. Steve could see him shift in his peripheral line of sight.

“I think that’s Mars. It’s winking red.” Steve’s pulse was slowing after the make out session and the running, he’d thought he’d never come down, but something about being still and calm next to Billy felt right.

Steve watched as Billy turned on his side and sidled up close, he draped one arm across Steve’s chest and propped his chin in the palm of his hand.

“You know I wanted to fuck you in high school.”
“I did not know that.” Steve attempted to sound casual, but there was a soft quaver in his voice. He swallowed slowly, his throat feeling dry. The things they’d been doing in the bathroom just a few minutes ago seemed unreal. There alone, on the edge of the woods, under the stars Steve felt elated and even a little bit fearful. He wasn’t afraid of Billy, but how much he wanted him.

“What are your dreams like?” Steve asked quickly, feeling breathless.

“What, do you mean like my dream job?” Billy chuckled and ran his hand gently down Steve’s stomach and up again, resting his palm over Steve’s heart.

Steve wondered if Billy could feel how hard it was beating, he blinked rapidly, not sure if he wanted to pursue the question.

“No. Like your actual dreams, when you’re sleeping.” Steve squinted up at Mars, watching it blink red and gold, his vision blurring a bit.

“I don’t know. Regular shit.” Billy’s hand roved under Steve’s jacket, gently pressing against the thin cotton of his shirt, his fingers caressing and strumming over Steve’s ribs.

“I’ve dreamt about you,” Steve closed his eyes, “a few times.”

“Yeah?” Billy’s tone was encouraging, but Steve wasn’t sure if he could go on.

Steve reached into his pocket and pulled out his beanie, he shoved it down on his head and then folded it back, he wasn’t cold, he just wanted to hide, he felt ridiculous.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“Try me, Harrington.” Billy’s hand stroked gently down resting warmly just above Steve’s belt. Billy shifted closer, Steve could feel his breath on his ear, a few tickling strands of hair grazed Steve’s neck making him shiver lightly.

“In the first one you were at a bar, there was a band playing, you were watching them, it was crowded, but people kind of parted for you when you cut through the crowd…” Steve shifted closer to Billy, he stole a glance a Billy’s face, illuminated in the faint glow of the half moon, his eyelashes looked impossibly long and black, his pale blue eyes glimmering faintly. Steve felt his breath catch and he looked up at the tree boughs and stars tilting above them.

“Um, yeah so, You were talking to people, I don’t know, it seemed like you were there working, you looked very focused. I walked up to you, and said hello, and you turned your head towards me, but you looked right through me. I, I was kind of mad for a second, like I felt like you were deliberately ignoring me. So I grabbed your arm, and then you turned and looked at me again and then someone, some guy, he was tall and had dreads, walked right through me and started talking to you. You reached up and rubbed your arm where my hand was, and your hand passed through mine, like smoke, and then I woke up.”

“That’s not so weird, I mean, it’s kind of strange.”

Steve felt Billy’s lips brush against his neck. It made Steve trembled lightly. He could still recall the sensation of Billy’s hand passing through his. In the dream his body had been vibrating with the music, he could remember the smell of stale beer in the air, clouds of smoke hanging heavily in the close atmosphere.
“I guess it’s not that weird. It was just, so vivid.” Steve mumbled he turned looking at Billy’s face and felt Billy’s hand shift down to his hip and pull him closer, Billy’s nose nudged into Steve’s and then their lips met slowly. Their stubble catching lightly, Billy’s tongue touched Steve’s bottom lip and slid in slowly and hotly. Steve leaned in his hands landing in the cloud of Billy’s curls, he lifted a knee and hoisted one leg over Billy’s hip, making Billy grunt softly into the kiss. Billy pulled back from the kiss slowly, his teeth pulled lightly at Steve’s bottom lip. His temple connected with Steve’s and pressed gently.

“You said the first time, there was more than one dream, about me?” Billy’s left arm scooped under Steve’s side, pulling him on top with ease as he rolled on back on the damp grass.

Steve cleared his throat, and nodded, he leaned in and kissed Billy, closing his eyes tightly, he could feel Billy stiffening below him, the heat of him rising up and soaking into Steve’s clothes and skin. Billy murmured into his neck, purring like a big cat.

“Are you going to tell me about it?” Billy nuzzled Steve’s neck and licked and nipped.

“Uh, yes… I can.”

“I’m waiting.” Billy nipped again as if to prompt him.

Part 11

Under Steve Harrington

Billy shifted under the weight of Steve, his body was both lithe and solid. He could feel Steve’s heart pounding, could feel his erection blooming. Billy wanted to take his time, he’d waited a decade to be with Steve, he’d envisioned all kinds of things, but this was better than all of it, and somehow eerily familiar. Billy couldn’t put his finger on it, maybe he’d just had too many wet dreams about Steve, he was hoping Steve was about to confess some of his own erotic dreams about Billy. Billy had never really imagined Steve being shy talking about sex, but it was so obvious now that Steve was struggling to share whatever it was he’d been dreaming of.

“So, in the second dream you were in an apartment, it was small and the walls were kind of pale blue, and there was a cat, a big cat. Orange.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah, and he was just kind of flopped over on an amplifier, just hanging out. I remember thinking he looked a little like you.” Steve tittered nervously before going on, “It was late, I think. It felt like it was so late at night that it was almost morning.” Steve drew a breath and gently pressed his lips over Billy’s jaw, warm lips trailing up to his ear, Steve’s voice a whisper in Billy’s ear, “There was a small desk lamp on, I think, I remember that, and you were on your bed, sprawled out on your back. Your boots were still on. Like the ones you had in high school, but they were trashed, you know, like worn out I think there was duct-tape on the toe of one of ‘em.”

“That’s a weird detail.” Billy’s heart started beating faster, he could picture his apartment in Steve’s description, he hadn’t mentioned Freeloader, his cat, or the color of his bedroom walls.
“My dreams about you are different, you know? Like a movie, like cinematic, technicolor.”

“No kidding.” Billy pressed his hands up Steve’s back, the velveteen fabric was slightly damp from the ground, it felt alive under Billy’s fingers. Billy clutched at Steve’s shoulder blades, drawing him tightly closer.

“I kept moving closer, you know, I said your name, but you didn’t seem to hear me,” Steve started speaking faster, “There was a bottle of Glenfiddich, on the floor, it looked empty, I kind of watched you, you know, I just stood there,” Steve swallowed, before continuing, “Watching you breathe, and then I knelt on the bed and pressed my hands to your shoulders and shook you, I was kind of freaking out, because it was so real, but I didn’t feel real, I thought for a second, that maybe, I was…” Steve lifted himself and looked a Billy, his eyes large and dark, “I don’t know, maybe I was dead, you know, a ghost? I didn’t feel right. I leaned over you, like right in your face, and I shouted your name and you didn’t move, I started to panic, I think, like unraveling, and then I kissed you. I kissed you to feel something, and because I wanted to, like I had to, like my life depended on it.” His voice had rose a bit, he looked lost in the memory.

Billy reached up, he pressed his hands on either side of Steve’s face and pulled him into a rough kiss, and rolled Steve onto his back. Steve’s hands traveled up the sides of Billy’s body, fingers hungry and searching, grasping desperately.

“I had a dream like that too…” Billy mumbled against Steve’s lips, he’d dreamt that Steve was at his apartment, in the middle of the night, but it hadn’t really been Steve, because he’d looked so different… Billy’s mind was racing, as his thoughts ricocheted around in his head, memories colliding with the present. He turned on his side looking at Steve.

“I, it, we…”

“What?” Billy laughed softly, he’d never heard Steve so at a loss for words, it almost distracted him from uncanny description of the apartment, his boots, the cat… and that one time he’d been gifted a very expensive bottle of whiskey by a band manager, he couldn’t even think of what band it had been, the guy had been Gary something.

“I like your laugh.” Steve mumbled and kissed Billy softly.

“How did you do that?” Billy asked as he sat up slowly, “how did you know about my apartment, and the cat? This isn’t some kind of joke is it?” Billy feel his stomach tighten, what if this was a joke, something horrible and cruel? Like a joke Billy would have pulled when he was a teenager, at the height of his rage. How would Steve know, had he been talking to some of Max’s friends? She wouldn’t tell them about his apartment. Billy felt his head swim, he knew he was being paranoid, but he felt so vulnerable all of sudden, sitting in the dark on the edge of the forest with Steve, not because it was night and the stars were muted by chasing clouds, but because there was something in the air, electric, or even alive. The cool grass that had been refreshing after the run was now just cold, the sexual thrill of finally having Steve Harrington in his arms, pliable and hungry now suddenly felt like he’d been beguiled into a sense of false security. What if Steve was just waiting to call him a faggot and tell everyone about it as joke at the local bar later that night?

“It was just a really vivid dream… Do you have a cat?”

“Yeah. All of that is true, what you described.” Billy’s voice came out a little hoarse, “are you fucking with me Harrington?”

“No. I’m not.” Steve’s hands clasped onto Billy’s shoulders keeping him from pulling away any further.
“So tell me, tell me the whole dream, from beginning to end. Don’t leave anything out.” Billy narrowed his eyes taking in Steve’s expression, his long hair framing his face in dark waves giving Steve a look both haunted and innocent. Billy wanted to be skeptical and analytical about this, but if anything, he was fucking spooked, which just made him angry.

“I kissed you, and at first it was like I was falling through you, like when you put your face in water and there’s almost no resistance, but then your eyes opened, and you were looking at me, and I leaned away from you, and then you said my name, like a question.” Steve ran a hand over Billy’s head as he spoke, his long fingers trailing over the side of Billy’s neck and jaw, “I kissed you and it felt real, you felt real, and I did too, like I was there in that room with you and I could taste the whiskey on your tongue and your skin smelled like that cologne that you used to wear in high school, I didn’t feel like a ghost anymore, and it didn’t feel like a dream, it feels more like an actual memory now.”

“Then what happened.” Billy’s voice was hardly above a whisper, he knew what happened next but he wanted Steve to tell him.

“I kissed you again, and you pulled me into your arms,” Steve squeezed Billy as he spoke, pulling him into an embrace, “We made out for a while, it was, very…” Steve kissed Billy slowly, then smiled softly before speaking, “enthusiastic.”

“So we made out.” Billy nuzzled Steve’s neck, the fear was starting to ebb, he nipped slowly, and kissed Steve’s lips a little tentatively and reached up unknotting Steve’s neck tie.

“For a while.” Steve sighed leaning closer to Billy.

Billy felt a little tremor run through Steve’s body, Billy ran his thumb firmly over Steve’s Adam’s apple, feeling it bob in a slow swallow. Billy rolled Steve on his back, Steve’s knees rose with intention on either side of Billy’s hips, Steve rolled his hips up again, and a low murmur purred from the back of his throat, Billy knew that sound, he remembered it, from what he’d thought had been an alcohol fueled wet dream.

“Go on.” Billy reached between them and squeezed the inside of Steve’s thigh, his palm pressing up and then down over Steve’s crotch, finding the outline of his stiffening cock and continued stroking and squeezing him through the fabric of his black jeans.

“Oh.” Steve gasped in Billy’s neck, Billy kept one hand over Steve’s crotch and the other on his throat, he could feel Steve’s fingers digging into his hair, Steve’s stubble tickled against Billy’s ear.

“You asked me if I wanted you, I said yes, then you asked me,” Steve reached between them, he unbuckled his belt and reached in his boxers to free his cock.

“How badly, King Steve?” Billy remembered and said the words clearly, he pressed his hand over Steve’s.

“You remember?” Steve gasped and twisted his hips up to thrust into Billy’s hand.

“I’ll never forget it.” Billy stroked Steve roughly, making him squirm.

“Ahh, wait, oh, shit.”

Billy gripped and stroked harder, knowing full well that he was going to chafe the tender skin of Steve’s cock, he bit hard on Steve’s jaw and pressed his thumb up against his Adam’s apple tightly
with his thumb.

Steve surprised Billy and grabbed a fist full of his blonde curls and pulled his head back and kissed him once and then bit roughly at Billy’s bottom lip.

“Agh, mmm.” Billy turned his head away and released Steve, and got up on his knees. He looked at Steve who was leaning up on his elbows, his erect cock exposed, Billy eyes lingered taking him in, his breath was coming fast. Billy couldn’t wrap his mind around why things always fell apart, the closer they got the more resistance he felt, the further apart they were the stronger the pull; they were like polarized magnets, switching from pull to push over and over.

“You’re fucking weird, Harrington.” Billy stood up, he un twisted his clothes and wiped his palms on his hips. He started walking away, he hated himself more with every step. His fucking balls were aching, his head was throbbing, his ears felt strange like he’d been under a wave and there was half an ocean sloshing around in them.

“What the hell, Billy. Where are you going?” Steve’s voice sounded raw, and confused.

“The fuck away from you.” Billy pulled his jacket off, feeling suddenly hot, like his skin was on fire. He took long strides, and dug for his cigarettes he lit up and wiped the corners of his eyes with the heels of his palms not looking back. He couldn’t put into words what he was feeling, he felt crazed, like he was in the middle of an electrical storm.

Part 12

Chasing Billy Hargrove

Steve wasn’t sure when he’d started running. He’d knelt up and un twisted his clothes watching the shadowy figure of Billy walk away, the burning scent of his cigarette lingering in his wake. Steve’s head was spinning, he wanted Billy. He always had, but now as much as his weird dreams had drawn them together they were now pushing them apart. Steve stooped, his hands on his knees, half bent over, his body aching, his heart beating like wild bird’s wings in a too small cage. Whatever it was, whatever this curse or gift was, he wasn’t going to let it rule him. He wasn’t going to let it dictate his actions.

Steve was hurtling down the side of the slope that led up to the woods just beyond the field, he came up on Billy and grabbed him around the waist and turned him till they were face to face falling back into the chain link fence that defined the property line of the back of the school field.

“Billy, I don’t want you to go.” Steve’s voice sounded too loud in his ears, he watched Billy’s eyes in the dim light, they danced over Steve’s face.

“What’s happening with you? What the fuck is it with this town? It’s like this entire shit hole and all of its residence are fucking haunted, you know that? Like this place, is all small town quaint if you’re sleep walking through life, but it’s fucking weird here, and it’s not just that fucking lab, it’s
everywhere only most of the bumpkins around here don’t see it because they don’t want to. I shouldn’t have come back here. Fuck this town.”

“Fine, you’re right, you know that you’re fucking right about Hawkins, but what about us? What about you and me?”

“What?” Billy shook his head.

“Us, right now, tonight,” Steve persisted, “Where are you staying?”

“I didn’t get a room somewhere, I was just going to sleep in my Camaro.” Billy pushed away Steve’s hand, it wasn’t violently done, but it was a cold and decisive gesture, “don’t worry about it,” Billy wove around Steve, “I can’t fucking take another minute in this town, I’m going back to Chicago.”

Steve walked backwards in front of Billy, trying to see him in the dim light of the stars, they were moving closer to the school, it looked like the fire alarms and following visit from the fire department had pretty much shut down the reunion. Steve glanced towards the parking lot and could see that almost all the cars were gone. Most of the interior lights were already shut off.

“Don’t leave.” Steve stepped into Billy, throwing caution to the wind he grabbed Billy’s hand and drew it up to his lips, he kissed the back of Billy’s hand and gently nipped his knuckles.

“Why are you like that? Why can you do that?” Billy’s brows were furrowed, but his eyes were on Steve’s lips watching them work across his knuckles. Billy’s expression was softening, the tightness leaving his mouth.

“I think it has something to do with what happened that night…”

“The night of the fight?”

“Yeah, the things that happened afterward.”

“It changed you.”

“I think so.”

“Are you going to tell me about it.”

“If you want me to.” Steve realized that Billy had stopped resisting him. Steve gently turned Billy’s square palm and opened it, planting a lingering kiss. He kept his eyes on Billy’s and kissed again, then slowly licked across his palm and up his thumb and sucked on it. Steve watched Billy sigh, Steve reached up and cupped the side of Billy’s face, he felt like he was petting a lion, risking life and limb. Billy tilted his head down till it was rested against Steve’s palm.

“Come home with me, right now.” Steve attempted to sound commanding, but wondered if he sounded like he was begging, he didn’t care which it was, he just wanted Billy to say yes.

“I’ll follow you, in my car.”

“I can leave my car here, I’ll ride with you.” Steve was afraid if he didn’t stay close to Billy that he’d leave, and Steve would miss out on his last chance to be with Billy Hargrove. He squeezed Billy’s hand, not wanting to let go of the connection, afraid another shift in the wind would set them spiraling apart all over again.
“Fine.” Billy said softly, he started walking and kept Steve’s hand in his, nearly towing him as if he’d been the one about to walk away from whatever was happening between them. They walked around the parameter of the school grounds, heading towards Billy’s parked Camaro. Steve took long strides till they were shoulder to shoulder holding hands. Steve took in Billy’s profile, his handsome face framed in his leonine mane of hair. There was a leaf tangled in a spiral of curls and Steve gently plucked it out. Billy glanced at him but didn’t pull away, or make a face. Steve walked into him a bit, sheep dogging him sideways, he did it till a small smile started curling up the side of Billy’s mouth.

“Knock it off, Harrington.”

“What?” Steve asked innocently.

“You think you’ve got the upper hand, huh?” Billy shook his head, looking away, but gripped Steve’s hand in his.

“Not at all.” Steve said earnestly.

“I really do hate this town,” Billy’s voice was low, he stopped when they were in front of his car, he turned facing Steve, they were so close if Billy had lifted his head they would have bumped noses, “but, I don’t hate you.”

“Well, that’s a good start.” Steve replied warily.

“I think I’ve made that pretty clear.” Billy’s blue eyes lifted and locked onto Steve’s eyes for a beat and then his gaze drifted down to Steve’s mouth.

“C’mon, let’s go, take me home.” Steve whispered, he nudged Billy’s lips with his own, coaxing a kiss. Steve tilted his head and parted his lips, he felt the Billy’s tongue slide against his own, it was a slow luxurious kiss, igniting Steve’s desire all over again.

“Hmm…” Steve smiled and purred into the kiss, he pulled away slowly, “Let’s go, I want you, in my bed, not in the parking lot.”

“Who said I was going to bed with you?” Billy tilted his head and batted his eyes.

“I will beg.” Steve deadpanned.

“I might like to see you on your knees.” Billy licked his bottom lip.

Steve laughed, feeling giddy, and a bit embarrassed, but mostly excited. He walked around to the passenger side and watched Billy unlock the door and get in the driver’s seat. When Billy unlocked the passenger side Steve slid in. The anxiety and the darkness of the edge of woods seemed to have lifted, it passed almost as quickly as the clouds were flowing in the sky above them.

They had just left the parking lot when Billy rolled down the windows, letting in the mild evening air, he cleared his throat and looked over Steve.

“So, that night.”

“The night, that we had a fight…” Steve exhaled not knowing how this conversation was going to go, if it would send Billy into fits of hysterical laughter thinking that Steve was a lunatic, or worse, send him into a red rage thinking that Steve was lying to his face, “Yeah, so Max stole your car, and we all went to one of the farms, where there was this, um, sinkhole…”
Billy nodded, his face lost in the shadows, the car rolled smoothly across the parking lot and onto the road. Steve chewed the inside of his cheek, not sure what to say next, and then he knew it had to be the whole story.

“Actually it started before that, back in November of 1983.” Steve thought about Jonathan handing out flyers, the night that he thought Barb had left the party early, his first night with Nancy. It was a lifetime ago, and it was like yesterday too.

“That long ago?” Billy’s voice broke the silence, Steve hadn’t known how long he’d been lost in recollection.

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m all ears.” Billy’s voice was low, a mix of impatience and tiredness in his tone. Steve didn’t want to freeze, didn’t want to hold back and so he told Billy everything that he remembered, and all the details the others had shared with him. Steve let it all pour out, he spoke until he was hoarse. At some point they parked in front of his parent’s house. Steve lost count of the cigarettes they’d shared, he hardly noticed the light changing in the sky. They didn’t finish talking until the sun truly up the dew damp trees and manicured laws of Loch Nora appeared to be glittering. Steve was exhausted and finally purged of the story, he squinted at the front of his house, it looked like it was unreal, or like a place he’d never been. He was tired and feeling shakey, he envisioned himself opening the front door and just finding nothing on the other side of the door, not a hallway, or the living-room, the woods.

Billy had been nearly silent the entire time, an occasional grunt of understanding, but he said nothing. Steve shook his head and looked over at Billy.

“The dreams, I guess, the astral projection thing or whatever, didn’t really start until I left Indiana, really I think it’s only been happening off and on for the last seven years or so. I can’t control it, but I think the times I’ve seen you, were when I was thinking the most about you.” Steve rubbed his eyes, and sank back. The car was stuffy, even with the windows cracked. The damp air had become humid. Steve looked over at Billy, he was staring off into the middle distance, silent and unreadable in the soft morning light, his black eyelashes shielding his pale blue eyes from the encroaching sunbeams.

“Are you going to say anything?” Steve grumbled, his voice was crackly. Steve was exhausted and wondered if Billy had tuned him out or dismissed him as nut case hours ago and had just been letting him talk because it was funny, or just sad, sad that Harrington was batshit crazy, *that would make a hell of a story*, Steve worried. Steve fidgeted with the cuffs of his jacket, he reached up and pressed his hair back from his face and pulled his beanie down.

“Let’s go inside, I can’t feel my ass.” Billy got out of the car. Steve fumbled his way out, his back was stiff, his feet were all pins and needles. Steve watched Billy out of the corners of his eyes. Steve’s neck was tight and he was hungry too. Steve dug his house keys out of a pocket and walked up to the front door. He opened it up and stood aside for Billy to walk in and then shut it against the rising sun, he didn’t want daylight, he just wanted a dark place to sleep, to forget the night that he’d almost fucked Billy Hargrove, only to blow it by telling him about the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer and Demogorgons and Demodogs, and all the other stupid names they’d used to name the unnamable.

“Fucking unspeakable horrors.” Steve mumbled as he climbed the steps. He could hear the shower running, he was sure it was his dad, maybe heading off for an early game of golf, or claiming he had to go to the office for some conference call, Steve never believed his father was a work half the time he said he was. There was a wafting scent of coffee, which meant it was pretty likely that his mother
was in the kitchen. He was about to tell Billy to be quiet, but realized instantly that there was no need, he was like a silent shadow trailing after him. On the steps Steve felt a flash of dizzying memories, the demogorgon coming through the walls of the Byers house, the fire, how nothing felt safe, no where felt safe. He felt Billy’s palm land on his lower back, gently propelling him up the stairs.

“Sorry.” Steve whispered, his voice still a bit raw. Billy said nothing, but moved to the stair beside him and wrapped his arm around Steve’s waist. Steve sighed, and opened the door to his old bedroom. He turned to face Billy, walking backwards.

“Just come lay down with me, I’m too tired to, or maybe, just gimme a minute or something, and we can,” Steve drew a breath, trying to figure out if he could wake up his libido, his whole body felt like led and his head was swirling with fatigued half finished thoughts and old worries that seemed to surface the minute he found himself back in Hawkins.

“Get in bed, pretty boy.” Billy pushed Steve back onto the bed, it was a gentle nudge, and Steve sat down, he scooted backwards watching Billy twist the blinds shut and pull the curtains till the room was mercifully dark.

“I’ve missed you, I mean, I know we were never close, I mean, you hated me… God, I hope you don’t still hate me.” Steve laid back, he half heartedly attempted to toe off a boot but gave up immediately. He felt Billy grab his ankle and make quick work of the laces on one boot and then pull off one boot and then again to the other, he set the pair down lightly on the carpet, keeping the room quiet. Steve’s eyes felt leaden, he shifted on his side. He was fretting that Billy was going to leave, but he was too tired to attempt to seduce him into staying.

“I don’t want to go to sleep.” Steve murmured and rubbed his hands over his face, the room was quiet and dark, he could barely hear Billy breathing as he laid down beside Steve.

“What if I fall asleep and I go?” Steve could barely form words.

“You’re not going anywhere.” Billy’s voice was deeply calm and certain.

“No, I mean, like my soul, what if it just takes off? What if I don’t wake up and I’m just gone, lost…”

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you.” Billy slowly wrapped his arms around Steve gliding gently under Steve’s shirt, his arms were warm, his squared palms left trails of heat on Steve’s skin. The undertow of exhaustion took over and Steve melted into Billy’s arms.

Part 13

Awakened

Harrington’s Residence

When Billy opened his eyes for a moment he thought he was back in Chicago, with his first breath
he realized that someone was in his arms, and with his second he remembered it was Steve. Steve was murmuring, and making strange little snuffling sound. It was the noises that has awakened Billy, it sounded as if a very small animal was trying to burrow out of Steve’s lips.

