Fugue

by K8BNimble

Summary

Billy Hargrove finds Steve and the kids in the Junkyard instead of at the Byers House. That changes a lot of things although the truism that the more things change, the more they stay the same is accurate, especially in Hawkins. It's also true that for every door that closes, another one opens.

Please read Author Notes for additional details before reading. Do not repost on other websites. This is only posted on AO3.

Notes

A couple of quick notes before you dive in:

1. This is still a work in progress. I have about 25k words written and know the ultimate plot. I'm a bit nervous as I've never began posting without a first draft completed. For my
own reasons, I felt the need to start posting today anyways. NO idea on posting schedule/writing schedule but I am going to try to do it once a week. Tags will change as needed. Warnings as well. At this point in the 25k - No Archive Warnings Apply however that could change (although not really planning it but sometimes stories take a life of their own).

2. First chapter is very long but I wanted to get my version of the end of Season Two posted before the new stuff starts (except for the Snow Ball which will come later).

3. I don't know if or who any final ships will be (between the older teens). Steve may not end up with anyone. I'm so undecided on him with anyone as an OTP but I can read him with anyone. That said - the basis of this story may lend itself to some temporary or odd "relationships" (generally will not be described too much in depth) but are necessary for the furthering and building of the plot. Some of it could be viewed as a tad dubcon in the same way as the MInd Flayer didn't give Will a choice but there is a reason some people are kissing. Any sex or violence will be generally canon level or a little worse in some points. I've marked as mature for language and just knowing I can get dark. I can always lower the rating later but I hate raising it.

4. There will be lots of "babysitter" Steve interacting with the kids in fun ways besides the ongoing plot. I already have some written that are needed but would love to add others just for fun. If you have specific suggestions, I'd be willing to consider them later. I may or may not be able to work it in but I would try.

5. POVs will change (although a lot of it is Billy's viewpoint up front). This is centered around Steve but often the action is viewed through other characters.

NO BETA WARNING. Let me know if you see any errors. And, no, I don't own Stranger Things. Wish I did.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1 - It’s Not Over Until Someone Passes Out

BILLY’S POV

“Is that you, Harrington, or am I dreaming?” Billy squinted in the dark at the figure standing in the dark. He had been looking for his pain in the ass step-sister when he spotted Harrington’s car parked near the junkyard. Well, it wasn’t an official junkyard per se, but a lot of people dumped their old crappy cars and such there. It piqued his curiosity why King Steve, of all people, would be routing around there in the dark. It couldn’t be he needed car parts. His beemer was only a couple of years old and was still nicer than most people’s cars. So color Billy interested. And Harrington was the most interesting thing this town had to offer even without this little mystery. Not that he would admit that to anyone out loud.

“3:00...STEVE, your 3:00!” A young boy’s voice shouted from somewhere around the husk of an old bus. He sounded frantic but Billy thought it sounded familiar.

“I’m a little busy,” Harrington yelled. And then ran straight at Billy. “Down, Hargrove!” Harrington was swinging what looked to be a bat right at Billy’s head. Without thinking he ducked, but tackled Harrington to the ground in defense. They both went down in a huff.

“Get off, off, OFF!” Harrington was yelling, trying to push him. Billy noticed Harrington wasn’t looking at him but rather something going over their heads. He sat up quickly but stayed on top of Harrington until he could get his bearings.

“Steve...move, move! Get up! They’re coming BILLY GET THE FUCK OFF HIM!” Several voices were yelling from the bus now. Billy looked up to see a pack of wild dogs starting to surround them and the bus. He was still straddling Harrington, and at another time might have enjoyed the sensation, but at that moment all he muttered was, “Oh, fuck me.”

“Later, maybe,” Steve quipped while pushing Billy off of him. Billy fell back on his ass as Steve stood and swung around to face the dogs, swinging the bat. This close, Billy could see the nails in it and...what the fuck. Why did Harrington even have that?

Two dogs stalked towards them. Billy guessed they were rabid, or starving, or both. They looked weird but it was really hard to see details in the dark unless they were closer, and he did not want that.

“BOOM”. The sound bounced off the bus and Billy saw a third dog throwing himself at the door. The kids screamed and he finally recognized Max’s voice in the mix.