Everything from the day and night before, came flooding back. The long drive into Hawkins, seeing Steve’s BMW, meeting him outside on the bleachers, setting off the fire alarm, the few stolen kisses and groping. The most unpleasant recollection was the eerie overwhelming feeling on the edge of the forest, one minute he’d been excited by Steve, fixated on the idea of doing everything and anything with him, and then almost instantly it was as if the whole of Hawkins was haunted and returning there had been a mistake. Now, laying in the warmth of Steve’s embrace, in Steve’s childhood bedroom, with just a bit of sunlight cutting through the edges of the curtain it felt absurd that he’d been so unnerved. Billy had gotten caught up like a child, spooked by his own imagination. But there was something to Steve’s dreams, those had been real. Steve really had come to him. Billy shook his head, his thoughts ricocheting around his head, the more he awake he was the faster his mind seemed to spin. Billy had had to come back, he needed to see Steve, been dying to see him. Billy lowered his gaze, looking at the lank waves of dark hair spread on his arm, Steve was nestled against Billy’s chest, his fine dark lashes pressed down, his inviting lips parted slightly. Steve was heavy with sleep. His breathing was deep and even. After a moment or two his eyes were dancing beneath his eyelids, shifting and twitching a morse code. Billy remembered how reluctant Steve had been to fall asleep, he’d seemed nearly delirious with fatigue. Billy knew Steve’s demons, knew that Demodogs and Demogorons, weren’t imagined, the story Steve had told him, Billy knew it was all true.

A few years ago, Max had been visiting from college and Billy had snuck her into the bar he was working at. She’d been excited to be in Chicago with him, and Billy had been excited to have her there, although he did his best to act like he was doing her a favor. He introduced her to the staff, watched her take snapshots with his disposable camera, even tolerated her taking a few of him, and asked Danny, one of the bar backs, to take a photo of the both of them. Billy gave some of the guys the look that meant, hands off; he didn’t imagine any of his coworkers would lay a hand on her, but he needed to make sure that they knew they were going to get pounded if they did. He wanted to be the big brother she deserved, he knew he hadn’t always been, not by a long shot. Things between them had finally grown into something like a friendship. He set her up at a little table up to the front right wing of the dinky stage. Billy kept his eye on her while he worked setting up the mics, running back to the little sound booth where he could check the levels better. Max was smiling and relaxed, he made sure she had a full glass of coke and a paper bag full of popcorn. The first half of the night had gone great.

It had been towards the end of the evening and the last band was clearing their gear off the stage, when Billy got caught up with talking with a guy that was there to photograph the band, Max had hung back, waiting impatiently, but the guy, whose name Billy had forgotten kept talking, and Billy had gotten bored and wandered off to hang out with Billy’s coworkers behind the bar. By the time Billy had grown tired of flirting, Max had already downed four shots just to prove she could handle it. He didn’t make a scene at the bar, he didn’t want to embarrass her, he’d done more than his share of underage drinking. He just put his arm around her narrow shoulders and steered her out of the bar, and flipped his coworkers the bird on the way out, he wasn’t mad, just hoped she wouldn’t get sick. He knew no one meant any harm and aside from Max weaving a bit when she walked she seemed to be okay, at least at first.

Halfway home from the bar to his apartment she’d stopped mid stride and had been starring down an
alley, her fingers dug into Billy’s arm. He could remember her nails starting to dig, her freckled complexion turned waxy under the yellow street lamp light. A small dog came exploding out of the alley and tore passed them, Max nearly kicked the dog, her drunkenness had saved the mongrel from taking a serious blow.

“Hey, easy, he wasn’t coming at you.”

“OH shit, oh shit.” Max had been on the verge of hyperventilating, “I thought it was something else, I thought, I thought…” and then she’d started sobbing, she wasn’t even trying to talk, just deep sobs, it was surreal, he hadn’t ever heard her cry like that. He’d seen Max cry, he’d even made her cry when they were younger but this was far different, she was a pile of grief and leaning into him. Billy tried to calm her down, and then decided he just needed to get her back in the apartment, he scooped her up and carried her.

That was night she’d told him all about the lab, her friend Jane’s abilities, the Demodogs, the Mindflayer and stories of the Demogorgon. Billy had sat up with her half of the night, first thinking she was schizophrenic or had just created an imaginary world to cope with the stress of living under Neil’s thumb, but the more she told him the more he knew it was true, and that her story, the events that she described somehow it filled in all of the little gaps, all of little grey areas that had always been kind of niggling at him since that first Fall in Hawkins.

He could still picture her, sitting at the end of his bed, her long hair in wild cascades framing her heart-shaped face as she confessed this secret history to him, her monkey-boots scuffing at the floor as she spoke, between biting her nails. He could still hear the strain in her voice, the undertone of defiance, as if daring him to call her a liar, but also the weak tremor that revealed she was afraid he wouldn’t believe her. Just as Steve’s voice had sounded last night. Another night listening to the same taboo past, everyone sworn to secrecy, he wondered who else had heard their confessions, been made to promise to keep silent and never speak of the horrors that had nearly overtaken Hawkins, or maybe more than Hawkins, maybe it would have never stopped.

Billy shifted on his back, agitated by the dark places his mind was taking him, it was then that Steve rebased a soft snuffling sound in Billy’s arms. Billy smiled a bit, his mood altering dramatically. Steve had always had that affect on him. Steve was a little heat generator, he was making Billy hot, as if he truly did have a fire burning in him. Billy placed a palm over Steve’s forehead wondering if Steve had contracted a fever in the night, but he wasn’t quite that hot.

Billy looked around the small room, it looked sterile, all prim and proper, banal in its pale floral wallpaper and void of any true warmth. It told him nothing about the man that was sleeping in his arms. Billy twisted his watch around on his wrist to see the face, it was already half past twelve in the afternoon. Billy stroked Steve’s hair, he started thinking about the drive back to Chicago, the recording session he had coming up in a little over a week, it was going to be good money, money he needed.

Steve mumbled, Billy tilted his head down to look at Steve’s face, he was still asleep his full lips twitched, his eyes darting beneath their heavy eyelids. Billy watched as Steve nudged closer, he smiled to himself feeling both voyeuristic and almost like a scientist, ‘What do Steve’s do in their sleep?’, Billy mused.

Steve had an erection, it was pressed hotly against Billy’s hip. All thoughts of Chicago flew out of Billy’s head, and the blood in his veins hurdled south.

“Harrington.” Billy whispered into the pink shell of Steve’s ear, Billy waited for a response but got nothing for his troubles, Steve’s breathing continued heavy and deep.
“Hey, wake up.” Billy said a little louder, and touched the tip of his tongue to Steve’s earlobe, this time he got a small sigh, and Steve shifted closer.

Billy twisted on his side and reached under the rumpled blankets and pressed his palm down Steve’s chest, over the his sleep rumpled shirt, Billy fingered the buttons waiting for Steve to awaken, and then hesitantly, feeling like a trespasser or a thief, he slid his hand down, a slow steady path, over Steve’s belt buckle, and along the seam of Steve’s button fly, until satisfyingly resting over the bulge that had been pressing into Billy’s hip. Billy’s fingertips pressed firmly, feeling the outline of the crown of Steve’s cock. Billy remembered very well the shape of Steve’s dick, he’d seen it many times throughout high school, always stealing glances when they showered after gym, or sometimes even when they were changing by their lockers. Steve had nothing to be ashamed of, he was large and wellformed, a piece of art.

Billy was so focused on what he was doing that he startled when Steve snorted and opened his eyes weakly against the low light, his big brown eyes shifted drunkenly to something like consciousness. Billy pressed his temple to Steve’s and gently pulled at his buckle.

“Billy, I was dreaming…”

“I bet you were.”

“You’re still here.” Steve had a soft smile curling up one side of his plush lips that made Billy’s mouth water, he slowly pulled Steve’s belt open and nodded.

“Mm-hmm.” Billy unzipped Steve’s jeans and pressed his hand in and rested it on Steve’s lower belly, he felt a rush as his finger stroked the soft skin and silken hair.

“Jesus,” Billy murmured, Steve had great hair from his head to his happy trail, Billy mused silently.

“That feels nice.” Steve pressed himself closer to Billy, his voice was still thick with sleep but, tinged with pleasure.

Billy kept his hand there, his fingers curling in lightly and then relaxing open, he could feel the muscles of Steve’s stomach beneath the sensitive skin tighten and relax.

“I didn’t think you’d stay.” Steve whispered and leaned his face to Billy’s neck, Billy lifted his chin giving access to his throat.

“Do you know how long I’ve been waiting to get me some King Steve dick? I’m not going anywhere, pretty boy.”

Billy closed his eyes as he felt Steve’s lips touch his neck, they roamed and brushed against Billy’s stubbled throat. Steve’s breath played on Billy’s skin. Billy pressed his fingers a little lower.

He felt Steve’s lips part and take a mouthful of flesh, it was a tender bite that transformed into a suckling kiss.

Billy pressed his hand down further, coiling his fingers around the length of Steve’s cock. Steve lifted his hips slowly, pressing into Billy’s hand. Billy squeezed firmly till Steve released a low groan, and then Billy slid his hand around the base of Steve’s cock.

“Don’t, don’t stop. Don’t go, don’t go anywhere.” Steve wrapped both his arms around Billy and planted a kiss on his lips. Billy parted his lips and felt Steve’s tongue prod and slide, slick and hot against his own.

Steve pulled from the kiss and sat up slowly feeling drunk with desire. Billy watched Steve as he slid
away, wondering if Steve had heard something, or changed his mind, and then saw that Steve was pulling off his jacket, Billy propped himself up on his elbow, he kept his hand wrapped loosely around Steve’s cock. Billy leaned back as Steve slipped off his ridiculous paisley necktie and unbuttoned the top half of his shirt before pulling it off over his head. Steve’s eyes were clear now, he looked preternaturally alert in the low-lit bedroom.

Steve reached over and unbuttoned Billy’s shirt, for a time the sound of their breathing was synced.

“You look good in black.” Steve said.

Billy was surprised to hear Steve sound coy. Billy tilted his head, saying nothing, he lowered his eyes watching Steve’s long fingers loose the last button of his fly, he drew a short breath as Steve’s hands roved up Billy’s belly, the caress was firm, as if Steve was sculpting him, building and shaping him into a living being. Steve sat up, reluctantly releasing Steve’s cock to shrug off his shirt. Steve grunted softly, Billy could only guess it was in displeasure at being released. As Billy slipped out of his Levis and briefs, Steve slid off his black jeans and boxers. Billy lay back, and to his pleasure Steve straddled his hips, and leaned over him, his dark unkempt hair hanging loosely around Billy’s face, the soft tendrils tickling his cheeks and catching lightly on Billy’s stubbled cheeks.

“Kiss me.” Billy commanded, his eyes fixed on Steve’s.

Steve moved in close, the tip of his tongue grazed Billy’s bottom lip, and flicked at the top. Billy sighed, and rested his hands firmly on Steve’s hips and squeezed.

“I said, kiss me.” Billy smirked tilting his head, Steve arched a brow and leaned in again, this time softly nipping at Billy’s lips, making Billy smile and twist his head away.

“Kiss me, jackass.” Billy suppressed a laugh and fixed Steve with what he hoped was a serious expression.

“Kiss you?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure?”

“I wanted to fuck you, but in a second, I’m just going to want to smother you with one of these pillows.”

“Kinky.”

“Harrington,”

“I want you to fuck me.” Steve pressed his mouth to Billy’s, his tongue parted lips parted Billy’s lips.

Billy arched his back and leaned up into the kiss, it was a real kiss, deep and molten and everything Billy had ever craved. Billy pulled Steve into his arms, feeling the heaviness of Steve’s lean frame, their stiffing cocks pressed against each other’s bellies. It made Billy ache, and he growled into the kiss. Billy wasn’t sure who moved first, or if they’d started simultaneously, their hips rolled against each other, Steve’s sharp hipbones pressed into Billy’s solid and well muscled frame. Billy marveled at how well they fit one another.
When Steve drew back from the kiss, Billy groaned in protest and grabbed a handful of Steve’s chestnut locks and tugged him back into another kiss. They explored and kissed and groped till they drew apart breathless from kissing. Flushed, Steve looked wild and gorgeous.

“I have lube.” Steve explained as he slid off the side of the bed. Billy turned on his side watching Steve dig through a lumpy duffle bag, and then return to bed with a a small plastic bottle.

Billy reached over and pulled Steve into his lap, he gripped the back of Steve’s knees and pulled till they were rested on either side of himself.

“I hope that bottle’s full, pretty boy.” Billy grabbed a hold of Steve’s ass and squeezed. Billy watched as Steve rolled his hips forward, rocking salaciously and shifting above Billy’s erection with an unexpected appetite.

“I can take, whatever you give.” Steve’s voice was as a whisper, but void of any doubt.

“Not sure if I can say the same, King Steve.” Billy looked at Steve’s cock, it was a fucking tower.

Steve smiled and pressed his mouth over Billy’s ear, “I’d be gentle,” Steve whispered, “at first.”

Billy felt a clench deep in his balls, he didn’t know what he wanted more, to fuck Steve or be fucked by him, he imagined Steve knew what to do with that thing, he’d been popular in high school, and Billy imagined he was now popular in the Seattle art scene, the thought double back on Billy like an snake, he felt a rush of jealousy and possessiveness. He bit Steve’s shoulder making him flinch and then stroked his tongue up Steve’s neck.

“You’ve done this before, been fucked by a dude?” Billy arched an eyebrow.

“Maybe.” Steve smiled at Billy and licked his lips nervously. Steve grabbed the lube and squirted some into his palm, he rubbed his hands together, and wrapped his long fingers around Billy’s hard cock.

“Mmm” Billy rolled forward fucking slowly into Steve’s hand, it had been a long time since Billy had been with anyone, and he’d been starving for Steve since he’d first seen him at the Halloween party. Billy sighed and pressed his head back into the pillows, letting Steve work his cock, making it slick and hot. Billy’s pleasure was interrupted when he thought he heard someone in the hallway, just beyond the door.

“Is it locked?” Billy felt ridiculous, suddenly skittish about being caught by Steve’s parents.

“There’s no one here but us.” Steve sighed, he studied Billy’s face and then got up and walked to the door, his dick leading the way. Billy ran one hand over his mouth, and the other over his swelling dick, he’d waited so long for Steve, and yet the few seconds added were unbearable.

“It’s locked now.” Steve turned back and got onto the bed, “Where was I?” He teased.

“About to eat some dick?” Billy smiled.

“Breakfast of champions.” Steve laughed, “Actually, I was planning on going for a ride, but you know, if that’s what you want.”

“I want it all.” Billy shifted his hips hoping to tempt Steve.

“Me too.” Steve whispered.
Billy threw his arm around Steve’s waist and pulled him closer.

“Com’ere,” Billy squeezed tightly dragging Steve closer and grabbed the lube. “You want to go for a ride, baby?” He breathed hotly in Steve’s ear.

“Yes.” Steve shifted pressing his knees on either side of Billy’s hips.

“I’ll take you,” Billy squeezed lube onto his fingers, it was dribbling down to his palm, he pressed his hand between them and slid his splayed hand along Steve’s lean thigh, traveling up, leaving a glossy trail.

Steve gnawed on Billy’s shoulder, his mouth hot and wet on Billy’s skin. Billy slowed his touches, dizzied by Steve’s attention.

“Beg me.” Billy pinched Steve’s thigh.

“Please.” Steve moaned and shifted closed, he reached between them grabbing Billy’s wrist tightly, shoving his hand further, “Please, baby, I want it.” Steve bit hard on the ball of Billy’s shoulder making Billy moan.

Billy pressed on, his finger thrusting roughly into Steve’s hole.

“Oh shit!” Steve gasped and twisted, not ready for the violation, he shifted down on Billy’s knuckles, “Oh, uh.” Steve murmured and rolled closer, his eyes shut tight, his body on fire.

“You’ve been fucked?”

“No…” Steve confessed, “I usually, oh…” Steve squirmed feeling the pressure of Billy’s middle and index fingers delving deeper.

“Do the fucking.” Steve said breathlessly as he dug his fingers into the soft flesh above Billy’s hips, coaxing a long pleasurable sound from his would be lover.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” Steve hissed, he was seeing stars as he barred down.

Billy dug deeper, curling his fingers, watching Steve tilt his head back, his beautiful neck exposed.

“I’m gonna get you off, baby,” Billy leaned in closing out the air between them, he bit cruelly making Steve yelp and twist against Billy’s knuckles.

Steve ground down, his knees riding higher against Billy’s ribs, clenching and trembling.

Billy twisted and turned Steve on his back, rolling his fingers in deeper, working roughly into the tight flesh.

“Oh, oh, please.” Steve begged, he grabbed at Billy’s shoulders his palms rising up into his hair and pulled Billy into a kiss.

“Beg.” Billy laughed softly, as he bit at Steve’s chin and lips.

“Please,” Steve bit the side of Billy’s jaws clamping his legs around Billy, hitching closer still.

Billy pushed in hard with his fingers eliciting sounds from Steve’s lips that just enflamed his desire further.
“Please!” Steve begged louder.

“Not yet, pretty boy.” Billy rolled his fingers curling in, and sucked on the side of Steve’s neck, and dipped his head down biting hard on Steve’s collar bone and dragging his tongue across it, leaving a hot wet trail of saliva.

Steve arched back, seeing stars and dug his fingers into Billy’s hair and pulled tightly, clenching his long fingers into fists and lifting his head till their mouths met. Billy’s mouth was all velvet and heat, their tongues probed deeply. Steve bit at Billy’s lip and twisted back and nipped and drew sucking kisses along his jaw, making Billy moan.

“I’m going to eat you alive,” Steve threatened as he bit and drew on Billy’s throat, “If you don’t fuck me now.”

Billy withdrew his fingers and grabbed his own cock, he was aching, he guided the tip home and thrust hard, eager and feeling desperately ravenous.

Steve cried out and grasped on to Billy tightly.

Billy grunted and thrust, it had never been like this, his appetite washed over him as he thrusted in and back, and in again. Billy rocked his hips, pinning Steve down as tightly as Steve grappled on to him.

“Billy, OH!” Steve jolted, his whole body on fire, his muscles clenching and shuddering, he could feel Billy inside of him, could feel the contact of Billy’s cock against his prostate.

Billy pushed Steve down against the mattress, dominating him roughly, lost in his own pleasure. All the longing, the fantasies, the lust washed over him, years of dreaming and wishing, Billy was blinded by the heat of consummating his decade long hunger.

“Billy,” Steve voice was low, breathless and pleading.

Billy grabbed a fist full of Steve’s hair pulling his head back. Steve’s eyes were wide and fixed on Billy’s, tears leaked out of his amber eyes.

“Steve.” Billy mumbled, feeling wildly out of control as he thrust in harder and faster. Billy was drowning in Steve’s gaze, he looked away and back again, and leaned into a brutal biting kiss, making Steve groan into the kiss.

Steve reached down and grabbed onto his own cock, pressing the tip against Billy’s belly and rubbing himself raw.

“Fuck.” Steve locked his leges around Billy entrapping him. They moved on the tide of their rutting, desperately lost at sea and clinging to one another as if for life.

Billy didn’t know who came first, or if they’d matched each other, but as he finally slowed he could feel Steve’s cum slicked hand squeezing up his side. Billy rested his weight on Steve, he felt as though he’d crossed an ocean, giddy to be alive and washed ashore into his lover’s arms.

Steve rested his arms around Billy, his body felt liquid, his muscles burning and limp. Billy murmured into Steve’s neck, his words lost and incoherent. Steve could feel himself shivering, he
was riding little waves of after glow. He felt himself come again, Billy released a little pleasurable moan but didn’t move, just laid on him limply.

Part 14
The Afterglow and Benny’s

Steve got out of bed, he didn’t want to be there when his parents got back, maybe they could get a hotel in some other town, his BMW was still parked at the High School, which made Steve chuckle, it seemed like a life time ago, time was malleable when he was with Billy Hargrove.

“I’m going to take a shower.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“Oh.” Steve stood up a little straighter and fixed his dark eyes on Billy’s, “Care to join me?”

“Sure.” Billy casually rolled off the bed, he picked up his jeans and stepped into them, just in case someone was home, he’d at the very least like to have the dignity of wearing pants when getting caught sneaking around like a teenager.

Steve led the way to the bathroom, wearing his boxers and a smile that he couldn’t shake off. His sore but it wasn’t too bad, and he could feel some errant drops of cum drying on his skin, it just made him smile more.

“Right this way mister Hargrove.” Steve swung open the bathroom door and watched Billy swagger in ahead of him and swipe back the shower curtain.

Billy looked back at Steve and slid down his jeans, revealing his beautiful ass.

“Are you enjoying the view?” Billy smirked and winked.

“It’s breath taking.” Steve sighed earnestly.

Billy leaned forward resting a hand on the shower wall and turned the hot water on, he held his hand under the spray and then ran his wet finger tips over Steve’s chest.

“Is the circus in town?” Billy teased and pinched one of Steve’s nipples lightly.

“What?” Steve blinked feeling Billy gently tug.

“Seems to me a tent-pole just went up.” Billy bit his lip, his eyes going down Steve’s stomach and to the rising fabric of his boxers.

Steve laughed and nodded looking down, he hooked his thumbs in the fabric and pulled it back a little, showing off.

“I guess you have my attention.”
“You mean I have you, at attention.” Billy stepped into the shower and ducked his head under the water, his golden curls grew heavy with water, transforming into bronze waves. He turned his face into the spray and looked at Steve blinking water off of his lashes, and licking drops that were sliding over the curve of his inviting lips.

“Christ, you’re gorgeous.” Steve stepped out of his boxers, quickly and went in after Billy. Steve pressed Billy till his back was rested against the tiled wall. Billy licked his teeth wolfishly and pulled Steve closer.

“I wanted you in the showers all through senior year,” Billy’s breath tickled Steve’s lips sending droplet down the curve of his mouth and over the pearls of his teeth. Billy tilted his head and went up the side of Steve’s neck biting and licking. His rough hands trialing down Steve’s back and sides, grasping and squeezing.

Steve sighed and leaned closer, his cock meeting Billy’s, Billy twitched forward and pressed his fingers around them both, and rolled his thumb over the tips making Steve quiver and press nearer. Steve pressed closer, feeling the pleasure of Billy’s mouth working down over his shoulder nipping and dragging his teeth back up and drawing on Steve’s neck.

“Did you ever dream of this?” Billy’s lips played over Steve’s ear, his tongue drawing over his earlobe and pulling it into his mouth, suckling and biting.

“N-no-oo-oh,” Steve rolled his hips, getting up on the balls of his feet feeling the pleasure of Billy working their cocks together.

“I did.” Billy pressed his lips and teeth across Steve’s throat, and sucked at his Adam’s apple.

“Yeah.” Steve groaned, the shower water had grown hot, the stall was blooming with steam. Billy’s grip was working them at a slow steady pace.

“In the best one,” Billy purred,”You got down on your knees.”

“And then?”

“You put those beautiful lips on my cock.”

“Mmm.” Steve moaned and locked his arms around Billy, “I wanted to, I wanted to Billy.”

Billy moaned tilting his head back he could feel the bands of Steve’s arms squeezing him like a vice, he was already on the edge. The kissed hotly, Billy grabbed Steve’s soaked hair, and held on.

Steve relaxed his arms and pressed his hands over Billy’s ribs, he let himself sink to his knees kissing and biting at Billy’s ribs as he slid down, he pressed his thumbs into Billy’s hips and delved his tongue into Billy’s bellybutton and nuzzled at his cock, landing on his knees.

“Was it like this?” Steve looked up at Billy’s face his long hair in dark tendrils around his face, eyes half closed and mouth parted.

Before Billy could utter a response he felt Steve wrap both his hands around Billy’s cock and Steve’s mouth and lips wrap around the crown. Steve’s tongue played over the tip, his fingers squeezing and torquing, Billy nearly slid down the shower wall, he braced his hands on Steve’s shoulders.

Steve tongued the tip, teasing and tasting. He felt Billy’s hand squeeze and pet the side of his neck, the other hand stroked over his head. Steve looked up at Billy, his face was flushed deeply, the blush on his skin trailing down his neck and blotching his chest. Steve blinked water out of his eyes and
closed them, concentrating on Billy’s cock. Steve let Billy fill his mouth, and drew hungrily desperate to please him.

Billy moaned and started rolling his hips, sliding slowly against Steve’s tongue and lips, careful at first.

Steve took his time drawing out Billy’s pleasure and his own, all other thoughts gone from his head. Steve kept one hand around Billy’s cock and pressed his other hand over Billy’s hip, and squeezed his ass, he let his index and middle fingers curl against the cleft of his cheeks, and probed gently with he tips of his fingers. Steve fingered and sucked at Billy.

Billy tilted his head back, feeling Steve’s exploring fingers and his hot mouth, beneath the fire of pleasure there was another tugging sensation, like Steve and he were magnetized to one another, it was a confusing sensation, as if he’d touched a texture he’d never felt or was seeing a color he’d never knew existed. For a moment the feeling was so intense, Billy thought he might tip over, but then he was caught up again in the pleasure of what Steve was doing to him, Steve’s fingers were nestled deep inside of him and slowly pulsing upward, while his lips were working on his cock, Steve was always reshaping him rebuilding him with his touches. Billy felt his insides ignite from his groin up through his stomach the wave of sensation taking him apart and it was a blooming bliss that bordered on the sensation of immolation. Billy came with a loud groan. Steve took his time and slid up Billy and kissed him, letting Billy taste himself.

They leaned against the wall, their temples pressed, sharing the same breath, their sigh synchronized.

“Christ, you’re dirty.” Billy gave Steve and appraising look and wiped Steve’s mouth and chin, feeling dizzy and dazzled.

Steve licked his bottom lip and nodded smiling slowly.

“Guess we better get clean then.” Steve grabbed a bottle of shampoo and squeezed a glob its contents into his hand and dug his fingers roughly into Billy’s hair. They alternated between scrubbing and kissing till they were both squeaky clean and the water was running cold.

Billy practically wobbled out of the shower, he was sated physically, but still imagining more and more of Steve. Steve had been his obsession for years, the constant under current of his thoughts, an obsession that Billy had tried to suppress from himself, like an addict in denial - he never wanted to say Steve’s name out loud, never wanted to admit that he was still dreaming of the boy whose face he’d pummeled, whose spirit he’d once tried to break because he couldn’t fight back against his father Neil. That had been so long ago, but the guilt had lingered like the smell of death, or an old scar that echos the ache of a long healed wound; maybe it never truly had healed.

The pair of them slinked back into Steve’s old bedroom, Billy counted the freckles and moles scattered generously down Steve’s back. He reached out and let his calloused finger tip connect the dots, pressing firmly making Steve slow his pace. When they got in the room Steve turned to face him and caught up Billy’s face and kissed him slowly.

“I feel drunk.” Steve laughed and kissed Billy again, smiling into the kiss.

“I have that effect on people.” Billy remarked cavalierly.

“Yes you do.” Steve’s voice was low and warm, heavy with sincerity.
“You’re so weird.” Billy laughed unexpectedly and kissed Steve deeply, enjoying the sensation of their stubble catching.

“Are you hungry?”

“I could eat.” Billy smirked, letting his eyes travel over Steve’s plump mouth, his lips pinked and swollen.

“I want you in bed for a week, maybe a month, no, at least a year.” Steve rambled wrapping his arms around Billy’s torso.

“Feed me first and I’ll consider.” Billy rested his index finger in the center of Steve’s chest and pressed him backward, his bright blues locked on Steve’s dark eyes.

Steve stepped back, letting his towel drop, he felt pleasantly grounded in his body, as if somehow Billy had anchored Steve’s soul to the physical world.

They dressed in silence, Steve couldn’t stop smiling to himself, he could smirk, he could quirk his lips, he could compress them but the corners just curled up. He kept glancing over at Billy watching him move around the room.

“Let’s go out of here, we could hit the diner?” Steve suggested.


“There’s the food court?”

“God, no.” Billy shook his damp curls.

“Benny’s?”

“I thought that place shut down, like before I even moved to Hawkins.”

“It reopened. I’ve not been there. Will told me about it, he said it was pretty good, for a greasy spoon.”

“Sure.” Billy shrugged into his jacket and playfully swatted Steve’s ass.

Steve crammed all his things in his duffle bag. When they went down the stairs he had to take his time, he was aching, but it only made him chuckle, after three steps down he felt Billy’s arm loop around his waist and then sweep up his long legs, Billy threw him over his shoulder in an easy swoop, duffle bag and all.

“Oof! So, chivalrous.” Steve gasped and laughed.

“You know me.” Billy patted Steve’s ass and went down the stairs at an alarming clip.

“Oh Jesus!” Steve laughed being jostled roughly. “My knight in shining armor!” Steve giggled as he was plopped down on his feet at the front door.

Steve got into the Camaro the long talk the night before and into the morning felt like a false memory as if he’d dreamt the whole conversation. He rolled down the window and let the humid Spring air blow in his face and stretched out his hand into the wind watching the once familiar landscape breeze by. He felt both weightless and firmly present in the moment, the cord that bonded him to Billy was
comfortably taught, as if the nearness had woven his soul all the tighter to Billy’s. He wanted to put it into words, to say just how he felt, as always, it was just beyond his grasp. Steve turned his gaze to Billy, his hair drying in the afternoon heat, his bright blue eyes masked by his black Ray-Bans. Billy’s fingertips were drumming on the steering wheel to a song only he could hear, he turned his head towards Steve and nodded.

“What are listening to?”

“There’s no music playing.” Billy shook his head.

“But there is, you’re drumming along with you fingers, right now.”

“ Weirdo.”

“No, seriously, what song are thinking of?”

“Guess.”

“Hold on, keep drumming.”

“Right.”

Steve closed his eyes and tilted his head back, “Keep thinking about it.”

“Sure.” Billy nodded, he was playing through a song in his mind, he started from the top, letting it play through, tapping and nodding along.

Steve closed his eyes, he let his head loll back, he reached over and rested a hand on Billy’s chest. He could feel Billy shift at his touch but then held still.

“Keep thinking about it, keep playing it through.” Steve felt as if he’d dove into the ocean, floating and pulsed by an invisible force. Somewhere in the depths of his mind, a steady driving beat took hold, he could hear the steady crashing of symbols and drums, the gnawing grinding of guitars, a voice growling out lyrics that were more noise than words.

“This is stupid.” Billy said.

“Shh.”

“You know I could just play something.”

“Shush.” Steve shut his eyes tighter, letting himself get swept by the music that was flowing from within Billy and into him.

“Thunder Kiss ’65?” Steve opened his eyes and withdrew his palm, he turned looking at Billy in anticipation.

“How the fuck did you guess that?”

“I didn’t! That’s it man, that’s the thing, the part of me that’s….” Steve drew a breath, he didn’t know what to call it, how to explain.

“The part of you that’s what?” Billy pressed, he turned off road and into the small parking lot next to Benny’s, it was empty but for two vehicles a dilapidated truck and a battered station-wagon.

“Um…like the magnets, you know, in compasses, how they point in the same direction, no matter
which way you turn them, yes,” Steve got it he knew what he wanted to say, “That’s it! Like, um, you’re like, my True-North!”

“I’m your True-North?”

“Yeah, yes. You’re my True-North.” Steve wanted to say it with conviction, but it sounded wrong, or like he wasn’t sure. He sighed and folded his arms tightly.

Billy removed his sunglasses and tucked them in his collar, he fixed Steve with his vivid topaz eyes and tilted his head.

“I’m hungry.” Billy announced and got out of the car and walked into Benny’s not waiting for Steve to keep up.

The place hadn’t changed much as far as Steve could tell. There were new light fixtures and tables, but it still had a tiny town feel. There were a pair of grizzled looking men sitting in their soiled coveralls leaning over their plates at one of the tables, and a middle aged woman and her preteen son were seated at another.

Billy surveilled the space briefly and then pulled out a chair at a table near the entrance. He snatched up a laminated menu and turned it over front to back, not looking at Steve for some time.

Steve wasn’t cold, but he pulled on his beanie, he didn’t bother with the menu, he just fidgeted in his seat.

“So what looks good?” The waiter who was also presumably also the cook had walked over.

“He’ll have a cherry-coke, the bacon cheese burger, hold the mayo and I’ll have a coke.” Steve leaned back, and watched Billy.

“Ohkay.” The waiter turned away and headed behind the counter.

“Get the fuck out of my head.” Billy said faintly.

“It’s what you want, am I right?”

“Yeah. You’re like telepathic or some shit.”

“No.” Steve blushed.

No?” Billy said flatly.

“No, I just, it’s you, you’re like a radio, I mean, I don’t know what you’re thinking all of the time, not even half of the time. I just kind of pick up some of the signals, like when you’re driving through the mountains, you know, the radio signal drops and it’s all static, and then you get to where it’s clear, or whatever, and then you just hear it, you’re like that, you’re what I hear, or feel or whatever.” Steve’s voice was getting louder.

“What am I thinking right now?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“So, I’m not a radio.”
“Not when you’re like, looking at me like that, like I just did something wrong, or,” Steve threw up his hands, “or you’re mad at me.”

“If I was mad at you, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Well, you don’t exactly look happy.” Steve twisted in his chair, everything was going wrong all over again.

“If I was mad you’d know.” Billy shrugged.
“i’m not psychic, like I don’t know what the waiter’s thinking about, or that kid.” Steve threw out his hand towards the mother and son sitting across the way, the woman was clearly trying to not look in their direction.

Billy cocked an eyebrow and leaned back in his seat. The waiter arrived with their drinks and set them down.

“I’ll have a grilled cheese.” Steve plucked up his coke and took a sip, not wanting to look at Billy’s unreadable expression anymore.

“Sure thing. You guys from out of town?”

“No” Billy said.

“Yes.” said Steve at the same time. Steve sank in his chair, he hated small talk, he hated Hawkins, most of all he hated himself. “Sort of, I grew up here.” He didn’t want to be rude.

“No kidding.” The waiter had already lost interest and walked over the the two old farts and filled their coffee cups.

“Calm down.” Billy drawled as he stirred his soda, “I’m just trying to figure this shit out, man.”

“I am calm.” Steve retorted grumpily.

“Totally, you’re the fucking Iceman.” Billy took a sip from his cup and winked at Steve.

Steve twisted in his seat and kicked at the table leg, “Will said that I’m astral projecting, and I don’t do it all the time, but when it does happen it’s,” Steve tapped his straw against the glass, he could feel Billy’s eyes on him, Steve continued, “Like it’s, well I’m looking, for you,” Steve lowered his voice, “Like I’m reaching for you.”

“Just me?” Billy glanced up from the table, he’d picked up a napkin and was folding and unfolding it, he set it down.

“It feels like you’re home, you’re my home.” Steve confessed.

Billy leaned back. The radio was playing from the kitchen, Billy recognized the song, it was Free Ride, by Nick Drake, a favorite of his mothers. Billy shivered, the synchronicity felt significant. Billy could feel Steve’s eyes lingering on him, but when Billy looked up at him, Steve had his arms folded and was looking at the table, he looked lost and sad. Billy tried to think of something that would comfort him, he wondered what it all meant, if it meant anything. How had Steve become like this, or had he always been this way, but just somehow grown into it.

The waiter arrived and set down their plates, with an air of indifference before resting their check on
the edge of the table. Steve grabbed it and pulled out his wallet, he wondered if he should just leave, if the sex had been just sex and whatever had driven him to this point, to this moment, had run its course.

Billy picked up a fat french-fry and chewed it, he grabbed the salt and took his time seasoning the fries. “Eat your food.”

“Yep.” Steve picked up a half of his sandwich and took a bite and chewed mechanically.

“I like that.” Billy said.

“Me eating?”

“No, dummy. I like being your home.” Billy picked up his burger and took a big bite, Steve watched him mutely.

“You’re like, you’re so,” Steve shook his head.

“So come to Chicago.” Billy interrupted, not sure if he wanted Steve to finish his line of thought.

“What?”

“Come to Chi-Ca-Go.” Billy repeated slowly around his food.

“I, I live in Seattle now, can’t you, would you want to come, live with me?”

“In Seattle?” Billy rolled his eyes and took another bite from his burger.

“Yeah, you could stay with me, I’ve got a big space.” Steve’s heart was racing, seconds ago he’d thought all was lost, but now he had hope, and it burned with promise.

“Harrington, I’m building a business, I’m not some fucking art student that can just pick up and move, I’ve got connections.” Billy shook his head, “Nobody’s gonna know me in Seattle, I’ve got bands and their managers come to me, I’ve got a life. I’m building something.”

Steve nibbled on a corner of his sandwich listening, his hope flickering.

“I mean if I went to Chicago, not soon, I guess, but like, I’ve got a handful of buyers and you know, a lot of support, like groups of artists, you know, and they like my work, they actually give a shit about my paintings. You know what I mean? Maybe I can.” Steve reached across the table and squeezed Billy’s arm. Steve withdrew his hand almost as quickly as he’d done it. Billy looked down at Steve’s hand as it retreated and put down his burger, he reached across the table and grabbed Steve’s face and planted a kiss on his mouth, it was just a press, a chaste kiss, but in a public space and that made Steve’s heart knock against his chest.

“I’ve got a show coming up, there’s some pieces I need to finish, and, Jesus, Billy, you just kissed me.” Steve smiled.

“I did. This burger is really good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Billy smiled and took another bite.

“Can I get the check?!” The woman at the table was grabbing her bag with one hand and her other hand was locked on the shoulder of her son as if a fire had just erupted in the building. Steve looked
over his shoulder at the lady and her child, he didn’t care, and it felt great, he released a burble of laughter, giddy and blushing.

“If I go back to the West Coast, it’s gonna be California.” Billy remarked as he ate his fries.

“So you’re saying, you’d consider the West Coast?”

“Maybe.” Billy smiled.

“I just know, I just… I need you, in my life.” Steve said thoughtfully.

“You’re a fucking Hallmark card.”

“I’m serious.”

“I can see that.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“I’m going to finish this food.”

“After that?”

“Shit, dude. Just, give me your number, we’ll figure it out.” Billy looked down at his plate, and if Steve didn’t know better he’d say Billy was blushing.

“I need to think about it.” Billy said gravely. He leaned back and set his eye’s on Steve’s.

“Okay.” Steve nodded holding Billy’s gaze.

They finished their food in a comfortable silence, and yet to Steve, it felt as if they were hanging on the side of the world, despite its turning, fixed in place across from one another - gravity was all that kept him from spinning off into space, that and Billy.

After they ate they walked out to the parking lot and leaned against Billy’s Camaro and shared a cigarette. The afternoon light was golden and Steve felt alive, as if he’d absorbed all the light and it had fused him with new possibilities, imagining a life with Billy, he’d never even dared, but now it seemed attainable.

“I’m going to take you to your car, and then I gotta get back to Chicago.”

“What about you coming to Seattle?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Are you thinking yes?”

“I’m thinking!” Billy shouldered into Steve, a small smile playing in the corner of his mouth.

“I know, I know.” Steve shuffled sideways and then leaned back into Billy.

“I’m driving back to Washington.”
“That’s a hell of a haul.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it, you know?”

“I wish I could go with you.” Billy said the words so softly that Steve wasn’t sure he’d heard him right.

“I wish you could too. Should I wait?”

“What?”

“I could wait, I mean, at the most like four weeks, I need at least three days to drive, and then like a week to get ready for my opening.”

“Wait, your opening? You’ve got a show coming up?”

“Yeah, I’m in an exhibit, it’s an art opening. My paintings, I mean there’s going to be two other artists, but I’m in the main gallery, and I still need to get some of the pieces photoed for the exhibit catalogue, and there’s a pretty big piece that I need to finish, it’d be cutting things close.” Steve paced a bit, doing mental math, counting the days. “I mean, I think I could make the drive in two days, if I really pushed, but I don’t know, the car’s getting old, it’s in great condition though.”

“Easy there, pretty boy.”

“What?”

“I can’t wrap up my life in four weeks, maybe four months, and I haven’t even decided yet.”

“Okay, well.” Steve hesitated, and turned in a small circle, “Maybe I can come see you after the opening, I can fly out, or maybe after my show closes, I need to get the pieces back that don’t sell. I love Seattle, but, if you really want to stay in Chicago.”

“You’d do that?”

“Leave Seattle, for you, yes.” Steve nodded.

Billy stepped forward, he grabbed Steve by the shoulders and shook him lightly.

“What? What did I say?” Steve released a nervous laugh.

“Everything. Everything you say, I think you were the one that got dropped on his head.”

“I said that to you once, didn’t I? I asked you if you’d been dropped on your head, I’m sorry.”

“Forget about it,” Billy shook him again, “that’s not the point, Harrington. You have a life there, you just said that you’ve got patrons, that you’re up and coming in the art world or whatever.”

“You do too, and you’re right, I mean, I can pack up my shit, I’ll find another space to paint. It’s not like I won’t find some other people that are willing to buy my paintings, I hope. Besides I’ll probably just end up at some bourgeoisie private school teaching angry entitled brats how to paint vases and plums.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I mean that or being a waiter. There’s not a lot to be done with a MFA, outside of teaching or waiting tables.”
“No boyfriend of mine is teaching brats, I’ll respect you more if you wait tables, or I can teach you how to bartend.” Billy winked at him.

“Boyfriend?” Steve inquired.

“Yeah, or do you want to keep it casual?” Billy sounded insulted.

“No, no way.” Steve shook his head.

“I’m touched.”

“I can move, I can come to Chicago if that’s what it takes.”

“Just slow down.” Billy leaned forward and kissed Steve, it was a lingering and exploring kiss, they embraced in the parking lot, drawing the kiss out tenderly.

“I don’t want to.”

“I can see that.” Billy shook his curls, a beautiful smile parting his perfect lips.

“Drive home, call me along the way. We’ll figure things out.”

“But I’m here now, we can figure this out now.”

“You can Steve, you can figure this out right now, because you’re high on sex and you’ve got your head in the clouds, space cadet.” Billy withdrew, “Just get in the car, c’mon.”

“Okay.” Steve said mournfully, he didn’t want to give up, he never begged, he never insisted on anything, but he’d never felt as if his life depended on a single decision, the thought of not knowing, of not having a plan, shared and plotted out was making him crazy.

Part 15

Hawkins High School Parking lot

Billy pulled over next to Steve’s BMW, it looked even better in the daylight, waxed and not a mark on it, almost as if had been kept in a time-capsule. He looked over at Steve, he was scruffy and his eyes were fixed on Billy’s. Billy shook his head and put the car in park.

“Just call me when you get to your first stop, I don’t care what time it is.”

“May I should just follow you to Chicago. I could maybe, fly out from there to Seattle, or just, I don’t know, pull out of the exhibit.” Steve attempted a casual shrug.

“No, Steve.” Billy tried to be gentle, tried to keep his tone soft, but he was tired, and overwhelmed.

“Okay.” Steve nodded, keeping his eyes on the dashboard.
“It’s not a big deal, right? Like you can just,” Billy made his hand into a plane and flew it into Steve’s chest, “fly in and visit me with your mutant powers.”

“I’m not a mutant, and I can’t always control it.”

“I bet you can.”

“Easy for you to say.” Steve frowned lightly and pulled his beanie down lower.

“Hey, give me your info.” Billy nudged him gently and watched as Steve dug into his battered duffle bag, “Maybe having the address will make it easier, you can check your Thomas Guide for a direct route.”

“Ha-ha.” Steve pulled out a pen and his well worn journal.

Billy watched intently as Steve wrote out his phone number and address, and an email address as well, his long fingers with their chipped black nails were mesmerizing. Steve tore out the page and handed it to Billy, Billy took it from him and quartered it, and put it into the interior pocket of his leather jacket, keeping his eyes on Steve’s.

“Your turn.” Steve handed over the journal and the pen, his doe eyes dancing over Billy, feasting on every aspect of his face, knowing that they’d be parting soon.

“Let’s see.” Billy squinted and tapped the pen to his lip, “Ah yes, the Hargrove Hovel.” He scrawled in broad strokes his address, number and email, feigning to have forgotten mid way and then laughing as he wrote it out.

“Here you go, don’t lose it.” Billy held out the journal and then snapped it away. Steve lunged at him attempting to wrestle it out of his fingers. Billy took the opportunity to pull Steve into his arms, within seconds they went from tussling to kissing.

The kissing slowed and Steve was all but draped over Billy, both of them flushed, the car was hot and stuffy, but Billy didn’t mind.

“I need to be on the road.”

“I know, me too. Oh shit, I gotta stop at the house.” Steve stuffed his face in Billy’s neck groaning.

“Sounds horrible.”

“it’ll be fine, I just need to say good-bye to my folks.”

“Yeah.” Billy stroked Steve’s long tangled thick hair, his hat had tumbled off during their make-out session.

“But I’ll call you at my first stop, I promise.”

“Okay, leave a message if I’m not there.”

“I hope you’re home.”

“Yeah, me too. But don’t expect me to wait by the phone like some teenage girl.” Billy squeezed Steve tightly, fully expecting to be waiting by the phone as soon as he got back to Chicago.

“I won’t.” Steve kissed Billy’s neck.
“Good.” Billy tilted his head back, freeing up more skin for those plump lips.

“You do have an answering machine, right?”

“Yeah.” Billy ran his hand over Steve’s back, the realization that they were going to be parted in a matter of minutes settled on Billy like a weight.

“Okay.” Steve nodded and slowly peeled himself away.

They both got out of the car, Steve tossed his bag in the trunk of his Beamer and slammed it shut.

“You’re still thinking about it?”

“Yes.” Billy lied, he didn’t need to think about it, he wanted Steve to come to Chicago, but it didn’t feel fair, it didn’t feel like Billy could ask him to do that, even if Steve was willing.

“Well don’t, don’t think about it too much, just so you know, in a couple months, I’m moving to Chicago.”

“Steve.”

“If you’ll let me?”

“Come’ere Bambi.”

“Bambi?” Steve laughed.

“Yeah, you with your saucer eyes, You’re like a Keane painting.”

“I don’t look like a Keane painting.” Steve blushed.

“Eye of the beholder, Harrington.” Billy stroked Steve’s cheek and kissed him softly.

Billy kissed Steve, intending for it to be the kiss good-bye, but instead one kiss led to two, then three, then he lost count. Billy didn’t want to let go, he didn’t want to stop. It was more than physical desire, there was a gnawing in his chest, a small cigarette burn of fear that kept growing and growing, like his whole heart was just going to burn up. He worried Steve would get home, see the life he had in Seattle, the art scene, being so far from Indiana probably felt safe, being away from all the horrors of their youth. What if Steve just never called? Billy felt an ache behind his eyes, his throat closing up, as his chest tightened like a fist holding on for dear life.

“Are you okay?” Steve's voice was soothing, what Billy would have dismissed as saccharine and patronizing in the past, he now knew it was genuine tenderness. Steve had always worn his heart on his sleeve, and Billy understood that now.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m gonna hit the road. We’ll talk soon.”

“I'm going to call you, it’s going to be late, but I'll call you, okay?”

“Yeah, you said.”

“Okay.”

“Right, have fun with your folks, don’t hang around Hawkins for too long, I hear there’s still a lot of heartbroken ladies with their eyes on you.”
“Ha! Well too bad for them, I’m off the market.”

“Yes you are.” Billy winked, he kissed Steve quickly and grabbed Steve’s dick through his jeans, Billy could feel the heat of it through Steve’s jeans, Steve half hard from their make out session and it was almost enough to stop Billy from getting in his car and driving away. Billy started to pull away from the kiss but Steve grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him closer, he rolled into Billy’s hand and wetly licked his lips.

“We’re going to be together Billy.” Steve promised, his eyes steady, his breath hot against Billy’s mouth.

Billy nodded, at a loss for words. He cupped Steve’s face in his hands and kissed Steve again. Billy took a step back and felt for a second as if he was falling into space, like he’d just stepped off a cliff and was tumbling into darkness. Billy didn’t say a word, he couldn’t, or he’d start crying like a child. He’d never felt so terrible walking away from someone, he took a few steps back and shot Steve an insouciant wink, and got in his car, despite his hands shaking Billy managed to start the Camaro with a roar and reversed out of his parking spot, he couldn’t look back, even if he had he wouldn’t have been able to see Steve shrinking into the distance, he was all but blinded by the tears standing in his eyes.

Part 16

On the Road Home

Route 31 North Bound, Indiana

Billy was making good time, he figured he’d be home in an hour and a half if not sooner. He resisted the urge to speed, there were too many bored cops around these small towns that he was passing through, or worse he might cross paths with a highway patrol man with a grudge against anyone that didn’t look like they were a farm hand or ex-military. Billy maintained a speed where he was barely over three miles above the speed limit. The sun was low but it was still a bright spring evening. Every time he thought about Steve some part of him ached with yearning, his heart hurt, or he felt a rush deep in his groin, for once in his life his heart, head and body were in agreement about what he wanted.

There weren’t many cars on the road, for which Billy was glad, he turned up his stereo and thought about the dreams he’d had about Steve. He wondered which ones Steve had been there, really been there. They might have more shared memories than either of them realized, or maybe more than Steve had let on.

Billy’s mind kept drifting, he wondered if Steve had left Hawkins yet, or if he was having a miserable family dinner. Billy imagined there were men and women in Seattle that were waiting for Steve to come home, some pretty artsy boys, or bearded grunge gods, riot grrls in too short babydoll dresses and combat boots - the lot of them hell bent on getting a taste of some Harrington dick. Billy had no idea what life was like for someone that had gone to art school, he imagined a lot of coffee and hash accompanied with long conversations about the deeper meaning behind Cobain’s lyrics and DeKooning’s paintings. He slapped his palm against the steering wheel and leaned over and turned on the stereo, he didn’t have a CD player, but he still had loads of mixed tapes. Billy ejected the cassette that was in and popped in one that he’d never admit was his Harrington mix and let it play.
Billy released a snort of laughter, all these years later and he was still possessive of Steve. He’d hated knowing that Tommy and Steve had been thick as thieves for years, but he’d used it to his advantage and covertly pumped Tommy for knowledge, Carol too.

Billy glanced in his rear view mirror and saw a highway-patrol car behind him. He checked his speedometer feeling reflexively nervous. He was right at the speed limit, he looked in the mirror again and snapped a salute, he hated cops and all of their ilk, they reminded him of old man, power drunk and biting at the bit for someone like Billy to step out of line. The cruiser kept pace with him and followed closely as they snaked along the road. Billy saw a sign telling him he was crossing county lines, shortly thereafter the patrol-car pulled over on the side of the road.

“Fuck you very much, Deputy Dip-Shit.” Billy crowed as he watched the car diminish into the distance. He turned up the volume on the stereo and sped for a bit, feeling exalted at not being pulled over; but it was more than that. It was Steve, Steve wanted him, Steve wanted him in his life, he wanted to live with him, to be his lover. Billy laughed, his eyes glistening with emotion. How the hell had that happened Billy wondered, he was in awe of how his life had suddenly changed for the better, it had already been going pretty well, but this, this was fucking magical.

Billy sped along, the anxiety and fear had melted into something between disbelief and hope, it wasn’t something Billy was accustomed to feeling, it practically accosted his mind with a melee of emotions. He leaned over and turned up the stereo, when he looked back up at the road he saw a big rig headed his direction. The truck was in the middle of both lanes and drifting into further into his. Billy pumped his breaks and blew his horn, in a flash he saw that the driver was slumped over the wheel. Billy turned the steering wheel hard and slammed his breaks, his Camaro’s wheels squealing and he gripped hard on the steering wheel trying to avoid a head-on collision. The Camaro spun in an arc as the tail took the brunt of the hit and then he was rolling.

“FUCK!” Billy yelled, his mind flashed on Steve’s beautiful dark eyes, he could feel Steve’s lips on his, the Camaro was slammed and slid sideways, Billy felt himself get launched into a tumble, he could hear the crashing of glass and the groaning of bending steel, the roof of the car screamed against the asphalt and the whole body of the car seemed to be shrinking around him, he was rolling and crashing. The stereo was still blaring in his ears, underneath the storm of noise as the car careened being propelled by the truck that was plowing it down the highway. He felt himself slam into the steering wheel, the breath knocked from his body, his head cracking on the windshield.

Steve!

Billy felt panicked, the blood rushing to his head, he was collapsed against the roof of his car, scrabbling to get hold of something, and then there was smoke, he couldn’t breath, couldn’t see, his vision filling with red and then black, and then nothing.

Part 17

“I’ve Gotta Go Now.”

Hawkins, IN
Steve had driven home. Driving with his head in the clouds and his mind full of thoughts of the future, suddenly all the things he didn’t like about life seemed to fade away, all the annoying stresses and worries seemed absurd, not sure about what to do after finishing his MFA, so what? Not sure if was a good enough artist? Who cares, as long as he was doing what he wanted. His parents didn’t like the choices he was making, big deal, they’d not be too excited once they found out about Billy, and that was not his problem, it was theirs!

When he arrived at the house his mother was in the kitchen, her dark auburn hair had silver showing at the roots, the lines around her eyes were a little deeper, but she still looked beautiful to Steve. He walked right up to her in the kitchen and grabbed her up in a hug.

“I love you, mom.”

“Oh, I love you too! Where were you? Did you have fun at the reunion? I heard the fire alarm went off. I can’t believe it, do you think it was someone there for the reunion, or maybe some of the high school kids snuck in?”

“Who knows?” Steve laughed, “I’m glad I came, it’s good to see you.”

“You’re not leaving now are you?”

“Yeah, I need to get back.”

“It’s such a long drive, are you sure you don’t just want stay? Maybe some money for a new car?”

“Mom, that’s really sweet. I think Dad would freak out if I asked him for money, and my BMW is still good, you know? I’ve got good memories of that car, I’d like to make some more.” Steve smiled, imagining driving to Chicago and finally getting Billy Hargrove in the back seat.

“Well, your father’s name isn’t the only one on the checking account you know.” His mother reached up and smoothed his hair, “Are you happy?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m so glad, you seemed so sullen yesterday.”

“I think I was just, overwhelmed, but I’m good now. I just want to get on the road and head back to Seattle, I’ve got a lot of things I need to take care of.”

“Well, if you’re sure. Let me just give you a little gas money, okay honey?”

“Sure, mom. Thanks.” Steve watched her leave the kitchen. He wandered over to the back window and looked out at the yard. The pool water was still, reflecting the dusky sky, clouds were suspended in the water, white and pink. Everything was more beautiful now that he had a future with Billy.

“You don’t want to wait for your father?”

“I don’t think he’ll miss me.”

“He loves you.” His mother squeezed his shoulders.

“I love him too, but we’re just very different… people. Are you sure I wasn’t adopted?”
“Steve!” His mother swatted his shoulder, “You’re my boy, and I love you very much, we love you and I miss you, please come see us for the holidays, at least?” She pressed some folded bills in his hand. Steve put the cash in his back pocket looking at her.

“Yeah, I can come for Thanksgiving.” Steve leaned on the counter, he looked at his mother and not for the first time searched for his own features in her face, he didn’t really look like either of his parents.

“Do you remember when I was little and I asked dad where I came from and he said out of test-tube?”

“Oh my gosh, well you couldn’t expect him to explain, where babies come from to a four year old!”

“I still think it’s a weird thing to say to a kid.”

“Would you have felt better if he’d said the stork dropped you down the chimney?”

“Maybe.” Steve chuckled.

“I wish, ugh…,” Steve shrugged feeling childish.

“What, honey?”

“I wish Grandpa Otis was still around.”

“You two, you had something really special.”

“Yeah.” Steve nodded.

His mother stepped forward and hugged him tightly.

Steve wished he and his father had been closer, but it was too late now, or maybe his dad just wasn’t the father Steve wanted him to be, just as much as Steve wasn’t the son he’d been dreaming of, still their differences couldn’t be anymore extreme, in personality, appearance and temperament, Steve wasn’t sure why he was dwelling on it now.

“I better get going.” Steve muttered faintly.

He and his mother embraced tightly. Steve imagined that once he’d moved to Chicago, he’d be sure to visit her on special occasions, it sounded awful, but it also sounded like the right thing to do.

“Drive safe.”

“I always do.”

“And get a hair cut!” His mother ruffled his hair, she was smiling, her eyes bright with emotion.

“Okay, okay, I will. Soon. I love you too.”

Steve got in his car and figured he had time for one more stop before heading west. He drove along the familiar roads, barely aware of the world around himself, all he could think about was Billy, what they’d done, and what they’d do in the future. The thought of waking up with Billy beside him in his bed everyday was too beautiful to even dream of, but that’s what the future held now. A lifetime with Billy Hargrove, Steve knew he was the one, the only one.
Steve drove down the bend and parked in front of the Byers home. He wasn’t even sure if Will was in, but he couldn’t leave without at least checking to see if he could catch him. He went up the steps and knocked on the door. He didn’t have to wait long, Will opened the door and smiled brightly.

“Hey, you’re just in time!”

“Oh, in time for what?”

“Dinner, Jonathan’s on his way.”

“Cool, I don’t think I should stay too long though, I’m going to start driving back tonight.”

“Already?” Will frowned, and stepped back so that Steve could come inside the house.

“Yeah.” Steve stepped in and looked around, he could hear Joyce In the kitchen, “Will, did you set the timer for the chicken?”

“Yeah, Steve’s here!”

“Oh, oh!” Joyce came out of the kitchen, her hair was tied up in a loose pony-tail, she threw out her arms, “Steve!”

“Hey, how are you?” Steve stepped forward and embraced her, she was so tiny he felt like he could wrap his arms around her twice, he rested his chin on the top of her head briefly.

“Oh my gosh, did you join a band? You’ve really gone native, you look like a Seattle man through and through! You’re thin, you’re staying for dinner right?”

“Uh.” Steve hesitated and nodded.

“Great, Jonathan’s on his way, I think Nancy is planning on doing something with her mom and Mike and Holly, but she’ll be here later. I heard someone pulled the fire alarm last night at the reunion.”

“Yeah, it was uh, kind of funny,” Steve briefly flashed on Billy pulling the alarm, “I can’t stay too late.”

“Why not?” Joyce smiled a little sadly, “I wish all the kids were in town, you know, I miss having all of you here.”

“Mom, it’s okay, Steve has a long way to go.”

“Oh, I know, but it would just be so fun. You’re all grown up now. Did you know Dusty’s going to Cal Tech?”

“Yeah, we write sometimes, haven’t talked to him in months though.”

“Will is Mike coming over?”

“No, we’re going to hang out tomorrow.” Will shrugged.

“Jim was just telling me the other day that Mike and Jane are back together again, I wonder if it’ll work out this time…”
“Ugh.” Will groaned.

“Well, it took me a Hop a long time to be, you know, we were in the right place and time together, relationships are complicated, you’ll find out one day.” Joyce swiped at Will’s shoulder, but he ducked away.

“C’mon Steve, I have some new panels for my comic, I just inked them.”

“Go on.” Joyce encouraged, her gaze on Will’s face.

Steve followed Will into his room. His desk light was shining on his drafting table, illuminating large illustrated sheafs of paper. Steve walked over and started taking them in.

“She’s worried that I don’t date.”

“That’s her job, she’s your mom.”

“I guess so, but I wish she wouldn’t.”

“Yeah. I know the feeling.”

“You seem different tonight.”

“What? From yesterday, um, yeah. I think I’m just glad it’s over, the reunion, I mean.”

“Is that all?”

“Maybe, no, I don’t know. I think, like I feel…” Steve hesitated, he’d never told anyone how he felt about Billy. He wasn’t sure if he was ready yet, like if he talked about it, it might all just vanish, like he’d break the spell.

There was a wrap on the door frame to Will’s room, Steve looked over and saw Jonathan. His pale face and sleepy, his smiling eyes framed in horn rimmed glasses.

“Hey! I didn’t get to say hello last night!”

“Yeah, you were working, cool specs!” Steve walked over and offered Jonathan his hand, Jonathan grasped it and pulled him into a one armed hug.

“Thanks,” Jonathan pushed up his glasses, “You look good man, like you’re yourself, you know?”

“I feel like myself.”

“That’s great, that’s great, how’s the art going, are you still plugging away at getting your MFA?”

“No, I finished.” Steve smiled, he felt kind of proud, and for the first time he really was.

“Congrats!”

“Thanks.”

“Nancy’s going to swing by after eight, can you stick around?”

“No, I wasn’t really planning on staying past dinner, I gotta get on the road.”

“Aw, what, we never see you!”

“I know, I know, but maybe we can plan something? You know, I could come spend a long
weekend in New York with you two, maybe pick up Will on the way?” Steve reached over and patted Will’s shoulder, he wondered what they would all think when he showed up with Billy, Steve laughed, giddy with visions of being seen as ‘a couple’ with bad-boy Hargrove.

“That would be great, whatcha think, Will?” Jonathan grinned brightly.

“That would be cool.” Will nodded, he looked pleased and it made Steve happy, no matter what face Will put to the world, to Steve there was often an undercurrent of melancholy in his eyes.

“I’m going to call Nance, maybe she can come over a little sooner, I think she’s kind of over ‘family-fun-time’.”

“You don’t need to do that.” Steve protested.

“I know, but she’ll be bummed if she misses you, she was kind of hurt you didn’t say good-bye last night, you know she really cares about you.”

Steve smiled, not sure what to say and just turned back to Will’s project, “Yeah, well I care about all you guys, I just live so far away now.”

“Everyone does.” Will said faintly.

Steve was tilting the lamp above Will’s pages to get a better look at the ink work when he suddenly felt a wave of panic rush over him, he staggered back a bit, it was like the room was spinning.

“Steve?”

The sound of crushing metal was ringing all around him. He pressed his hands over his ears, he was tumbling, and tumbling.

“Jonathan!” He heard Will call from a million miles away.

“Steve?!” It was Will, part of Steve knew it was Will saying his name, but he heard Billy’s voice shouting his name in his mind.

Steve fell forward onto Will’s drafting table, hitting his temple on the edge of it before tipping back against the bed and slumping on his side to the floor. Will fell on his knees beside Steve.

“Oh my god, oh, shit. Jonathan!” Will rested his hands on Steve’s temples trying to still him.

Jonathan came into the room, and saw Will knelt over Steve. Steve was groaning and mumbling incomprehensibly.

“I think he’s having a seizure!” Will’s voice was verging on tears, he clasped his hands over Steve’s, Steve’s hands were still clamped over his ears.
“What’s wrong?” Joyce rushed in the room.

Jonathan called over his shoulder, “Call 911!”

Joyce rushed back out to grab the phone in the hall. Jonathan shoved the bed sideways to fit himself on the other side of Steve.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Steve, can you hear me?” Jonathan strained to keep his voice calm.

Steve could hear them, when he opened his eyes he saw them, but his vision was split, he could see red, he could smell gas and smoke, but Will’s bedroom was clear he could see the ceiling and the Byers’ brothers leaning over him, trying to reach him.

“I,” Steve tried to make sense of it all, he felt like he was split in two, part of him was on fire with pain, his neck and his back felt compressed and crumpled, his legs felt cramped and folded, but he also could feel that he was laying on the floor looking up, but when he blinked he was looking at the Camaro’s steering wheel, and there was blood in his eyes, it burned.

“There coming, the ambulance is coming.” Joyce’s voice came in loud and clear, and then it was lost again.

“Radio.” Steve mumbled, he couldn’t explain, he wasn’t there with them anymore, he was with Billy, but Billy was fading, the signal was fading.

Steve closed his eyes and pushed and twisted himself, he burrowed deeper into Billy’s presence, he could feel a booted heel find purchase on the center console, his right arm was useless or rather Billy’s right arm, it hurt, everything was hurting.

“There coming, Steve. Just breathe, just take a slow breath.” Will had one hand on Steve’s chest, Jonathan wiped at the blood that was dripping from Steve’s lip where it had split on the edge of the desk.

“I, gotta go,” Steve managed to say. He was losing, he was losing Billy. The more he focused on the Byers the less he felt Billy.

“You’re not going anywhere Steve.” Joyce said fiercely, “You hang on, you’re okay. You hear me?”

“I,’ Steve felt like the there were a red thousand threads as fine as spider’s webs that tied him to Billy and they were snapping one after the other, faster and faster. He could hear the pinging of the Camaro’s engine, the smell of burning rubber was acrid in the back of his throat, he couldn’t breathe, he needed to get out, Billy needed to get up, but he couldn’t, he was nearly gone.

“I’ve gotta go now.” Steve murmured, Will leaned forward, he barely heard the words, but he felt his heart drop and shrivel.

---

Part 18

The Possession of Billy Hargrove
Steve looked around, Will, Jonathan and Joyce were gone, Jonathan’s room had vanished. The quiet cozy room he’d been in had been replaced by broken glass and the heavy scent of motor oil and smoldering engines. Steve looked at his hands, they weren’t his, they were Billy’s. Steve brought them up to his face and his vision went a little blurry, there was blood in his eyes in Billy’s eyes, Steve wiped them away and knew what he had to do.

“I’m here, I’ve got you.” Billy’s voice spoke Steve’s words, it was rasping and breathless. Steve could feel Billy presence, it was faint, a slipping living thing that might slither out of his grasp. Steve turned and peered out where the driver’s side window had been, the opening was narrow. He started crawling his way out. He used his legs and his left arm, could feel the muscles of Billy’s body responding to his will. It took time, every inch he moved sent lightning flashes of pain through him. Sparks of white and red flashed across his vision.

“I’m going to get you out of here, but you’ve got to hold on.” Steve spoke, hearing Billy’s voice was strangely comforting. Steve dragged himself out of the smashed car. He didn’t look back, he just looked at the next few feet of road before himself and reached and drew himself further from the wreckage. The sky was rust colored and spinning, he could hear someone yelling, he didn’t pay it any mind, he just kept dragging Billy towards safety.

“I’m here, we’ve gotta get outta this mess. I got you, don’t go, just don’t go.” It was as if Billy was shrinking inside of him, for a split second he couldn’t feel him at all, but then it was there again, a flickering flame that danced in his chest. Steve folded some part of himself tight around the seed of Billy, the wounded bird of his soul that shared the same body. Steve kept crawling, he felt his booted foot get leverage on the side of the car and pushed himself further out. He’d cleared the car, now he just needed to get to the side of the road.

“Just a little further, and we can take a break okay?” Steve’s struggled to speak through the foreign mouth he was inhabiting, the lips he’d been kissing hours ago were now his to speak with.

Steve grasped long drying grass by the side of the road and rolled himself, rolled Billy, on his side, and then on his back. He could breathe again, he took several shuddering gasps looking up at the fading daylight.

“I love you, I love you so much. Just please hold on, I’m going to take care of you. I’m going to come live with you.” Steve felt sick, he felt like he was going to throw up, but when his stomach seized he only coughed up bile, he could taste blood. He ran his hands over Billy’s stomach, over the body he was possessing, feeling for wounds. He didn’t think he was bleeding, at least not externally.

A figure staggered over, the man was bloodied and bewildered looking.

“Are you okay?”

“No! We’re not fucking okay.” Steve snapped.

The man lurched forward, his figure suddenly awash in light, a police truck pulled up, its blue and red lights strobed across the wreckage. Steve looked up at the sky.

“Hang on, hang on.” He could still feel Billy there, deep within, it made him weep, with relief and barely stifled fear. Steve wanted to sleep, he wanted to close his eyes and just rest, he forced them open and focused on breathing. It hurt. Everything hurt, he felt Billy fold tighter within himself, balling up like a fist.
“I think you’d really like Seattle, it’s not so bad.” Steve babbled, “What am I saying? I’m going to fucking love Chicago, I want to meet your friends and you can take me to all of your favorite spots. It’s going to be great. It’s going to be so good, Billy.”

Steve heard someone speaking, he looked up, there was a man in highway patrol uniform kneeling next to him.

“What’s your name son?”

“Steve, no, Billy.”

“Billy?”

“Yeah, Billy Hargrove.”

“My name’s Ken, we’re getting you some help. There’s an ambulance coming.”

Steve was barely aware of Ken moving around him, touching him carefully. Steve could hear the crackle of the radio, another highway patrol car had pulled up. Steve peered towards the voices of two other men, the truck driver was sitting on the side of the road and the other highway patrol man, Ken’s partner was tending to his wounds.

“How old are you?”

“27?” Steve guessed, he knew he was a little older than Billy, but he wasn’t sure when Billy’s birthday was.

“When’s your birthday?” Steve was asking Billy but Ken said, “My birthday’s in March. Do you remember what happened? Do you know what day it is?”

“It’s Saturday.” Steve stared up at the sky, but he wasn’t looking at anything he was concentrating on Billy, his wavering energy, it was as if he had his hands around a flame and was shielding it from blasting winds.

The next moment Steve was aware of the physical world he was strapped to a gurney, there was an oxygen mask on his face and he was being jostled into an ambulance. It was night now.

“We’re on our way, baby.” Billy’s voice was muffled by the mask as Steve spoke. The EMTs were speaking calmly.

“Looks like you’re gonna be fine Billy, maybe a few broken bones and a little head trauma, just try to stay awake, okay?”

“Sure.” Steve attempted to nod but they’d put a brace around Billy’s neck.

Part 19

Boyfriend in a Coma

Plymouth, IN
Hey, I missed you.

“What?” Billy felt stoned, he felt heavy, he was drugged to the gills.

I love you.

“Where am I?” Billy demanded, trying claw through the fog caused by the pain meds were being pumped into him.

“You’re awake!” Max exclaimed.

“What the hell?” Billy frowned, he closed his eyes, he could smell antiseptic, and hear faint beeping.

“I hate hospitals.” Billy wondered why the fuck he was in a hospital bed.

Me too, baby.

“Yeah, I know. I think everyone does.” Max squeezed Billy’s hand.

Billy forced his eyes open wide and they squinted tightly as he peered around the bright room. The room was white, little signs were posted here and there, but Billy couldn’t see well enough to read any of them. He saw Max seated beside him, her hand clasping his.

“Where’s Steve?”

“What?”

“Where’s Harrington?”

“Um, Seattle, I think.”

“He was just here.” Billy growled and then coughed several times, his throat felt like he’d been swallowing sand.

“He wasn’t in the car with you. Do you remember what happened?” Max coaxed gently.

Billy frowned, he did. He remembered getting rammed into by a semi truck. The driver had been asleep or drunk, or both.

“My fucking car.” Billy moaned.

“Forget the car, you’re lucky to be alive.” Max laughed, her eyes damp.

“How long have I been here?” He squinted around the room still not convinced that Steve wasn’t there, he’d just heard him.

“Three days, you’ve been in and out of consciousness, we got here the morning after the accident.”

“We?”

“Mom’s here too, she’s went to the cafeteria to get food. They called my number, it was in your wallet. I got a bus here and Mom drove over from Hawkins.”

“You’re missing school.” Billy didn’t know why it mattered, it just seemed important. He wondered what the hell they were giving him, he reached over and attempted to pull out a needle that was in his arm, that’s when he saw that his right arm was in a cast, from knuckles all the way up to his arm pit.
“I think this is a good reason to miss school, nerd.” Max reached over and pushed his casted arm away, “don’t do that.”

“You gotta call him for me.”

“Call who?”

“Steve!”

“Okay! I don’t have his number though. I can see if Lucas has it.” Max reached over and grabbed the hospital phone. She glanced at the instructions taped on the key pad and punched 9 followed by Lucas’ phone number which she knew by heart.

“It’s in my jacket. Where’s my stuff?” Billy could hear himself slurring his mouth tongue and gums were sticking together. He spotted a water cup with a straw and sloshed most of its contents on himself and then took a long sip.

Max hung up the phone before the call went through and got up and went to the narrow closet and opened it, “I think your jacket is all that’s left.”

Billy furrowed his brow, it made his head hurt worse than before. His car had been upside down, and he’d felt a rush of heat, it had started in his stomach and rushed through him, and it had been like he was dreaming, but not delirious, but not real. Shock, Billy wondered, but no, he knew now it had been Steve, Steve had come to him.

“Steve?” Billy screwed his eyes shut.

“I found it, I’m gonna call right now.” Max had the page from Steve’s journal in her hand.

“He’s not here.” Billy twisted his head back, snakes of pain slithered up his neck.

“I know, I told you. I think, I better get a nurse.”

“Call him, he’s on the road, he might not be home yet, just call.” Billy shuddered.

“You sound delirious.”

“Just call him!” Billy yelled as he half sat up. He sank back immediately. He couldn’t stop himself, he started crying, he turned his face away from Max and sobbed uncontrollably.

“Hey, Billy.” Max touched his shoulder, but he flinched away.

“I’m fine.” He choked the words out, wiping his face even though the tears were still falling, “Just call him, please.”

Max picked up the phone and punched in the number, she cradled the receiver under her chin watching Billy turn his back on her again, shuddering and curling up into a ball. Max listened to the phone ring, the line was crackling. She reached over and gently pulled the flimsy hospital blanket over Billy’s shoulder, she could see purple and black bruises on his back and shoulder where his hospital gown was gapping, she frowned imagining the pain he was in. She heard Steve’s voice come on subdued and distant, ‘Sorry I missed you, please leave your name and the best number to reach you at and I’ll call you back as soon as I’m able, thanks.’

“Hey Steve, it’s Max. I’m at the hospital, um Saint Joseph’s in Plymouth, with Billy. He’s going to be okay, but um, he really wants to talk to you, so can you call this number?” Max read the number
off the top of the phone, “If we check out before we hear from you I’ll call and let you know where you can reach us. It was a pretty bad car accident, but Billy’s awake, and he’s going to be okay. So, yeah, we’re in Indiana, just a couple counties north-east of Hawkins, um… Okay, bye.” Max set down the phone and looked at Billy’s back, he’d pulled his spare pillow over his face.

“Billy?”

“He’s not there.” Billy’s voice was muted by the pillows and very hoarse.

“I’m sure he’ll call.” Max touched Billy’s shoulder gently.

Billy pulled down the pillow but kept his face turned away from her, “Just give me a sec okay, I just, go get a me coke or something.”

“Yeah, okay. Do you want a doctor?”

“No.”

“Okay, I’ll be back in a few.” Max went out into the hallway. She didn’t know what the hell was making Billy freak out but it was making her worry. She walked down the hall to the vending machine and stuffed in a few coins. She wanted to call Jane, maybe Jane could help, but if she asked her to help him and Billy found out he’d get all bent out of shape. Max frowned, maybe Billy wouldn’t have to know. Max walked over to a waiting room where there was a row of pay-phones with little wooden dividers, three of them were occupied and one had an out of order sign taped to it. She waited impatiently pacing.

“Hey, who are you going to call?” Susan had walked over she was holding a wrapped sandwich and a bottle of juice out to Max.

“Mom. He’s awake, he’s really, upset.”

“Well, I would be too.”

“I think he’s delirious.”

“The doctor did say he might have some head trauma, but I’m sure it will clear up. Why don’t I go sit with him?”

“I think he needs a minute, he seemed a little, well, very pissed off.” She almost said sad, but she didn’t want to tell Susan how confused Billy really seemed, how he’d thought Steve was there, and was now demanding that she contact him. It didn’t make sense to Max. They were never friends, Billy never asked about Steve. She wondered if something bad had happened at the reunion. She’d been waiting for Billy to get back from Hawkins so she could grill him all about it. Maybe Jane would have heard.

“Max?”

“What?” Susan looked at her mother, she’d been lost in her own thoughts.

“I said he’s got his father’s temper, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think I’m just distracted.”

“I’m going to go buy a magazine, do you want one?”

“Yes please, um, RollingStone, the New Yorker and Popular Science if they have the new issue, I
read the last one already.”

“How about something fun like, the Economist?” Susan teased.

“Ugh, it’s so boring, but if there’s some crosswords I’ll take one of those too.”

“Okay, I’ll see what I can find and be right back. Don’t keep Jane on the phone too long, and eat your food.”

“Okay, I won’t be on the phone long. I’ll run out of quarters anyways.” Max squinted at the people on the phones, she wished she was like Jane sometimes, she’d just sit in a dark corner and speak to Jane psychically if she could. It would be way better than waiting to use a stupid payphone, and cheaper too. Finally a lady got off the phone near the end, Max jumped on it and called Jane.

“Hello?” Jane picked it up after one ring.

“Hi, it’s me, Max, so you know I’m here at the hospital right?”

“How’s Billy?”

“He’s awake, and I think his egg’s a little scrambled, but I need a favor.”

“His egg’s scrambled?”
“Just a joke, not a nice one, but I was wondering if you could get a message to Steve?”

“Oh!”

“What?”
“Steve’s here in Hawkins.”

“What?”

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you when you called, you were telling me about Billy, I wanted to,”

“Steve’s there, you mean he’s been there since the reunion.”

“Yes.”

“So that’s good, is he staying at home? Do you have his parents’ number?”

“Max, he’s at the hospital.”

“Steve’s in the hospital too? You should have told me. What’s going on with these jerks!” Max all but yelled into the phone, “Is he okay? What happened?”

“He’s not okay.” Jane said her voice low.

“Jane, tell me what’s going on, please.”

“Last Saturday, Steve was with Will and Jonathan, and they said he collapsed, and was kind of babbling about a radio and that he needed to go.” Jane sighed before continuing, “I went to the hospital last night, he’s in a, a coma. I tried to find him. I looked for him.”

“Did you talk to him, did you see him?” Max knew exactly what Jane meant, she’d gone searching for him, the way she’d looked for Barb, and Will.
“I, I can’t find him.” Jane’s voice cracked.

“It’s okay.” Max could hear the tears in Jane’s voice, “It’s okay Jane.” Max felt her own throat constrict. She sat on the linoleum covered floor setting her food and purse down, her bottle of juice started rolled away, she put her finger tips on it stopping it.

“Is he… like, dying?”

“No, I don’t think so… He’s breathing, on his own. He’s bad though, I mean it’s bad. I don’t think he’s, broken, he’s not gone?”

“He’s not broken?” Max frowned, Jane could be cryptic sometimes.

“No, but he’s far, really far away, and weak I think.”

“This is bad.”

“I don’t know how to help.”

“Steve’s pretty tough, right Jane?”

“Yeah. He’s very, very tough.”

“And Billy’s got a a hard head.”

“Like a rock.” Jane encouraged.

“So they’re both going to be fine, right?” Max suggested hopefully.

“Right.” Jane answered determinedly.

“I really miss you.” Max wiped the corners of her eyes with the cuffs of her sleeve.

“I miss you too.”

Max heard the phone line click, an automated voice demanded more money for the call to continue. Max fed her last nickel in, she’d used all her change on the coke machine.

“I gotta go Jane, I’ll call you if anything changes, let me give you the number to Billy’s room, I should have called you from there.” Max relayed the number and ended the call. She didn’t want to give Billy the news about Steve, he was already upset. She took her food to a chair in the corner of the waiting room and ate. She didn’t really taste anything, or even remember chewing. She felt like they were cursed, all of them cursed. She shook her head, trying to shake the feeling, she told herself she was being dramatic, that it was just weird timing, Steve and Billy had both been doing fine, until they both went back to Hawkins, was it them, or was it Hawkins? Was it just a coincidence, or chance, what the hell had caused this, she ate her food brooding over all the things that had gone wrong, why couldn’t things just be okay? She shook her head and reminded herself that she was a woman of science, and that sometimes really shitty things happened in life and if you were lucky you got through it. Billy and Steve had better get through it, because if either of them died or lost their marbles, she was going to be pissed.

Max walked back to Billy’s room, a doctor was speaking quietly with her mother, Susan was nodding, she looked exhausted and sad.
“There you are, did you eat? You need to eat.”

“Yeah, I ate.”

“Excuse me ladies.” The doctor nodded at them both, a nurse had beckoned him away. Max squinted after the doctor.

“What did he say?”

“Billy?”

“No the doctor.”

“Oh, just that Billy seems much stronger, and him being, emotional, is normal. He thinks that he’ll be less disoriented soon. They want to do some kind of brain scan, um, and MRI, I think.”

“Okay.”

“But they can’t until tomorrow, the technician is out today.”

“Great.” Max frowned, “I need to talk to him, he was asking about Steve,”

“They just gave him a mild sedative, he’s not going to be lucid, honey. I didn’t know they were friends.” Susan said distractedly.

“Neither did I, mom, Steve’s in a bad way.”

“What?” Susan looked alarmed.

“Let’s go sit down.” Max went into the room, Billy’s eyes were shut, his breathing sluggish yet steady. Max set the can of soda down on the little table next to Billy’s bed, “Let’s sit in the waiting room.”

Max walked with Susan and told her what Jane had told her, omitting the part about Jane going looking for him. Max didn’t realize how upset she was, but as she spoke she started crying. She didn’t want to tell Billy, but knew she couldn’t keep it from him either, and when he awoke she was going to tell him, part of her really hoped that someone would call and tell her Steve was okay, she just wanted everything to be okay.

Part 20

“Everyone Hates Hospitals, Will.”

Hawkins, Indiana

Will had a small sponge on the end of a tongue depressor, it was something a nurse had given him and told him how to drip water on Steve’s tongue. He stirred the plastic water cup. He’d put a few drops in Steve’s mouth just a few minutes ago, and knew he was supposed to wait at least a quarter of an hour before doing it again. He heard the door open.
Will glanced at his watch, it was a quarter after 8PM and visiting hours would be over soon, but he was hoping it would be the same night nurse as it had been the evening before, he’d been an intimidating big dude, Will thought he’d design a warrior barbarian after him in his next comic. The giant like nurse had walked in and spotted Will and then said in the kindest voice, “You know you’re not supposed to be here, right?”

“Yes.”

“He’s not going anywhere and if he wakes up, we can call you.”

“I, I’d rather stay.”

“Visiting hours are over.” The nurse pointed to a posted sign with the hours that permitted people to visit.

“Please?”

“What’s your name?”

“Will, Will Byers.”

“No kidding, you’re the boy that disappeared back in the eighties.”

“Yeah, that’s me.” Will nodded.

“Where’d you go?”

“It’s a long story.” Will waited to get grilled.

Did you run away?

Did some pedo diddle with you?

What’s it like being the Zombie Boy of Hawkins?

The nurse nodded, not saying anything for several minutes, he walked over to Steve’s bed and checked his vitals. Then he drew the curtains over the wide window, shutting out the frail glowing light of dusk. The night nurse moved around the room in his thick soled white shoes, he was well over six foot and big enough to be a linebacker. He turned his wide dark eyes on Will.

“Alright Will, I’ll get you a blanket and a pillow.”

“Thanks, um.”

“Nurse Tyrese” Tyrese had said helpfully.

“Thanks, Nurse Tyrese.” Will meant it with his whole heart, he didn’t want to leave, someone had to be there in case Steve woke up, and Will wanted to be that person.

“You’re welcome.” Tyrese lightly touched Will’s shoulder and slipped out of the room as quiet as a cat.
Will’s recollections were broken when the door opened and Jonathan came in the room, his glasses slipping down his nose, he pushed them up.

“Hey, you want to go get some dinner?”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“You’ve been sitting in the same spot since yesterday, c’mon, let’s go get some dinner, how about pizza?” Jonathan walked over and squeezed Wills shoulder.

“Someone should be here.”

“There will be, I mean, someone comes in this room every hour, they’re monitoring him.”

“No, someone that Steve knows should be here.” Will protested.

“Will, the hospital staff will let us when he wakes up.” Jonathan nudged Will gently.

“Steve hates hospitals!”

“Everyone hates hospitals, Will.” Jonathan fixed his little brother with a matter of fact expression.

“Jonathan, they’re not going to call us, they’ll call his parents when he wakes up. If he wakes up…” Will’s voice cracked.

“You know that Hop and Dr Cheney are friends right? There’s no way that Hop isn’t going to be told, and he’ll tell mom.”

“But what if Steve’s afraid, or confused? Or thinks we don’t care, like we just abandoned him in a hospital of all places.” Will reached over and grabbed Steve’s hand.

“Well, he’ll probably be a little foggy.” Jonathan sat down on the edge armrest of Will’s chair, “But I don’t think he’d be mad at you for eating, and sleeping in a bed.”

“Do you think he’s okay?” Will whispered, he touched the chipped black polish on Steve thumbnail.

“I think Steve Harrington is like a Timex.”

“What?”

“He takes a licking and keeps on ticking.”

“You’re such a dork, that’s so inappropriate. I can’t, I can’t believe you just…” Will shook his head and then let out a laugh in spite of himself.

“He would love that joke, as a matter of fact, when he wakes up you should ask him why he’s like a Timex, I bet he’ll laugh.”

“Dork.”

“You used to think I was cool.”

“Yeah, when I was like twelve.” Will smiled at Jonathan.

“Will, will you please come home and have dinner with your dorky big brother?” Jonathan squeezed Will’s shoulder, he rested his hand there.
“I’m not hungry.”

“Then watch me eat, I’ll take you home and we’ll see mom for a bit, she’s worried about you, and then I’ll bring you back in.”

“What if they don’t let me in?”

“I think we can figure it out, I mean you spent the night last night.” Jonathan ruffled Will’s hair.


“What?” Jonathan looked at Will, his brow furrowed.

“Just talking to myself.”

“You know you can talk to me, about whatever. Right?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Steve’s your hero.” Jonathan said thoughtfully.

“You are too.”

“You’re mine.”

“Really? Why?”

Jonathan threw his arm around Will’s shoulders and held open the hospital room door, ushering him out.

“Because, in spite of everything, you’re always kinds, you’re really talented, you’re smart. You have great taste in music, just like me, you’re my best friend in the world and the bravest little brother to ever walk the earth.”

“You think I’m brave?”

“The bravest guy I know.”

“I don’t feel brave.”

“You are, trust me.” Jonathan shook his head, thinking about everything Will had been through, and squeezed Will closer to him as they walked down the fluorescent lighted hallway.

Part 21

“We Could Be Heroes,”

Saint Joseph’s Hospital, Plymouth, IN

Billy awoke to a nurse covering him with fresh blankets. He squinted at her, there was an orderly in
the room with her, he was opening the blinds and chatting about a date he’d gone on.

“She’s crazy, like really crazy, like nuts.”

“I told you, I told you but you didn’t listen.” The nurse shook her head, laughing.

“You did, you did.” The orderly agreed he looked at Billy and realized he was awake.

“Hey, Mr Hargrove, good morning.” The orderly’s name tag said Nick Knost, Billy thought that was a horrible name.

“Can you get Dr Gallagher?” The Nurse asked Nick.

“Sure thing.” Nick nodded and walked out of the room.

“I need to make a call.” Billy sat up, a little, and flipped down the blanket.

“Why don’t you wait till after you have a chat with the doctor?” The nurse suggested.

“What the hell for?” Billy reached over and tugged the phone onto his bedside.

The door to his room opened and Max walked in, she looked terrible, tired and pale. She smiled at Billy, but it was a weak attempt at anything like happiness.

“Billy.” Max went to his side, Susan came through the door next and greeted the nurse warmly before addressing Billy.

“You’re looking stronger already.” Susan filled his water cup, “I bet you’re thirsty. You’re getting an MRI today.”

“I just need to call Steve.” Billy grounded. He couldn’t believe she still talked to him like he was a kid, he could imagine what he looked like, and strong sounded like patronizing bullshit.

“Billy, Steve’s in a hospital too, actually he’s over in Hawkins.” Susan adjusted the straw and reached over and picked up the phone, placing it on the bedside table and handing him the little plastic cup.

“What is she talking about?” Billy fixed Max with a look.

“Steve collapsed, they think it might have been a brain aneurism or something.” Susan spoke calmly. “I was just speaking to Joyce Byers,” Susan offered, “Steve is in a coma, Billy. He collapsed at their house four nights ago, he’s getting taken care of, don’t worry about him right now.”

“The same night as your accident.” Max murmured.

“I need to go see him.” Billy’s voice quaked when he spoke.

“What you need is to heal, William Hargrove. I know you’re used to doing things your own way, but right now just listen to the doctor, he’s going to decide what’s best for you, okay?”

“No.” Billy snapped, “It’s not okay.” He pushed the water cup away and splashed water across his bed.

“Oh, Billy.” Susan sighed. “Just try to think, you have serious head trauma, you’re like one giant bruise right now, they might need to put more pins in your arm if the bones aren’t setting properly, we can’t take you to Hawkins in your state.” Susan tried to reason, she plucked up the edge of the blanket and shook off some of the water, shaking her head.
Max hovered near the edge of the bed, Billy’s face was dark and brooding.

Susan handed the refilled water cup to Billy and he slapped it out of her hand.


“Get the fuck out of my room!” Billy yelled.

“Billy!” Max hated it when things got like this, she’d forgotten what it was like to be around Billy and her mother at the same time.

The door to his room swung open and Dr Gallagher looked at the state of the trio.

“Is everything alright?” He asked.

“When is everything alright in a fuckin’ hospital? I want to sign out.” Billy’s head was swimming, he felt rage smoldering under his skin. The nurse and Dr Gallagher exchanged a glance.

“Okay, Billy, Mr Hargrove, we can look into to getting you checked out of here, but it’s my responsibility to make sure that you’re capable of doing so, and if you require home care there are people or services available to you.” Dr Gallagher grabbed Billy’s chart and continued to drone on, “You’ve got a Humeral fracture in your right arm, and a spiral break in your radius and ulna, just for that alone you’re looking at wearing a cast for roughly twelve weeks. Then there’s the head trauma, you might experience headaches and dizziness, fatigue, blurred vision, mood swings, nausea, numbness in the extremities, disrupted sleeping patterns.” Dr Gallagher was now at the top of Billy’s shit list, all of this meant nothing to him, he just needed to get to Steve.

“As far as we know you don’t have any type of insurance, is that true?”

“What the fuck do you think, Doc? Worried you’re not going get paid? Is your Country Club membership due?”

“Billy.” Susan attempted to intervene.

Billy eyed the nurse who had a just removed a fresh syringe from a tray.

“Get the fuck away from me.” Billy growled at her, Billy watched her hesitate, but then the doctor opened the door and beckoned Nick the orderly into the room.

Susan hooked her arm in Max’s and drew her back a bit, and then the phone rang loudly.

Billy grabbed it “Steve?”

“Billy?” A strange voice asked.

‘Yeah, who’s this?” He pointed at the nurse who had taken a half step forward attempting to ward her off, his wrathful gaze made her stop dead in her tracks.

“It’s Jonathan, hey man, how are you? I heard you’re were in a wreck?”

“How’s Steve, have you seen him, are you at the hospital?”

“He’s still there, he’s in a coma, he’s holding on though, they’re not sure what’s going on, they’re running more tests on him.”

“I need to see him. Come get me.”
“What?”

“I said come get me.” Billy glared at Dr Gallagher who was now wielding the needle with a determined look on his face.

“Byers, please.”

The orderly that had been in the room earlier stepped up to his bed and reached across grabbing a strap.

“You’ve gotta help me.” Billy managed to say before the phone was taken out of his hand.

“You can leave when you’re a little better, just try to be calm.” Dr Gallagher watched as the orderly strapped Billy’s good arm down. Billy thought about punching and screaming, about clocking the orderly as hard as he could, with his casted arm, but instead he just laid back. What if Steve never woke up? What if this was it? He closed his eyes, he could feel pressure and static in his arms as the sedative traveled up his veins.

“I can’t,” Billy mumbled.

“Just try, Billy.” Max pleaded from across the room, but she sounded so far away already.

“I can’t do this without you.” Billy said, picturing Steve’s face, his lopsided smile.

*I’m here, I’m right here.*

Billy laid back feeling the drugs weighing heavily on his limbs and mind. He flashed back to being upside-down in his car, he’d been playing his secret Steve Harrington mixed tape, as the car had flipped David Bowie had been crooning,

*We could be heroes, just for one day.*

*I love that song.*

“Don’t leave me.”

“I’m right here, it’s alright.” Max had moved closer but it was impossible for Billy to open his eyes.

“He’s fine, this is normal, don’t worry too much.” Dr Gallagher’s voice made Billy want to fight the sleep that was taking over.

“Fuck you.” Billy managed to say before going completely under.

*Part 22*

*Vanishing Act*

*Saint Joseph’s Hospital, Plymouth, IN*
Nancy breezed in through the automated double doors with Jonathan at her side. She spied a line of wheelchairs and grabbed one and pushed it along the hallway.

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“No really.” Nancy answer in a nervous laugh.

“Well his extension was 231.”

“Right, elevators.”

“Right.” Jonathan nodded, he pointed when he saw the sign that directed them down another hall to the elevators. They got into an empty elevator and Jonathan pressed the Botton for the second floor.

“This might be really stupid.”

“It’s what he wants.”

“I know, but, what if he’s too messed up, or really just delirious?”

“Max said that Steve was the only thing Billy was talking about, I don’t think that’s delirium.”

“Do you think, something’s going on, like between them?” Jonathan mused.

“What, you mean like, um, romantically?”

“Yeah.”

“No, no way. I mean, Steve’s straight and Billy’s a total ladies man, right? He practically dated every single girl in High School, and the ones he didn’t were like dying to go out with him.”

“That’s a good cover up, you know, it’s almost text-book.” Jonathan shrugged.

“Maybe they’re just good friends, although when or how that happened, not that Steve and I have talked in a long time.” Nancy shifted uneasily, willing the elevator doors to hurry up and open already.

“Maybe.” Jonathan said neutrally.

The doors pinged open, Nancy pushed the chair out and Jonathan hung back holding the doors open for a couple to go in. Jonathan jogged a bit after Nancy till he was beside her, both of them reading the door numbers, her pace had slowed a bit.

“They hated each other all through high school, ever since that stupid party.”

“That wasn’t a stupid party.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I got take you home.”

“Oh geeze.” Nancy rolled her eyes, “That’s not fair, I don’t even remember that night.”

“I mean, it kind of opened the door for us. I remember it.”

“I got too drunk, I told Steve he was bullshit, I regret that, I regret that I didn’t have the sense to just talk to him when I was sober, it was just all so, so,”
“Drunken teenage drama?” Jonathan offered.

“Yes.” Nancy agreed.

“Here’s his room.” Nancy stopped the wheelchair.

“Okay, hold on.” Jonathan reached over and silently cracked open the door. He stepped back and then sat in the wheelchair and looked up at Nancy.

“There’s someone in there.”

“Max said she’d take Susan back to the motel with her.”

“No, I mean, I think it’s house cleaning or something, act casual.” Jonathan winked at her. They both laughed quietly.

“This is ridiculous.”

“I think it’s kind of romantic.” Jonathan smiled.

“What? The two of us sneaking around trying to rescue Big-Bad-Billy-Hargrove?”

“Well, that’s romantic too, in a Bonnie and Clyde sort of way, minus shooting innocent people.”

“What else is romantic?”

“Billy wanting to see Steve so bad that he said please, and actually asked me for help.”

You really think there’s like a thing, happening between them?” Nancy raised her brows, it was a familiar expression to Jonathan, one that she made when she didn’t wholly believe or disbelieve something.

“Maybe, just kind of a feeling.” Jonathan shrugged and smiled.

“What if Steve, what if he doesn’t pull through?” Nancy folded her arms.

“Then, I’ll miss him.” Jonathan reached over and squeezed Nancy’s hand.

“Yeah, me too.” Nancy squeezed back and nodded.

The door to Billy’s room swung open, a petite woman in a blue apron came out with a small bag of trash. She didn’t even look at them, just went into the next room, with a small broom and pan tucked under one arm and brief nod in their general direction.

“Let’s go.” Jonathan popped out of the chair as soon as the cleaning lady disappeared into the next room. He opened the door and saw Billy in his bed. There was another bed curtained off, and he could hear a TV playing its pale light shining weakly on the divider.

“Billy. Wake up.” Nancy was at Billy’s side, he looked terrible.

“Billy opened his eyes slowly, he stared at Nancy and slowly frowned.

“Wheeler?”

“You said you needed a lift to Hawkins.” Jonathan offered.

“You two, you came?” Billy sat up, blinking awake.
“Were you expecting someone else?” Jonathan wheeled the chair next to Billy’s bed, Nancy offered a hand to help pull Billy up and out of bed.

“I don’t need that.” Billy shifted slowly, his eyes fixed on the wheelchair, he dangled his bare legs over the edge of the bed, and glanced at Nancy’s outstretched hand and gave her a high-five, knowing full well that wasn’t why her hand was out.

Nancy rolled her eyes and went to the closet, she opened the door and looked inside for his belongings.

“I found your jacket, and your boots, where are the rest of your clothes?”

“I think they got trashed in the accident.” Billy grunted as he lowered himself in the chair.

“Shit, we didn’t bring clothes.” Jonathan laughed softly.

“Guess I’ll go commando.” Billy smoothed the lap of his hospital gown and waggled his brows at Nancy.

“We can’t wheel him out of here naked.” Nancy walked over and held up Billy’s jacket, the right sleeve had been cut open, that’s when she noticed the back was split all the way up. “This isn’t going to work.” She was about to toss it on the bed but Billy held his hand out for it. She handed it to him, he held it tightly in his hands a shadow passing over his face, “I want to keep this.”

“Of course.” Nancy said, wondering why he wanted it.

“I’ll um, I’ll see what I can find. You two wait here.” Jonathan went out in the hallway. He had no idea where he’d find some clothes, but he had noticed a cart in the hallway stacked with fresh linens next to the elevator.

“You really want to do this? Just leave the hospital?”

“If you and Byers drove all the way out here, I think you know the answer.”

“What’s going on with you and Steve?”

“We need to talk.” Billy slowly stood adjusting his hospital tunic and then carefully sat down again in the wheelchair, his head spun a bit, but he was glad to be off of that narrow little mattress. He started to slide the IV needle out but Nancy gently placed her hands over his.

“Let me.” She removed it painlessly to Billy’s relief.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“I mean for coming.”

“Jonathan said you sounded pretty serious.”

“I am. How does Steve look?”

“Um, well he’s pale, it’s been nearly a week now, they’re worried, about him, you know, but, his heart rate is steady, and he’s breathing on his own. He looks, he looks kind of peaceful, I guess.”
Nancy worried nothing she was saying was going to make Billy feel any better, but she also knew bullshitting him would not help the situation in the least.

They both tensed when the door opened, Jonathan slid in and smiled at them both, “Alright, we’ve got some clothes.” He knelt down in front of Billy and started pulling some sweats up around his legs, Billy grunted and shifted helping himself get in the damned things, Nancy averted her eyes.

“When’d these come from?” Nancy picked up a hoodie and pulled the zip down.

“Some guy in a room down the hallway, he’s not using them.” Jonathan shrugged.

“Robbing invalids, Jonathan?” Billy’s tone was light.

“No, um, he’s dead, pretty sure anyways, I mean when they wheel people out of their hospital rooms with their faces covered they’re not going to be needing their sweats anytime soon.”

“Huh, hope whatever it was, isn’t contagious.” Billy zipped up the hoodie, over his pale green hospital gown.

Nancy peaked out the door and checked up and down the hallway.

“Let’s go.” Nancy walked out, trying to act nonchalant despite her heart beating hard in her chest, she had Billy’s boots under her arm, she held her head high, feeling tense. She had never imagined she’d be helping Billy Hargrove sneak out of a hospital so he could go see Steve.

Part 23

Rude Awakening

Hawkins, IN

Nurse Tyrese had just finished his rounds, it was a quarter to midnight and he was ready for a quick lunch break, maybe even a smoke break if that pretty girl that worked the Urgent Care desk was out back, he was still working up the courage to talk to her. Tyrese was about to go down the staircase when he saw a young couple wheeling some rocker looking dude in a chair up the hallway.

“Are you all lost?” Tyrese asked.

“What, um, no.” Nancy smiled.

“We’re just taking him back to his room.”

“Well you’re on the wrong floor if that’s the case, because I know all the patience on this floor, because they’re mine.”

“Oh.” Nancy frowned, “I must have, um, well,” she turned and looked at Jonathan.

“Hey.” Tyrese boomed, “I know you, your Will’s brother, huh.”
“Yeah.”

“You trying to sneak into Harrington’s room?”

“Yeah, we are.” Billy stated.

“Well,” Tyrese checked his watch, “We never had this conversation, I never spoke to you, you never saw me, I’m going to be back here in forty-five minutes and I don’t want to see any of you unless there’s some kind of emergency.”

“It’s a deal.” Jonathan nodded.

“Thanks.” Billy nodded, and winced, he was in a lot of pain, all the drugs they’d been pumping into him had been doing a better job than he realized.

Nancy walked ahead of them and opened the door to Steve’s room.

The room was dim, the only light was from the street lamps outside of the room, it sliced across Steve’s bed.

Jonathan reached over and slapped on the light, the room flickered brightly.

Billy squinted at Steve, his heart pounded against his chest, he hadn’t really believed it, part of him had held out hope that Steve would look more, normal, like just asleep, but he looked too still, his face bleached of all emotion, his hair looked almost black in the stark lighting, he looked like less than a ghost of himself, he looked like a prop, a cheap facsimile. There was an oxygen tube plugged into his nostrils and what Billy guessed was a feeding tube going into his mouth.

“Get out.” Billy croaked.

“What?” Nancy turned her head sharply, she’d been approaching the bedside.

“I said get out.” Billy repeated.

“Um, sure.” Nancy hesitated, she looked at Jonathan.

“Let’s go call Will, I saw a payphone near the restrooms. I promised him I’d call him.”

“If you guys get caught, don’t mention me.”

“Don’t worry, if we get throw out, we’ll wait for you in the parking lot.” Nancy touched Billy’s casted arm, she waited for Billy to say something, but he kept his eyes on Steve.

Jonathan opened the door and waited for Nancy to walk out ahead of him.

“I think you’re right.” Nancy said her voice full of quiet wonder.

“Yeah. Me too.” Jonathan wrapped his arm around Nancy’s shoulders as they walked down the hall, “Talk about an odd couple.”

“You think they’re a couple?”

“It feels like it, like serious, you know?”
“Yeah.” Nancy agreed.

Billy pushed himself onto his feet, shooting pain traveled up his back, he grimaced and sat down hard, the chair nearly rolled out from under him.

“Shit.” Billy shifted himself back in the chair and then rolled it up to the side of Steve’s bed till his knees were against the side of it, he reached down and flipped down the locking levers on the chair and released a slow exhale, trying to breath out the pain. He pushed himself up again, slower, the pain was still there but he grabbed the side of Steve’s bed and hoisted himself up next to Steve.

“I’m here.” Billy sighed, he looked around the room, his casted arm was useless and he felt off balance sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I’m going to break my other arm if I slide off this bed, it’s your fault.” Billy felt his throat catch, he stifled a sniffle and cleared his throat.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know I would have been okay, you didn’t have to do what you did. Are you just going to spend the rest of your life playing the hero?” Billy rambled, as he scooted closer to Steve’s body, he reached over with his left hand and touched Steve’s face, he wasn’t cold to the touch, but not far from it.

“I need you to wake up.” Billy tried to sound all business, but could hear the waver his voice. He cleared his throat again.

“Steve, you’ve gotta wake up. This is bullshit.” Billy squeezed Steve’s shoulder, pressed his palm across Steve’s chest and rested it over his heart.

“You said you were going to come live with me, you can’t come and live with me if you don’t wake up.” Billy gave Steve a gentle shake, “So wake up.”

“You gotta open your eyes, like come back to earth. Where are you? Are you in here?” Billy touched his own chest, and felt like an idiot, but he meant it. “Are you hiding out in here? Well it’s time to get back to your own place, you know?” He touched Steve’s chest. Steve didn’t blink, his eyes were still beneath their lids.

“Shit.” Billy felt hot tears running down his cheeks.

“I love you, you know that right? I love you, I do. I love you so much, I’ve never fucking loved anyone or anything the way I love you.” Billy wiped his eyes roughly.

“So wake up, just open your eyes.” Billy raised his voice and shook Steve roughly, and nearly shook himself off the side of the bed in the process.

“Fuck. C’mon, Harrington!” Billy scooted awkwardly moving himself closer to Steve and toppled on top of him. Steve didn’t flinch or make a sound, Billy’s tears were dropping on Steve’s waxy cheeks.

“Oh, god. I can’t, I won’t, damnit Steve, I won’t…” Billy grunted, he was tired of hearing himself whine and beg, he pressed his temple to Steve’s, and sobbed.

“This sucks.” Billy sniffled and cupped his left hand to Steve’s cheek, “This fucking blows, Harrington. You’re breaking my heart.” He kissed Steve once on the corner of his mouth, and then again on his cheek.
Billy pressed his left arm under Steve to anchor himself and laid his head on Steve’s chest. He knew any minute the nurse was going to come in and eject him from the hospital and there’d be fuck all he could do about it, but for now at least he could be next to Steve. Billy drifted off to sleep listening to the beep of the heart monitor.

Steve awoke gasping, he was being crushed, he was being choked. He tried to reach up to his mouth but his arms weren’t responding, he tried to roll on his side, to arch his back, his body felt alien and as if it were made of stone. He squinted hard against the bright light in the room, his eyes flooded with tears against the glare of the light all around him.

Billy first felt Steve’s body lurch beneath him, next he heard the heart monitor go triple tempo.

“Steve!” Billy started to slide off the bed, but managed to keep himself from sliding all the way off by putting his foot on the wheelchair. Steve’s eyes were open and watering, he was turning his head weakly side to side, it sounded like he was gagging. Billy grabbed the feeding tube and gently pulled, it felt really lodged in there, Billy pulled it out bit by bit, till if finally slid out completely, slick with tears against the glare of the light all around him.

Steve reached up and weakly pulled at the tubes in his nose.

“Billy.” Steve rasped as he flopped forward, an animated rag doll and weakly wrapped his arms around Billy.

Billy stroked Steve’s back with his good left arm. “Holy shit, I’ve never been so happy in my life.” Billy laughed and cried into Steve’s neck.

“Me too.” Steve croaked and coughed, speaking was nearly impossible, but he managed to whisper, “I love you, Billy.” Followed by a staccato fit of weak coughs. Billy rubbed Steve’s back.

“I love you too.” Billy cradled Steve to his chest, hot tears of relief flowing down his cheeks.

Billy wasn’t sure how long Steve had been awake when Jonathan and Nancy entered the room, they were followed by Tyrese. Tyrese gently pushed them both aside, he reached over and lifted Billy off the bed and set him down on the wheelchair with ease, Billy managed to hold on to Steve’s hand, he didn’t fight the nurse, he just couldn’t take his eyes off of Steve.

“Look who’s awake. All these people coming around here at all hours, they’re not gonna let you get any rest.” Tyrese said with a smile on his face as he went about checking Steve’s vitals.

“I’m going to call the house,” Jonathan stepped forward and grabbed the phone by Steve’s bed, he was so excited that he misdialed twice.

“Hey Steve.” Nancy said, her eyes dancing tearfully with joy.

Steve had his eyes on Billy, he didn’t seem aware of anyone else in the room.

“Alright Mr Harrington, welcome back, welcome back.” Tyrese gently laid Steve back, “I gotta get the doc on duty to come check you out, sit tight with your friends.”
“He’s awake!” Jonathan said into the phone, “Yeah, just now, he looks a little, uh, stoned?” Jonathan laughed into the phone, “I don’t know, yeah. Okay. Yeah. Yes of course!” Jonathan looked at Steve and smiled.

Steve squinted around the room. The brightness seemed less intense now, his body still felt stiff and alien, but he could feel Billy’s fingers curling and uncurling around his hand.

“What do you want some water?” Billy asked.

Steve nodded, he felt hands sitting him up, he could smell Nancy’s perfume, and feel her small hands on his shoulders propping him forward.

“Let’s get you sitting up.” Jonathan was stuffing the pillows behind him.

Steve wasn’t sure who gave him his first little sip of water, he just knew he was surrounded by people that loved him, and that he’d made it back to his body.

Part 24

The Engagement Party

Byers’ Residence, Hawkins IN

It had been two weeks since Steve had awakened with Billy in his arms, his soul had found its way back to its home, and his heart too, finally back with Billy.

Steve was slouched in a corner of the wide overstuffed couch surrounded by pillows. The low coffee table was covered with bowls of snacks and punch glasses. Jane and Max were standing a few feet away laughing and talking animatedly. Mike was hovering near Jane, but not really a part of the conversation. Steve wondered briefly if they were on again or off again, it didn’t matter, they would always be bound to one another, everyone in that house - they were all forever tied by secrets and trauma, and love too.

The Byers’ house was alive with laughter and conversation. Will and Jonathan were in the kitchen with Hop and Joyce, the phone was ringing. The front door opened and Steve looked over expectantly, it wasn’t Billy. It was some girl he didn’t recognize.

“Hey, come on in!” Will had escaped the kitchen and waved in the girl with perfect little dreadlocks draping elegantly over her shoulders.

“Hey!” She threw her arms around Will, it was her voice that made Steve realize he was looking at Erica Sinclair.

“No way.” Steve mumbled. He pushed himself up and walked over, “Erica, wow, you got big!”

“Yeah, you know, I’ve been drinking milk.” She joked and hugged him lightly, “How are you,
“Yeah, I hear it’s what all the cool kids are doing here in Hawkins.” Steve shot a wink at Will, who was laughing and shaking his head.

“Do you want a drink?” Will offered.

“Shit yeah!” Erica enthused.

“Oh my god, the mouth on you!” Joyce had come into the room and hugged Erica tightly.

“Shit, I’m sorry Mrs Byers, oh dang I did it again!” Erica laughed brightly.

“It doesn’t matter, Will get her a drink, no booze, I don’t want her mother thinking I’m a bad influence!”

“I’ll come with you.” Erica grabbed Will’s hand and he led her to the kitchen. Jane and Max followed the pair of them to the kitchen, Steve heard Max, “Oh my god your hair looks so cool!”

“Thanks, I did it myself, it took, like forever!”

“She’s so big.” Steve marveled.

“She really has grown up, she got into Harvard, you know Lucas is enrolled at Stanford?” Joyce was beaming at the young girls as they followed Will into the kitchen.

“Yeah, Max told me.” Steve nodded.

Nancy and Holly greeted Erica loudly from the other room, Steve could hear the happy and boisterous greetings being exchanged.

Steve made his way back to the couch, he was getting headaches, he’d often feel nauseas, and sometimes dizzy too, he wondered if it was from being away from his body, or if he was picking up on Billy symptoms from his head injuries. Steve often asked Billy how he was feeling, but Billy would only grunt and change the subject.

“You’re looking better.” Hopper had wandered into the living room and sat down in a recliner across from Steve.

“I feel better, I think.” Steve smiled weakly.

“Don’t think about it too hard, just keep getting better.”

“Good advice. Hey, congratulations, I’ve not had a chance to say it, but I’m really happy for the both of you. So when’s the big day?”

“Oh, we’re thinking about a summer wedding, I guess that’s what Joyce wants.”

Steve nodded, not sure what else to say. Hopper and Joyce were finally getting married.

More party guests arrived little by little, Joyce’s friends, and Hopper’s coworkers arrived bearing plates of food, flowers, gifts and drinks. Most of the guests were familiar to Steve, some more careworn than before, but still recognizable years past. Every time the door opened Steve looked up, hoping it was Billy. Billy had said he’d come, he hadn’t been enthusiastic in the least, but he’d said
Billy had spent the last two weeks at Susan’s house, she and Neil had separated eight months ago. Billy and Max hadn’t know. Susan had told Billy that things hadn’t ended well, she had a restraining order against Neil, and as far as she knew he had relocated to Indianapolis.

Steve had driven over to spend time with Billy, almost daily, but things had been feeling stilted. Steve hoped it was just the pain meds, or maybe the head trauma, but he wasn’t sure.

It was nearly Eight o’clock the party was crowded with guests. Steve relocated from the living room to Will’s bed. No one seemed upset that he wasn’t being more social, he received a few concerned looks, and Nancy had checked on him twice. He couldn’t sleep with all the noise, that and the anticipation, waiting for Billy to show up. He thought about calling the house, but he didn’t want Billy to feel pressured.

“There you are.” Billy’s voice awoke Steve, he hadn’t realized he’d dozed off. Billy stood in the doorway, his cast was marked up with skulls, lightning bolts and other doodles. His hair was tied back in a low pony tail, he was dressed in new jeans and a black sleeveless t-shirt.

“You made it.”

“Yeah. I said I’d come.” Billy stepped into the room and looked at all of Will’s art.

“So this is where you were when you,” Billy hesitated, “When you,”

“When I knew I needed to be with you.” Steve filled in, he watched Billy closely, for a brief moment he remembered laying on the floor, his mind split from his soul, seeing the car wreck and the Byers crowded around him trying to pull him back.

“He’s pretty good.” Billy was staring at a particularly vicious battle, a storm of soldiers with spears and shields were fighting a tentacled beast, it was done in shades of black and white with flourishes of red and gold.

“He’s a natural.” Steve said, “Come sit down,” Steve patted the bed, “How are you feeling?”

“Stoned on meds,” Billy sat down slowly.

“How’s your back, still sore?”

“Yes.”

“Even with the meds?”

“Yeah.”

“And your arm?”

“Itches.” Billy slid his gaze off the art on the wall and focused on Steve.
They sat in silence for a moment looking at one another. Steve sat up and moved closer to Billy.

“I’m glad you came. I know you didn’t really want to, but I think it means a lot to.”

“If you’re going to say it means a lot to Hopper, I think you’re lying.” Billy interrupted.

“Uh, well it means a lot to me.” Steve smirked.

Billy nodded.

Steve shifted on the bed moving closer. They’d shared a few kisses since their reunion in the hospital, but they had all been rather chaste. Quick kisses, Billy had been withdrawn, usually filling the space between them with words, or moving away, saying he needed water, or needed to check something, the room was too warm, any small reason to pull away.

“Your hair looks nice.”

“Max keeps trying to braid it.” Billy scoffed.

“You’d look good in braids.”

“You think so?” Billy snorted.

“Something to hold on to.” Steve flirted.

Billy chuckled as he stood slowly, moving away from Steve again. Steve watched as Billy took the one and a half step over to Will’s desk, he slid the sheets of paper back, with his left hand, his right arm was still in a cast, it would be for another ten weeks or so.

“He’s making comics?”

“Yeah, he’s been working on a pretty long series, I think he’s planning on doing about twelve volumes, like, individual comics. He’s got some amazing zines.” Steve stood up and stood behind Billy, and rested his chin gently on Billy’s left shoulder, looking at the artwork.

“Crazy.” Billy said admiring the art.

“Yeah, he’s a genius.” Steve nuzzled at Billy’s neck.

“So, do you think you’ll make it back in time for your exhibit?” Billy asked.

“What? I mean, I’ve been in contact with Bryce at the gallery, they’ve pushed back the date a couple weeks, they really want me to be there for the opening, they want me to finish a couple pieces, they’ve been, um, really accommodating, I mean, considering I was in a coma,” Steve rambled.

“You’ve got to go back to Seattle.” Billy turned away from Will’s art work, and meandered over to the window, he pulled back the curtains and looked outside.

“It’s not paramount.” Steve said.

“Paramount? Look at you, using twenty-five cent words.”


“What’s paramount, my paramour, is that you get your ass to Seattle and finish those pieces, and make a name for yourself.” Billy shifted away from Steve, walking around the room looking at the
drawings covering the walls.

“No.” Steve protested.

“No?” Billy teased.

“No, you are, you’re all that I care about Billy.”

“Dude.” Billy murmured.

“What?”

“What?! You can’t stop the world Steve.” Billy snapped, “You can’t put your life on hold because of me.”

“Bullshit, I already did.” Steve reached over and grabbed hold of Billy’s left wrist.

“I didn’t ask you to you didn’t have to. Fuck this.”

“Fuck what?!” Steve raised his voice, he didn’t mean to.

“You, you need to go home, you’re not a fucking, saint, I don’t know, live your life, you didn’t need to do what you did.”

“Like hell I didn’t, Billy, you were trapped, you were practically gone.”

“Maybe it was my time!”

“No.”

“You don’t get to decide.”

“Fuck that, I did decide!” Steve snapped.

Billy stepped back, he twisted away, he wrapped his left arm across to his right shoulder and moved towards the door.

“Stop, just stop.” Steve moved forward and pressed the door shut, “Stop pulling away from me!”

“I, just, god damnit.” Billy muttered.

“You, you need to stop pulling away. It’s over, we lived, we got through it. I’m here, right now. I don’t want to go to Seattle, I don’t want to be apart from you, Billy.”

“Yeah, okay, the world’s gonna stop spinning because two fags are in love.”

“Billy.” Steve warned.

“What, you think it’s just gonna be all wine and roses?”

“No. It’s going to be hard, it’s going to be messy, it’s gonna be a fuckin’ shit show, all over again, and again and again.”

“Great, I can’t wait.”

“I fucking love you.”
“Yep.” Billy grumbled.

“I’ll keep saying it.”

Billy withdrew, till his back was against the wall.

“I love you.” Steve repeated, he wrapped his arms around Billy for the first time since awakening in the hospital, “You’re not getting away from me.”

Billy lowered his gaze, he turned his head away.

“Stop it.” Billy whispered.

“No, you don’t mean that, you don’t want me to stop.”

“Fuck.”

Steve leaned in and kissed Billy, it was a simple kiss, but he kept at it, teasing a returned kiss from Billy’s lips.

For the first time since they’d parted ways the day after the reunion they shared a deep kiss, their tongues intertwining. Billy groaned into the kiss and melted into Steve’s embrace. They kissed for several minutes, Billy grasped at Steve with his left hand, his broken arm hanging uselessly in its cast. Billy slowly pulled back from Steve’s lips.

“I want you to do your show. We’ll get together after, just go back to Seattle.”

“Is that really what you want?”

Billy pressed his face into Steve’s neck, drawing several breaths before speaking again.

“I need, I need, you to,” Billy struggled to find the right words, “I can’t hold you back.”

“You’re not holding me back.”

“Go to Seattle, do your show. I’m gonna be busted up and stuck in this cast for another ten weeks, I need to know you’re doing your thing.”

“You’re my thing.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Maybe, but I don’t agree, like I don’t want it, I don’t want to be apart from you.”

“You’re not, you’re never going to be, I still feel you.”

“What?”

“I still feel you.” Billy murmured.

“How?”

“It’s, just trust me.”

“You keep pulling away.” Steve squeezed Billy gently, wanting to wrap him up tightly in his arms, but knowing Billy was still hurting from his injuries.
“I can’t be the reason the you don’t live your life.” Billy whispered in Steve’s ear.

“You are my life.”

“That’s not fair, that’s not fucking a real reason, maybe you’re just scared.”

“The only thing that scares me is that you’re going to disappear.”

Billy said nothing, they stood still with their heads tilted to each others.

“Look,” Billy finally broke the silence, “I’m fucking busted up, I don’t even know how I’m gonna take care of the sessions I have lined up.”

“I could go to Chicago with you, I can help you!”

“No.” Billy interrupted, “Stop playing the hero.”

“Who’s playing?” Steve teased.

“Fucker.” Billy smiled, “You’re going to Seattle, I’m going back to Chicago. We’ll get together, it’ll all work out, pretty boy.”

“Is that how it is?” Steve sighed.

“That’s how it is.”

“Okay.” Steve resigned to Billy’s wishes.

“Good.”

“Can I blow you?”

“What?!” Billy laughed, “Right now?”

“I mean, if you don’t want me to.”

“If you want to, I guess, I mean sure. I don’t know if I can, these, um, drugs, they’re pretty intense.”

“Let’s find out.” Steve kissed Billy hotly.

---

**Part 25**

**Chicago Blues**

**Chicago, IL**

Despite Susan and Max’s protests, Billy opted to take a couple buses home. It wasn’t pride that made him do it. He just wanted his independence back. He didn’t like being an invalid, it made his skin crawl.
Steve had driven back to Seattle, he’d left Hawkins a week before Billy. Steve had put off the drive out West as long as he could, but he needed to get home and get set up for the exhibit. The gallery had even agreed to postpone it, but they’d only wait so long.

Billy took his time going up the staircase to his apartment on the third floor. Every sent jolts of pain up his spine. He let out a low miserable chuckle, thinking he was lucky he wasn’t carrying much, he really didn’t have many things to bring home with him.

He hadn’t gone to examine what was left of his car, he was told that it was totaled and what few belongings he’d had in the car with him had been either, burned, damaged beyond repair or strewn across the highway. He’d been given the address to the junkyard his car had been hauled to, apparently it was so smashed up from being hit and rolled that they couldn’t even tow it, it had been loaded onto a flat bed. When Billy called the junkyard he was warned by the owner that pickers often snuck onto the property at night and scavenged parts from the cars that were there. Billy didn’t want to see his baby all battered and picked clean of what few salvageable pieces were left.

Max had given him a messenger bag, it looked almost exactly like the one he’d had in high school, and Susan had gifted him a backpack. It was hard for Billy to accept gifts, it had been a struggle to even let them help him at all, but of course he was in no condition to refuse their help. He hated being broken, and in pain, he wanted Steve to stay with him all the time, but instead of telling Steve that when he was around, Billy had been withdrawn, and he knew it. The week after Steve left and Billy was still stuck in Hawkins had been miserable, he was getting better but felt so much worse at the same time.

It was a hot Chicago night, the air was humid, Billy adjusted the straps of the messenger bag and his back-pack on his left shoulder, he couldn’t really use his right arm much at all. The building looked shabbier then he remembered. The paint in the stair well was chipped and water stained. His car key was all that was left of his Camaro, he turned it on his key ring, then jammed his apartment key in the lock.

He could hear his neighbors TV through the wall, and the dumpsters that lined the alley beneath his window seemed particularly ripe. He was glad he’d left the window ajar, despite the stench. He wanted to make sure the cat could get in and out while he was away, although he’d thought it was going to be a night at most, now he wondered if his orange boy had found a new home.

Billy flicked on the overhead light and that was when he was greeted warmly by Freeloader, the big old tomcat had managed pretty well without him, he was a little thinner than Billy remembered, and a bit scruffier looking too, but still purred louder than a VW Beetle.

“Hey.” Billy threw both his bags on the floor, startling the feline a bit, but Freeloader recovered quickly and allowed Billy to stroke his head and back.

“Looks like we’re both still alive.” Billy crouched down slowly, the cast throwing him off balance a
bit. Billy looked around the room, everything looked untouched, his answering machine’s light was
flickering, alerting him he had messages.

With some effort, Billy managed to single handedly opened a can of cat food. The cat was so excited
to eat that it had its paws in the dish and kept getting in the way.

"Take it easy, do you want to wear it or eat it?" Billy used his casted arm to shove the cat aside and
dump the food in the dish.

Billy opened all the windows, the place was stuffy, he thought he should start calling people, let
them know he was finally back in town, start rescheduling a couple sessions. The more he planned
then next few weeks in his mind, the more his heart ached, Billy sat on the floor petting Freeloader as
he ate.

“We’re gonna have some changes, big ones.” Billy thought about Steve, about their lives merging,
about how terribly far apart they were from one another.

Part 26

The Exhibit

Seattle, WA

Steve paced the gallery, he checked the level on all of his paintings for the hundredth time. The
gallery space was broken up into three rooms. His work was hung in the main entrance, visible from
the street. Steve was wearing new black motorcycle boots, the sound of the thick heels and heavy
soles echoed as he crossed the polished concrete floors, the ceilings were high and stripped to the
rafters, it looked good, but every sound bounced around, making Steve feel like he was at the bottom
of a well. He crouched down a bit checking the nameplate under his largest piece, he could hear the
soft squeak of the leather in his boots, he’d bought them that afternoon, on impulse. He was glad to
be wearing them, they made him feel closer to Billy.

Steve’s painting seemed garish to him displayed against the stark white walls. He stood before his
favorite piece, it looked mammoth, even with the exposed ceilings. He wished Billy was there, but
also felt his skin grow hot at the thought of Billy seeing his art. Billy had never seen any of his
paintings. Steve took several steps backwards and squinted at his work. He attempted to look at it
with fresh eyes, but all he could see was where it was lacking. The depth was off, the strokes were
too heavy, the contrasting colors too muddy, it didn’t hold the light properly, his inner critic was yelling in his ear.

“Fuck me.” Steve groaned, he raked his fingers through his hair digging beneath he is beanie, and then pressed it down till it nearly covered his eyes.

Steve had sent Billy a few emails, writing wasn’t really something he was comfortable with. Steve wrote in plain but emotional words -

- I miss you.

- My bed feels too big, knowing that I could be next to you in yours.

- I was walking, across the street and I saw someone that looked like you and almost ate shit on the curb. I knew it wasn’t you, but for like a second - anyways, I guess I’m an idiot…

- Found a Slayer t-shirt at the thrift store, it’s in great condition from the Rein in Blood tour, ’86, do you want me to mail it to you?

- I don’t feel you, it’s like when I woke up back in my body, something broke? Do you still feel me???

Billy would reply, but it was often days later, and his responses were factual and lacked any expression of feeling, and more often than not he wouldn’t answer Steve’s questions; it drove Steve insane.

Steve walked across the gallery, looking about the space, trying not to rest his gaze too long on any of his paintings. He perched on the stool that was behind the receptionist’s desk. Steve grabbed the wireless chrome plated phone and scanned the room for Keith, Keith a fellow artist, and the gallery’s sometime receptionist was off setting up the hors d’oeuvres or maybe just sampling the free wine. Steve punched in Billy’s number, he knew it was no big deal if he made local calls, but he thought he might be overstepping by making a long distance call. He just really wanted to talk to Billy. Steve had left him a voice mail two days ago and not heard back yet. Steve’s mind raced with questions: What if Billy was done? He’d kept pushing Steve away, what if he really just wasn’t interested? What something was wrong, and somehow Steve couldn’t feel it?

The phone rang three times, then a fourth, Billy’s answering machine played it’s familiar greeting,
“Hey, leave a message and I’ll catch you later.”

“Hi, um, it’s me, again.” He paused worried that he sounded like he was whining.

“So, tonight’s the big night. I, um, I left you a message, you probably know that, sorry. Um, I emailed you too. Are you doing alright? I haven’t heard from you for like, three days…” Steve looked out the large windows of the gallery, the sun was dropping and he could see a ghost of himself in the glass, just a shadowy reflection, he dropped his eyes to the floor, and then closed them, picturing Billy, trying to feel that tether that connected them.

“I miss you, I miss you a lot. I wish you were here, but then, I don’t know if you’re gonna like my stuff. I mean, it’s, it’s not bad, you know, it’s pretty good, I think… but like, I don’t even know what kind of art you like? I guess we’ll have to talk about that, maybe we could hit some galleries or museums in Chicago?” Steve frowned, and scuffed the floor with his heel of his boot. “I love you. Call me, okay? I’m worried.”

The phone clicked and a breathless voice said “Hello?”

“Billy?”

“No, who’s this?” Steve didn’t know how’d he’d mistaken the voice for Billy at first, it was nothing like Billy’s.

“Steve, who are you?”

“Hi Steve, I’m Danny. Billy’s not here.” Whoever Danny was he had a strong midwestern twang that made Steve’s ears itch.

“Okay. Is he going to be in soon?”

“Nah.” Danny sounded distracted.

“Where is he?”

“Whoa, who are you, like his parole officer or something?” Danny laughed.

Steve hated Danny.

“I’m his boyfriend, Danny.” Steve wanted to reach through the phone and strangle Danny, he briefly fantasized of flying his soul over to Chicago just to see if he could punch this guy.

“No shit?” Danny sounded slightly more alert now.

“No shit.” Steve snarled.

“Look man, he’s um, he’s not here, but I’ll tell him you called.”

“You do that.” Steve ended the call, really wishing he could slam the phone, pressing the disconnect button on the cordless was not satisfying in the least.

“Who the fuck is Danny?!” Steve got off the stool almost tipping it over and then nearly walked into Keith who leapt out of the way.

“What!?” Keith moved back startled, he clutched a plastic wine cup to his chest.

“Never mind. Tell Bryce I’ll be back.” Steve walked around Keith and swung the double doors open, stepping out into the fresh air didn’t help, the familiar scent of pending rain was heavy, a cold
wind was coming in off the coast, the early evening traffic was starting to thicken. Steve could hardly pay attention to the world around him. All he could think about was that Billy had never mentioned a Danny, Billy hadn’t really talked about anyone in Chicago. Billy had named a few bands, some musicians he’d met, a few celebrities that had breezed through the bar too, but he never talked about his friends, or anyone he’d been with, not that Steve had either, but Steve hadn’t been with anyone, not really. He’d had a few dates, sometimes the same person two or three at the most; but nothing serious, nothing truly romantic. It was as if Billy had a claim on his heart all those years ago and Steve didn’t even understand it till he saw him again, standing before him on the bleachers, it was like he’d materialized out of Steve’s dreams.

Steve jay-walked across the street and flipped off a honking truck driver. He got into his car and started the engine. His skin was prickling, it felt electric, like static, and he was vibrating as if he was standing on railroad tracks and a train was speeding towards him. He punched the center of his steering wheel, the BMW protested with a weak beep.

Steve had more than two hours to kill before the official opening time, then he’d need to be on his best behavior. It was very likely he’d be bombarded with inane questions; where do you get your inspiration? Who are your influences? I think this would look marvelous in my office, don’t you? Can you do something like this, but just make it, less depressing? Who is your model? Is this a self-portrait?

Worst case scenario, no one would ask him anything, or be interested in purchasing his work. But none of that seemed to matter now, not really. Billy hadn’t called him in three days and some asshole named Danny was in his apartment. Danny from the midwest. Steve frowned, he drove home and then just sat in his car. Steve was so overwhelmed with thoughts about Billy and whoever the fuck Danny was that he couldn’t see straight, he wasn’t even sure why he’d driven home.

He went into his apartment, he hadn’t cleaned it in weeks, maybe months. There were dozens of canvases leaned against the wall. Tarps spattered with paint and cigarette ash was on the tables and floor. He sat down at his desk and grabbed a sketch pad. He started drawing in thick lines, sharp diagonal lines in black. He stood up and dropped his charcoal and his sketchpad on the floor and grabbed his phone, he dialed Billy’s number again.

“Hey, leave a message and I’ll catch you later.” Billy’s recorded voice came coolly across the lines.

“Billy, you call me, you call me here at my place and if I’m not here call the gallery, those are the only places I’m gonna be for the next few hours. This is bullshit…” Steve’s voice caught in his throat, he flashed back to Nancy drunk and angry all those years ago, “I need to talk to you.” Steve hung up.

“This isn’t like that.” He mumbled to himself. It was then that he noticed that his answering machine was blinking. He jabbed the button hoping to hear Billy’s voice.

“Hi honey, just checking on you. I hope your event goes well. I wanted to fly out, but you know, your father, he’s just well - he can’t stand the idea of me traveling alone and he can’t take time off work, what with the financial quarter wrapping up. Alright, well I love you, break a leg.” His mother’s cheery tone was like nails on a chalkboard to Steve, he gritted his teeth as he deleted the message.
“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Steve ran downstairs and jumped in his car. He drove back to the gallery. He still had an hour and a half to calm down before the official opening and as he drove past the gallery he was surprised to see people were already milling about, not a huge group, but at least a dozen.

“Fuck.” He grunted. He thought about driving to Chicago, just leaving Seattle and all his shit behind and starting over. He could go and see Billy in person and, hopefully, punch Danny’s face in.

He was about to turn onto the next street and head for the highway but there were a couple cars blocking the lane, the drivers were yelling at each other.

Steve rolled down his window and bellowed “HEY FUCKERS! MOVE IT!”

The pair of drivers looked over at him and pointed at each other and resumed their argument.

“Jesus Christ, just kill me. Just let me die.” Steve rolled up his window, and then threw his car in reverse and drove backwards for four car lengths and parallel parked in a tight spot like a champ. He rubbed his palms roughly over his face. He could feel the itch and sting of tears.

Someone was knocking on his driver’s side window.

“What?!” Steve yelled, he looked out the window, and didn’t believe his eyes. Billy was looking at him with an amused expression.

“Holy shit! Holy shit!” Steve unlocked the door and practically fell out of the car and into Billy’s good arm.

“What the fuck kind of Dukes of Hazzard driving was that?” Billy laughed, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you that pissed off. It’s kind of hot.”

“You’re here, you’re here.” Steve rambled squeezing Billy tightly.

“Yeah, I want that t-shirt.”

“I, I… Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“I wanted to surprise you.” Billy shrugged, keeping his arm around Steve.

“That’s really sweet.” Steve pressed his hand to BIlly’s cheek and kissed his lips.

Billy smiled into the kiss briefly then tilted his head and parted his lips. Steve pressed his left hand up the back of Billy’s neck and gripped the long curls at the nape of his neck, his tongue teasing Billy’s.

A light rain started falling. Billy squinted upward and looked at Steve.

“Seattle.” Billy said the word like it were a curse and squinted at the rain.

“This is nothing.” Steve smiled squeezing Billy closer.

“So are you ready for the big show?”

“I don’t even care about it anymore.”

“Well I do.” Billy smiled.
“I guess I’ll go then, but we could just get out of here. If you want, I could take you back to my place, we could order some food. I’ve missed you so much.” Steve leaned into Billy.

“Nice try. I want to see King Steve in his new element.”

“How’s the wing?” Steve ran his hand down Billy’s cast.

“Hurts, but it’s better, I guess.” Billy shrugged lightly, he looked over his shoulder at the gallery windows, “Looks like you’ve got some fans already.”

Steve looked over at the people drifting about the gallery, the windows were bright now in comparison to the grey day outside, it looked big in there, like it had some how expanded.

“Yeah.” Steve swallowed, “I’m not the only artist.”

“You’re headlining.”

“I guess so.” Steve felt his stomach squelch, “Um…” His heart was racing now. He could feel his skin prickling. Suddenly he felt like running away, he didn’t want to go in, he didn’t want Billy to see his work, he didn’t want to have to face all those people, “I uh, I don’t know why there’s so many people, I wasn’t expecting, um, like, a lot of people?” Steve started to ramble, his ears were ringing.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“What?” Steve asked, he ran his hand over his head shifting his beanie backwards and then pushed it forward again.

“Are you freaking out right now?” Billy laughed.

“No, it’s just.”

“What?”

“What if you hate it?”

“Hate what? All the art goons?”

“No, I mean yeah, them, but my work?”

“No way.”

“Maybe. You know what?” Steve reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys, “Why don’t you just go to my place, I’ll um, I could meet you there, and then,”

“No you don’t, nuh-uh, steady there, pretty boy.”

“I’m freaking out. Oh my god, I’m fucking freaking out!” Steve bent at the knees a little, he stepped back from Billy, and rested a hand on the roof of his car. Steve opened the driver’s door and got in, he didn’t even know what he was doing. He shut the door and gripped the wheel, he couldn’t breathe.

Billy rapped his knuckles on the driver’s side window, but all Steve could do was shake his head.
Steve pressed his hands over his face taking deep breaths, he wondered if he had a paper bag, he was pretty sure he should be breathing into a paper bag at that moment. He heard the passenger door open and felt the weight of the car shift. He looked over at Billy, who twisted sideways to face him and clasped Steve’s right hand in his own.

“‘You’re not having a panic attack.’

“I’m, I’m, I’m hav-ving a p-p-panic attack!” Steve stuttered.

“Over a little art show? C’mon! You’ve fought demogorgons, you’re Steve Harrington, you’re my King Steve!” Billy cackled.

“Thanks, thanks, I’m fucking, my skin is melting and you’re laughing at me. That’s super helpful. Demodogs, it was demodogs, there was only one demogorgon!”

“Right, okay, the demodogs, you fought hundreds,”

“Dozens, at most, like maybe dozens,” Steve corrected taking deep breaths.

“Holy shit, alright, alright.” Billy snorted, and straightened his face, “Look at me, look at me, babe.”

Steve’s eyes swam, he forced himself to hone in on Billy’s eyes, they were bright and shining, wreathed by a forest of lashes. Steve’s breathing slowed a little, but he was still panting like a dog.

“Tell me about one of your dreams, about one of the times you came to see me.” Billy pressed his thumb back and forth over Steve’s knuckle.

“Right now?”


“The, the most vivid one,” Steve started hesitantly, he closed his eyes.

“No, look at me. Tell me any of them, which ever one you want.”

“Okay.” Steve opened his eyes focused on Billy’s eyes again.

“I was in your room, there was the cat, the bottle on the floor, it was empty, you were sleeping, and I tried to wake you and I felt like I wasn’t real, like I was dead.” Steve said rapidly.

“But you weren’t.” Billy soothed.

“No. I wasn’t, I was there, and…” Steve took a slow breath, his eyes traveled over Billy’s flawless face.

“I asked you if you wanted me.” Billy said his voice barely above a whisper.

“I said yes, and you asked how badly.” Steve shivered looking at Billy’s lips.

“That’s right, so, how badly do you want me?”

“More than anything.” Steve leaned in till his lips were lightly brushing Billy’s, “More than anything I’ve ever wanted.”

Billy parted his lips over Steves, let his tongue light across Steve’s lips. A steady drumming of heavy rain fell on the roof of the car. Steve leaned closer and cupped Billy’s face in his hands. He turned his head and parted his lips over Billy’s.
Billy tucked his chin and drew on the side of Steve’s neck, drawing and sucking on his skin, he tasted pleasantly of salt and sweat, he smelled of sandalwood shampoo, Billy cursed his broken arm and gripped the front of Steve’s jacket and hauled him closer, ignoring the pain running down his back.

“Come here, baby.” Billy tugged, Steve crawled over the console feeling Billy reel him in with his strong left arm, he shifted in the confines of the enclosed space of the car till he was straddling Billy’s lap, they kissed and nipped at one another. Billy laved Steve’s neck with a long heavy lick of his tongue, evoking a groan from the back of Steve’s throat.

“Oh god, oh fuck.” Steve rocked his hips against Billy’s, he twisted down on his lover’s lap.

“That’s so good, baby.” Billy murmured his voice heavy with pleasure.

Billy stroked his hand down the small of Steve’s back and clasped his right butt cheek, Steve arched squirmed and ground against Billy.

Steve pressed and rolled, his jeans constricting, he reached down between them, he glanced at the windows of the Beamer and saw that they were fogging steadily from the heat of their bodies. Steve unbuckled his belt and unzipped his fly releasing his cock, he was hard.

Billy clasped his hand around Steve and tugged firmly at the base, his thumb rolling over the tip.

“Don’t stop.” Steve pressed one hand around Billy’s and knitted his fingers into Billy’s hair and pulled him into a kiss. “Just don’t stop.” Steve shifted hungrily, thrusting into Billy’s fist. Billy tilted his head down and released a mouthful of spit onto the head of Steve’s cock and spread the saliva with his thumb listening to Steve moan in his ear. Steve reached down and yanked up Billy’s shirt pressing against the warmth of his stomach and ground into him.

“Are you gonna tell me more, about that dream?” Billy coaxed.

“You got a hold of me, I don’t know how, it was like, like your touch,” Steve groaned, and gasped into Billy’s neck, “You made me real, you made me feel,” Steve rutted harder, his voice breathless “It was so real.”

Billy bit Steve’s neck and jaw, shuddering and rolling up to meet him. He pressed his feet down on the floor of the car lifting his hips riding up against Steve.

Steve wrapped both his arms around Billy’s core, squeezing his ribs, he bit Billy hard making him yelp, Steve tasted the faint taste of copper and realized he’s broken Billy’s skin, but before he could apologize Billy turned his head and chewed up the side of Steve’s neck, whispering “Yes, baby, yes.” Arching beneath him, Billy’s whole frame quivering with tension.

Steve kissed Billy sloppily their tongues and teeth grazing wetly against each other’s. Steve groaned loudly and his whole body spasmed and he came up Billy’s belly and chest. Billy released Steve’s cock and crushed Steve to him.

“Fuck, you’re strong.” Steve melted against Billy wrapped under his left arm.

They sat in sated stillness. Steve wasn’t sure how long he’d stayed that way, snuggled against Billy, but suddenly he was aware of the world again, the tapping of heavy rain, the occasional car horn protesting. Steve closed his eyes and felt a heat burning in his chest, it was as if the thread that had connected them was rebuilding, but it was stronger now, heavy, like braided steel, bonding them so
intensely that it would never give, never break, never fail.

“I feel you Billy. I feel you again.”

“I never stopped feeling you,” Billy said in a low voice, as if in a dream, “I love you, I love you so much Steve. It’s fucking scary, it’s the scariest thing I’ve ever felt in my life, but it feels so good, baby.”

“I love you too.” Steve mumbled, his eyes hot and welling over with happy tears.

“Tears?” Billy murmured.

“They’re not bad ones.”

“I don’t want you to cry.” Billy kissed the corners of Steve’s eyes, his own eyes glistening. They sat in the car a while longer, neither of them wanting to part. Steve pulled off his beanie and wiped at Billy’s belly, removing some of the cum.

“I jizzed my pants.” Billy confessed with a smirk.

“Oh?” Steve laughed, and kissed Billy lightly, “Maybe we should go back to my place so you can change?”

“No. We’re going into that gallery, I’ll, um,” Billy laughed, his face flushing. “Come in with jizz stains on your jeans?”

“It’s your fault.” Billy snorted.

“Here, take my car, drive to my place, it’s not far, and grab some jeans. I think there’s some clean ones in the closet, if not, try the hamper.”


“I will.” Steve smiled, and ducked his head, his heart was thrumming wildly in his chest, but the anxiety had left him completely. Steve drew a map for Billy, so he could find his way to Steve’s apartment without any trouble, that and to spend more time with him before going into the gallery.

“I’ll be right back.” Billy promised as he kissed Steve one more time, before shoving him out of the car.

“Can you drive with one arm?” Steve teased.

“Yeah, I’m gonna hit the bus depot, I’ve got my shit in a locker.”

“Okay, don’t get lost. I’ll see you soon.”

“Count on it.” Billy winked.

Part 27

Eye of the Beholder
Steve floated into the gallery, he was so distracted by what just happened, and feeling boneless from the time spent with Billy that he didn’t really care about anything. He was high on the rush of having Billy back in his life. The connection he’d thought had broken was back and it felt like a live thing blooming out of his chest, he could feel a bizarre sense of elasticity blossoming from his chest, it seemed to be chasing Billy and yet at the same time flowing back into him. Steve had never really considered the idea of souls, but now it was all he could think about.

As Steve walked through the browsing art connoisseurs he felt blissfully free of their presence, it was like passing through so much mist, the only real thing was the sensation of being tethered to Billy. Steve smiled and nodded at the people around him, maybe a little vacantly, but he didn’t care. The magnitude of what he felt just knowing that Billy Hargrove loved him was making him feel high. Steve stood before his largest piece, “He loves me.” He mumbled.

“Hey, you showed up! Dude, I was worried, like that, you weren’t gonna come back…” Keith had materialized next to Steve.

“I’m here, and there are so many people here, it’s crazy.” Steve smiled at Keith, he hugged him on impulse.

“Whoa, nice. Here have some champagne, and congrats, you’ve already sold three pieces.” Keith patted Steve’s back.

“No kidding?” Steve shook his head.

“Yep.” Keith nodded.

A woman swathed in black and sporting heavy framed tortoise shell glasses touched Steve’s elbow, she had steel grey hair and immediately started asking him about his influences and inspiration. Steve heard every other word and nodded, he looked over at the door, he could feel Billy moving closer. It was a bizarre and satisfying sensation. He kept glancing at the door and back at the wizened face of the woman by his side. She seemed nice, and genuinely interested, but he couldn’t really focus on anything she was saying to him. He was aware enough to realize that she’d paused, and looked at her.

“I’m, I, ah, thank you, I’m a bit overwhelmed right now.” Steve laughed.

“Well, that’s understandable, you’re probably not used to getting this much attention. But let me tell you something young man, you should get used to it. Artists like you only come around once a quarter of a century and I feel lucky to be here on your debut.” She pat his arm warmly. She chatted with him a bit longer, and Steve tried to pay attention, but all he wanted was for Billy to walk in the door.

Bryce, one of the gallery owners strolled over and placed himself between Steve and his patron.

“Iris, so you’ve met the artist, what do you think?”

“I think he’s immensely talented, I can’t wait to take home my painting.” She raved.
“He’s a diamond in the rough.” Bryce nodded.

“Hardly in the rough, that’s as if to say he needs to hone his art, he has the skill and the inspiration. You’re so predictable Bryce, don’t play down his abilities, it’s offensive.” Iris hissed.

“Well, far be it from me to argue with the grand dame of the Seattle art scene.” Bryce muttered irritably.

“Pfft!” Iris scoffed, “You’re such a sycophant Bryce. Get your nose out of my ass, I’ve already purchased a piece, the other exhibitors are pedestrian at best, you need to get a better handle on your selections for group shows.” She scolded.

“Yes ma’am.” Bryce groused.

“Indeed. I’ll speak with you later, Mr Harrington, perhaps we could do an interview for my art journal, *La Bête*?”

“Sure.” Steve nodded, not knowing what else to say, he now knew who she was, Iris, was well know in Seattle, she had been the local art critique for decades and was well respected.

“Bryce.” Iris nodded and walked away with an air of lioness, established and untouchable in all her glory.

“Well, shit, Steve-o, I guess you’re golden now.” Bryce stood next to Steve and examined the canvass that was hanging before them.

“She seems nice.” Steve said, not really knowing what else to say.

“She’s cut throat and influential, you’re fucking lucky.”

“I am.” Steve agreed his thoughts on Billy.

Billy had driven like a madman to the bus depot and gotten his bag out of the locker, he opted out of driving to Steve’s apartment and changed at the bust station’s men’s room. He’d circled the block around the gallery four times before finding a parking spot and rushed inside gallery. When he stepped in he had to push his way through the crowd. Billy scanned the crowd for Steve, he couldn’t see him but he could feel his presence.

Billy stopped in front one of the paintings, it was of a tunnel, shadowy monsters were faintly shown, they could be part of the walls, or the ground, it looked like they were peeling themselves free of the earthen walls, the paint was thick, Billy wanted to touch the canvas, it was menacing and yet inviting. Billy hadn’t expected the paintings to be so large. He walked over to the next piece, weaving around the crowd. It was a torso, decidedly male and muscular, a chain and pendant were suggested in delicate highlights, he liked how abstract it was, as if the figure was more of a suggestion than a clear image. Billy walked through the gallery, taking his time examining each of Steve’s paintings.

“So you’re going big time.” Bryce leaned into Steve.
“I guess. We’ll see.” Steve said doubtfully and shifted away, he could feel Billy was close, but he couldn’t see him in the gallery, there were too many people.

“I hope you’re not going to forget who got you this show.” Bryce wrapped his arm around Steve’s waist and dragged him closer.

“Dude.” Steve looked around the room.

“What, I know you swing both ways, it’s no secret.” Bryce dropped his hand from Steve’s waist to his ass and gave an unwelcome squeeze.

“Not interested.” Steve side stepped away and pushed Bryce arm off and turned to face him, he’d always gotten a vibe off of Bryce, but he hadn’t thought this would happen.

“Oh please,” Bryce mocked, stepping into Steve’s space.

“Fuck off, before I break your face.” Billy stepped into Bryce, bumping him backwards.

Bryce looked confused and angry, his expression settled into a sneer.

“Bryce, this is Billy, my boyfriend.” Steve said feeling elated at Billy’s timing.

“Slumming it?” Bryce sniped.

“Only when I hang around with you.” Steve replied cooly.

“This is Bryce?” Billy lifted a brow.

“Yeah, I own this place.”

“Well, Bryce. Keep your hands off my boyfriend.” Billy, fixed him with a glare, “Unless you want to get your ass beat in front of all your friends by a guy in a cast.”

“Fuck this.” Bryce melted back into the crowd with a scowl.

“What a douche.” Billy grunted watching Bryce vanish.

“Yeah, I had no idea.” Steve pulled Billy close and kissed him, “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” Billy admitted, smiling softly into the kiss and following it up with another.

“Did you see this one? It’s my largest piece.” Steve nodded at the enormous painting in hanging before them.

Billy hesitantly pulled his gaze off of Steve and looked at the painting.

Hanging there, the center piece of the exhibit, was a large painting of the a night sky, overlapped with an image of staring blue eyes, wreathed in thick lashes, beneath it was a forest defined by tall tree tops in black on a bruised colored sky. Billy took a couple steps back trying to see it better, the sky went from black to purple with the skyline above the trees turning red with highlights of orange, the suggestion of a nose and lips were woven in to the scenery, the further Billy stepped back the more clearly he could see the clouds were like falling curls, the mountains behind were composed of dark brows, a shooting stars were placed like highlights in the eyes. Billy took another step back, not sure if really was seeing what he thought. Billy looked over at Steve he was talking to a young
couple, both of them dressed fashionably. Billy stepped back further and looked at the painting, it was a landscape, but it was also a portrait, and he was the subject.

Steve hugged Yoon and Eli warmly, he’d had classes with them off and on over the last few years, he looked around for Billy hoping to introduce them to him, but Billy had wandered off. Steve excused himself and made his way through the crowded rooms looking for Billy, he finally spotted him and was about to beeline towards him when Keith got in his way.

“Hey, this is Howard, he just bought your piece, um, Wayward, he wanted to meet the artist.” Keith was drunk and happy, he steered Howard in front of Steve, he was a mild looking middled aged man draped in turquoise jewelry, he had long black hair framing his owlish face.

“Hi, nice to meet you.” Steve glanced back at where he’d last seen Billy and had lost him again.

“I just love your work, it wasn’t hard to choose the one I did though, it’s so beautiful, it really speaks to me, in a strange way.” Howard spoke softly, Steve leaned in to hear him.

“Thank you.” Steve smiled, distracted.

“No, no, thank you, thank you for showing your work, it’s just so, overwhelming and dream like, I just love it.”

“Thanks, thank you.” Steve nodded, he saw Billy go out the front door out of the corner of his eye. “I hope you enjoy it, really, um I need to go speak to someone, sorry, excuse me.” Steve touched Howard’s shoulder gently and darted through the crowd rushing after Billy.

Part 28

Home

Steve made it out the doors and looked left and right, then he saw Billy across the street, he was standing beneath an awning of a coffee shop having a smoke, rain was pelting down steadily. Steve looked up and down the street checking for cars and darted across the four lanes and ran up beside Billy.

“Hey.” Steve smiled, feeling anxious.
“Hey. Shouldn’t you be in there?”

“Did you just step out for a smoke?”

“It’s hot in there.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.” Steve agreed.

“Do you want to leave?”

“What? No, I just wanted a smoke.” Billy turned his face away and wiped at the corner of his eye.

“Are you mad?”

“No.” Billy laughed softly and shook his head.

“Did you, do you like, do you like my work?” Steve shuffled his feet feeling wildly off kilter.

“Like it?” Billy barked.

“Uh, like a little?”

“No. I don’t like it, I’m blown away by it, I can’t believe you did that, I can’t believe how talented you are. You’re really amazing, I don’t fucking like it, like isn’t the word. I love it.” Billy sounded angry, he flicked his cigarette into a puddle near Steve’s feet and pulled him over by the front of his shirt and kissed him.

“Oh, good.” Steve sighed and kissed Billy back. They kissed a bit more before Billy spoke again.

“Is that, one, the big piece, is that…” Billy struggled for the words.

“It’s you, you’re my muse.”

“I’m you muse?” Billy laughed and ducked his head.

“You’re a work of art.”

“I guess, I am now.” Billy shook his head, he looked at Steve in wonder. “Where are you from?”

“Hawkins?”

“No way, you’re not from there/ You’re from fucking outer-space.”

“You’re the one that rolled into town, how do I know you’re not the alien?”

“Because, I’m an asshole like everyone else on this fucked up planet.”

“I’m so sorry to be the one to tell you, but you’re not an asshole.” Steve teased lightly kissing Billy up his cheek and temple.

“It’s debatable.” Billy chuckled.

“Let’s go, I want to go home and I want to order a ton of Chinese food.”

“What about the show?”

“Fuck the show. The paintings will or won’t sell, I don’t care, and it will really piss off Bryce if I
leave early. I just want to be with you right now.”

“Yeah?” Billy tilted his chin up looking at Steve.

“I’m also really sick of talking to people.”

“Well we don’t have to talk, if you know what I’m saying.” Billy moved in close for a kiss, he wasn’t disappointed.

Steve drove to his apartment Billy idly stroked Steve’s thigh and stared out the window. It was a quick trip.

“It smells like you in here.” Billy dropped his duffle bag on the floor and walked over to a half completed painting.

“I can open a window.” Steve offered.

“It’s not a bad thing, it smells like cigarettes and sandalwood,” Billy took a deep breath, “and shampoo, and turpentine.”

“I should definitely open the windows.” Steve picked up his cordless phone and dialed the local Chinese restaurant that delivered while he cracked a few windows open, just an inch or so, heavy cold rain was coming down and Steve was grateful to be inside.

“I want dumplings, pork if they’ve got them.” Billy poked his head into Steve’s closet, he kind of liked the place, and there were no traces of anyone else, as far as he could see. He snooped around in the bathroom, listening to Steve order.

“Billy do you want anything else?”

“Chow Mein, and um,” Billy looked in the little bathroom wastebasket, no used condoms, “Beef with broccoli.”

“Yeah, please add Chow Mein and Beef with broccoli, and that’s it.” Billy walked out of the bathroom and wandered over to another stack of canvases.

“I need to call Danny.” Billy mumbled lifting the corner of a drop cloth that was covering a door sized canvas.

“Who the fuck is that guy?” Steve grumbled, putting the phone on the counter not offering it to Billy so he could make a call.

“Danny?” Billy laughed, “He’s a guy that’s looking after Freeloader, my cat, he bar-backs with me a couple nights a week, kind of a loadie, but an okay dude.” He turned and smiled looking at Steve, “Is there something I need to know, Harrington?”

“What, wait, shouldn’t I be asking you that about Danny?” Steve felt ruffled.

“I wouldn’t fuck Danny if you paid me, he’s got the sex appeal of an apple core and the brains of mayfly.” Billy shook his head, he walked over to Steve’s desk and gently lifted corners Steve’s sketch pad, he tilted his head checking out Steve’s drawings.

“Okay, it was just weird when I called and you weren’t there and he was, and I’d never even heard the guys name before, and he was in your apartment, and he was being kind of dick.”
“He’s not a dick, he’s just stupid.” Billy said mildly, he turned looking at Steve, Steve was clearing a small kitchen table, getting ready for the food to arrive, Billy realized that Steve, was foolishly as well as genuinely jealous.

“So what’s the deal with you and Bryce?” Billy tested, he leaned on the wall watching Steve pull a couple plates out of the cupboards.

“There isn’t one. He’s never really done anything like that. I guess he just thought I was interested, which I’m not, at all.”

“What about that other guy, the tall one?” Billy moved closer, Steve had grabbed a damp sponge from the sink and he was wiping down the table.

“Keith? No way, he’s not my type, actually I think you’re the only one that’s my type, type Billy.”

“Maybe you’re his type.” Billy moved up behind Steve and rested his hands on his hips, and pulled Steve back into his groin.

“Um, dinner is on its way.” Steve rested his hands on the table, feeling a rush of heat from the contact.

“I guess that makes you dessert?” Billy shifted closer, firmly rocking into Steve’s ass.

“Um.” Steve shut his eyes, resting his palms flat on the table, and exhaled slowly, he was a little surprised by what Billy was doing but more so by how much it turned him on.

“Knock it off.” Steve said weakly, he turned to face Billy and wrapped his arms around his neck, they kissed slowly. Billy backed Steve into the table, Steve shifted and sat on it and wrapped one leg over Billy’s hip and pressed his opposite knee between Billy’s thighs.

“You know, you never need to be jealous.” Billy fixed his eyes on Steve’s.

“That’s good to hear.” Steve replied distractedly.

“I’m starving.” Billy kissed Steve’s jaw, and nuzzled one of Steve’s many beauty-marks with his nose.

“This place is great, really fast and they’re next door…” Steve’s mind melted into puddle, Billy’s left hand was working over his crotch.

“They’re going to be here any minute.” Steve pressed his hand over Billy’s and reluctantly pulled it away, he kissed Billy’s knuckles, “When’s that cast coming off?”

“Another eight weeks or so.” Billy frowned, and then smiled, “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Maybe.” Steve smiled and kissed Billy quickly. Steve pressed his knee against Billy’s thigh and crotch.

“Mm.” Billy pressed his palm over Steve’s throat gently and kissed him up the side of his neck and teethed at his earlobe.

“You might freak out the delivery boy if you open that door with a boner.” Steve slid himself of the edge of the table and walked to the refrigerator and took out a couple beers.

Billy moved around the table, Steve watched him out of the corner of his eye and kept a few steps away from him, fighting a fit of giggles.
“Yeah, no kidding.” Billy let his eyes travel over Steve, it was so good to be with him again. Billy didn’t know how he’d ever managed to let Steve go.

“Keep your hands to yourself.” Steve took a couple steps backwards.

“C’mon, baby, we could take care of that real quick.” Billy winked and leaned on the counter. Steve popped a beer open and flicked the cap in a mason jar on next to the sink. “Have a drink,” He pressed it into Billy’s left hand and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and darted away.

Steve wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, he had been so nervous about Billy seeing his work that he’d almost had a meltdown to end all meltdowns, and now they were in his apartment, and Billy was being playful, sexy and best of all, he seemed happy.

“Are you happy?” Steve asked, he blurted the question before he could overthink himself out of it.

Billy took a long pull from the beer bottle and watched Steve’s face.

“Yes.” Billy answered solemnly.

“Me too.” Steve beamed.

There was a knock on the door, Steve took a few steps toward the short hallway that led to the front door and was swiped up in Billy’s strong left arm, Billy pinned Steve to the wall like a butterfly and kissed him voraciously, rocking his hips against him. Steve kissed him back, overwhelmed and moaning into the kiss. The knocking at the door repeated itself, followed by a voice “Delivery?”

“Holy shit.” Steve whispered, his lips puffy and his cheeks flushed.

“You better get that.” Billy smiled and released him, and swaggered back to the kitchen area.

“You sonofabitch.” Steve mumbled affectionally feeling dizzy with desire.

“Hi.” Steve opened the door, he recognized the delivery guy, he had long hair and dark eyes, Steve had wanted to paint him but never asked because it felt like a pick-up-line, he couldn’t risk his favorite Chinese food not being delivered to him, or worse being spat in.

“Hey, you must be really hungry.” The delivery guy said in a good natured tone he had two very full looking bags of food.

“I’m uh, ravenous, um let’s see.” Steve shifted sideways and half hid himself behind the door, not wanting the bulge in his pants to be seen. He fumbled a bit with his wallet and then finally came up with the cash, and a generous tip. “There you go, thanks, thanks, I’ll see you next time.” Steve handed over the cash and hooked his fingers in the bag.

“Yeah, see you soon, thanks for the tip!”

“Billy are you going to help me?” Steve turned to see Billy practically on top of him, Steve shoved one of the bags in his chest.

“Saved by the Chow Mein.” Billy wrapped his arm around the bag and made his way to the table. The smell of food distracted them both from their other appetites temporarily. The room smelled deliciously of noodles, beef, orange flavored chicken, egg-drop soup, pork dumplings and steaming hot white rice. Steve was impressed to see Billy wielding chopsticks like a natural, Steve popped open a box of Kung Pao Shrimp and pulled the plate over.
“Don’t put it plate, it gets cold.” Billy fussed, Steve laughed and scooted his chair closer to Billy’s.

“Is that like, a thing with you?”

“What do you mean a thing? I like my food hot.”

“Okay.” Steve smiled, there was so much to learn about Billy, he wanted to know all his quirks.

“I mean, unless you really want to use the plates.”

“No, I like this, eating out of the cartons saves me from having to wash dishes.” Steve leaned into Billy playfully.

“Yeah.” Billy smiled. They sat shoulder to shoulder picking out their dinner from the white boxes, taking sips of beer in between bites.

Billy had never felt more at home in his life. It wasn’t the apartment, or Seattle, it was just being next to Steve. He remembered that Steve had told him that he was his ‘True-North’ and his ‘home’ Billy couldn’t help but smile as he chewed, Steve was his home too.

Dinner was good, everything was flavorful and Billy felt like he hadn’t enjoyed a meal like this since he’d had lunch at Benny’s, of course the food there had been mediocre at best, but it had been him and Steve, just the two of them, trying to figure out each other, trying to imagine a future together.

Steve waved a shrimp caught between his chopsticks in front of Billy, “Hey. You wanna eat this little guy?”

Billy smiled and snapped it off the chopsticks.

“I don’t think I can eat any more.” Steve leaned over and kissed Billy’s cheek, he tossed half of the cartons in the trash, there were still three that were half full.

Billy picked up his beer and took a swig.

“I guess I’m done.” He speared one more piece of broccoli and chewed on it, then folded the little container shut.

Billy watched as Steve closed all up the take out boxes and placed them in the fridge, there wasn’t much in there, a half dozen bottles of beer, a carton of half and half, some cheese slices and what looked like a triangle of pizza wrapped in aluminum foil.

“You don’t like eating much?”

“What? Did you not see the amount of food I just put away?”

“No, yes I saw that, your refrigerator it’s empty.” Billy squinted at him.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve been pretty preoccupied with the show coming up, but there’s some eggs, and I’ve got pancake mix, and,” Steve paused opening the freezer, “some sausages, so breakfast is covered.”

Billy got up and walked over to Steve, he folded his left arm around Steve’s waste and bit lightly at the ball of his shoulder through his shirt, then turned his head and yawned.

“Hey, let’s got to bed.” Steve turned and faced Billy, catching his face gently and planting a kiss on his forehead.
“It’s early.” Billy protested, his eyes damp from yawning.

“We don’t have to sleep.” Steve kissed Billy’s cheek tenderly.

“Let’s go to bed.” Billy stepped back, sliding his hand down Steve’s arm, hooking his index finger in Steve’s and towing him to the bed. Steve followed with a smile on his face, he could see that Billy’s eyes were heavy with sleep.

“So how long did it take you to get here?”

“About 45 hours of non stop bus rides.” Billy shook his head, “the people that ride the buses are insane, like nuts.”

“You’ve been riding buses for almost two days?” Steve raised his eyebrows.

“It was worth it.” Billy leaned forward and kissed Steve gently.

Billy sat on the edge of the bed, the wooden frame was heavy and ornate, scuffed and chipped but still handsome. He reached over and touched the headboard, “This is you.”

“This is my bed?”

“No, what I mean is, this is you, it’s your space, an old antique bed frame, paint spatters everywhere, and art books and mismatched plates, this place, it’s you. Not your parents, not anything but 100% pure Steve Harrington.”

“I guess so.” Steve sat next to Billy, he looked at his studio apartment, most of his possessions were found, the book case was hobbled together with cinderblocks and boards, most of his art books had come from library sales. The sketches on the walls were his own, a few pages from music magazines were mixed in and some carefully pinned up pieces that Will had done.

“It’s perfect.” Billy said softly and wrapped his left arm around Steve’s waist, “I’m going to check out your CD collection later, you will be judged.”

“Great, fine.” Steve laughed softly, laying back cuddling against Billy.

“In the morning, we can have breakfast, I’ll make pancakes and eggs, and coffee and sausages. How do you like your eggs? But, we don’t have to wake up early, we can sleep in as late as we want. You haven’t told me how long you can stay? Maybe instead of taking a million buses back to Chicago, you could fly back, and I could go with you? Do you think Danny’s really going to take care of your cat?” Steve frowned, he hated Danny, he knew it wasn’t reasonable, but he wanted to knock his teeth out. Steve lifted his chin realizing that Billy hadn’t answered any of his questions.

“Hey?” Steve sat up on his elbow. Billy’s lips were parted, his dark lashes were pressed down on his cheeks. Steve leaned over and kissed the tip of Billy’s nose.

Steve got out of bed and shut the windows, he stripped down to his boxers and then pulled at Billy’s boots. Billy cracked his eyes looking half asleep and pulled his feet free. Steve gently crawled up beside him and unbuckled his belt and slid his tight black jeans off of him. Steve decided to let Billy sleep in his sleeveless t-shirt, trying to get it off of him and over the cast on his right arm just seemed like too much trouble. Steve pulled up the sheet and heavy comforter over Billy, he could see Billy’s eyes moving beneath their lids.

“Are you dreaming of me?” Steve whispered. Steve turned off all the lights but the one in the restroom, in case Billy awoke in the night, he left the door cracked so that it created a pale beam of
light that cut across the room. It was still raining steadily outside. Steve snuggled close to Billy, but was worried he might annoy him if he cuddled up to him.

Billy cracked his eyes, and turned on his back, he slid his left arm under Steve’s side and practically flipped him onto Billy’s chest, “Com’ere.” Billy mumbled and squeezed Steve to him.

“Ohay.” Steve wrapped himself to Billy, let his long legs knit over Billy’s thick thighs, he rested his palm over Billy’s chest, and it felt as though he was holding onto the center of the universe.

When Steve woke up he comfortably nestled against Billy. The rain that had been lasted through the night, it was torrential, unusual for that time of year. Steve looked at Billy and was surprised to see that Billy was still sleeping, in spite of the clattering raindrops rattling the windows.

“Billy.” Steve whispered, “Hey, I’m hungry.” Steve kissed Billy’s cheek, a small smile twitched at the corner of Billy’s mouth.

“Billy, Billy-boy,” Steve sang softly, “Wake up, sunshine.” Steve kissed Bily’s cheek and then his chin and his cheek.

Billy’s eyes opened and then drooped to half shut, Steve wasn’t convinced he was awake.

“Are you sleeping?”

“Yes.” Billy murmured, his eyes shutting.

“Do you want breakfast.”

“Mm-hmm.” Billy nodded just a fraction.

“Are you going to live with me forever?”

“Yeah?” Billy mumbled, sounding confused.

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, totally, so much. Love you.” Billy rambled briefly and then took a long sighing breath, followed by the smallest little snore.

“Are you awake?” Steve chuckled.

“Yeah, yeah.” Billy nuzzled into Steve and wrapped his good arm around him, he even attempted to hold him in his right arm, but the cast just ended up resting heavily against Steve’s ribs, Steve gave a little shiver, it was cold. Steve didn’t have the heart to shove his casted arm off, so instead he just cuddled up and decided he could wait awhile longer before making breakfast.

“Do you think, Hawkins is haunted?” Billy whispered.

Steve nestled closer.

“Like by ghosts?”

“No, not like that. By everything that happened, like maybe it’s a cursed place?”

“Do you believe in things like that?”

“Not exactly.”
“When my grandfather got older, before anything with the lab happened, he used to say that it was a ’frail place’. I mean, he got pretty senile, but sometimes I wonder, maybe wasn’t just the squirrels in the attic.” Steve reached over and stroked Billy’s messy curls back from his face.

Billy gently caught Steve’s wrist and ran his thumb over a small scar, he’d never noticed it before. It was pale, it looked like a burn, as if three small rings had been branded into his skin. It was a shallow scar, the skin was thin, nearly imperceptible unless the light hit it just right.

“What happened here?”

“Oh, I don’t remember, my mom said I reached into the oven when I was little, she must have been baking cookies or something.”

“Your mom baked a lot? Mine did.”

“I guess, I don’t really remember her baking very much.” Steve reached up and scratched at the scar.

“Does it itch?”

“Nah, just a habit.” Steve blinked.

“What’s your earliest memory?” Steve asked looking at Billy, he looked far away in thought.

“That’s a weird question, uh, I think falling down the stairs at the beach, my mom scooped me up, I had a few scrapes, I think it scared me more than it hurt.” Billy chuckled and pressed his fingers over Steve’s scar again. “I was just a little dude, maybe three at the most, but we got ice cream afterward.”

“That’s really, sweet.”

Billy was looking at the scar, he squinted at it, “It almost looks like three zeros.”

“Huh, yeah I guess.”

“What’s your first memory?” Billy mumbled.

“Oh, god. My first memory was being at the doctor’s office. I was so little and the table, you know the little bed things, it was cold and I wanted to get down, but it seemed really high, and I was crying. I remember Grampa Otis picking me up. He was mad. I guess the doctor had upset me. Really weird, it’s not a good memory, but like I felt safe, when he scooped me up. He was really kind.”

Billy nodded and smiled a little.

To Steve Billy looked deep in thought, maybe even a little worried. Steve kissed Billy’s jaw, “When should I move to Chicago?”

“My place isn’t as nice as this.” Billy frowned.

“We can move somewhere bigger, if you want. After I find work.” Steve sighed.

“I hated Hawkins when I moved there, I felt angry all the time.”

“I bet, I mean, I can’t imagine. Leaving your home, your friends, and not by choice.”

“I was worse in Hawkins, sometimes I just felt like I was on fire.”
“You were a teenager, that’s kind of standard.” Steve teased.

“I think it was that place.” Billy said seriously.

“Maybe, maybe you were just, I don’t know, like picking up on the Upside Down.”

“What, like bad vibes?”

“Yeah, the worst vibes. Maybe you were, like an amplifier to all the negative energy.”

“You sound like a hippy.” Billy scoffed, but he did wonder if Steve was right.

Steve pressed closer to Billy, “Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to you.”

“Because I’m picking up on bad vibes?”

“No, because, you’re, kind of,” Steve hesitated.

“Kind of?”

“Special?”

“You’re a nut. Do you think I’m special baby? You don’t have to sweet talk me.”

“I’m not.” Steve shoved Billy lightly and then pulled him close again.

“But you can call me baby anytime, you know, if you want.”

“Maybe your grandpa was on to something, about Hawkins.”

“If he was still around and hadn’t lost his marbles, I’d ask him. I miss him he was always looking out for me. He was more like a father to me than my dad.”

Billy thought of his mother, her long golden wild curls blowing in the sea breeze, her brilliant smile. Billy kissed Steve’s brow and nose and a couple prominent freckles and moles. There was so much they didn’t know about one another. Billy wondered if he’d grown up in Hawkins if he’d have survived, or if that place would have somehow crushed his soul, it definitely felt bruised by it, if that was possible. He reached over and took hold of Steve’s wrist, running his thumb over the scar again, it looked familiar somehow, but he’d never seen a scar like it.

Steve watched Billy’s face, his brow tensing in thought, his lips slightly parted. Steve leaned over and kissed Billy’s collar bone, he still had traces of bruises from the crash, faintly yellowed spots of skin. Steve looked at the cast and couldn’t wait for Billy to be free of it.

“So what do you think?”

“About?” Billy blinked, still looking lost in thought.

“When I should move to Chicago.”

“I think,” Billy said slowly, recalling being in the woods, the weird energy that was storming around the pair of them, the stories that he’d heard from Max, the laboratory now long vacated but still looming on the edge of the woods. He didn’t want Steve anywhere near that place, not within a hundred miles of it.

“I think I’m going to move here, but on one condition.”
“Name it!” Steve sat up.

“I’m bringing Freeloader.”

“Done!” Steve got on his knees facing Billy and pulled him up by his good arm.

“You’re going to love it here.”

“I already do, baby.”

End Notes

Thank you for reading.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!