“Come on, you creepy fuckers. I taste a lot better than cat and I’m right here,” Steve said while gingerly stepping away from Billy and the bus, but inching towards the dogs. “I promise, I am finger-licking...claw licking good.” Steve then made a clicking noise that sounded like he was luring a stray cat. He thought Harrington was fucking insane. It seemed to be working. All three dogs turned their attention to him. It was deathly quiet.

Billy slowly got up, trying not to attract attention.

Then all hell broke loose when the kids suddenly starting banging on things inside the bus and
yelling. Billy assumed they thought it would distract the dogs but it just goaded them into action. All three lunged at Harrington who swung his bat and got one right in the ribs. The force of it knocked the dog into the one next to it, but also forced Steve to stagger right into the path of the third.

Billy felt the adrenaline rush through him. He had felt a need to punch something after the shit with his dad went down. Without thinking, he ran and tackled the dog before it got to Steve and just started punching it. He lost himself in the feel of the violence that thrummed through him. It wasn’t a dog below him. It was his father. And he wailed on it. He heard the sounds of the scuffle around him but it was distant and foggy.

He finally snapped out of it when another dog rushed him. He fell over and it was on top of him. He struggled to hold it away from him, bracing his hands against its chest to keep its teeth away until he looked up and realized there were no teeth at first. There was actually no face to speak of until it opened up like...well he wasn’t sure what. He’d never seen anything like it. Some kind of demented venus fly trap. Then there were teeth - so many goddamned teeth - and a god awful smell. He accidentally inhaled deeply and the stench filled his nose and mouth, like the most rotten cigarette smoke and sulfur stench filling his lungs. Sudden choking on it made him relax his arm and almost before he realized his mistake, the weight was gone. Struck off him by Harrington with his bat, who was now beating its brains in. Did it have brains?

Billy rolled over quickly and got to his feet, sucking oxygen in. The taste in his mouth was awful as he almost hacked up a lung.

“Your 6:00!” someone yelled. Billy and Steve turned at the same time to see four...well they weren’t dogs...but whatever they were approaching them.

“Goddamnit,” Steve muttered. But just as he muttered it, all four stopped, looked around and ran off.

Huh.

One of the kids yelled, "You must have scared them off!"

Billy looked up at Steve, moon behind him lighting his profile, bat dripping blood and guts and other unnamable things over his shoulder. “No, they’re headed somewhere,” he said quietly watching them run off in the distance. Billy thought Harrington had never looked hotter. Then he started coughing again, hoping one of them had some water.

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Billy had almost forgotten what he’d been angry about when Max stepped out of the bus. Then he saw Lucas and began seeing red. He had told her to stay away from him and look what happened. That kid was trouble.

“That was so cool!” another kid yelled, running up to Harrington. Great, another giddy member of the King Steve’s fan club. He could almost see the hero worship oozing out of the kids’ pores. It irritated the crap out of him.

“Max, what the hell are you doing here?...No wait…I’ll deal with your bullshit later.” He turned on Steve. “What the fuck are you doing here with them? At night...in a junkyard.”

Steve just stared at him.
Not seeing any water anywhere, Billy pulled a cigarette out and lit it, waiting for an answer. He needed to get that taste out of his mouth. Steve started walking away. “Don’t you walk away from me! Here I am looking for my little step-sister...all worried because she’s not where she’s supposed to be…”

“Billy, don’t,” Max stepped forward trying to intervene. He pushed her away and continued toward Steve. He grabbed Steve’s arm and spun him around. “And I find her here, with you, in the middle of nowhere. Gives me the heebie jeebies.”

“Were you dropped on your head as a child that you didn’t just get what happened?” Steve seemed utterly done with Billy. As if he couldn’t be bothered with Billy. Like he hadn’t just saved Steve’s life. OK - Steve had saved his first - and more than once - but still...it pissed him off to be ignored by anyone, let alone King Steve. Who the hell did he think he was? And why was he hanging out with these kids. Too many damned questions rattled around in his head.

“Oh, yeah...what the fuck were those things and why are you here?” Billy spun again and ran towards Lucas “and why the fuck is Max with you? I told her not to speak to you. But you know if she won’t listen, maybe you will. Stay the fuck away from her,” At that point, he had picked Lucas up by the shirt and held him against the bus.

“Why? Cause I’m black, you jerk?” Lucas kicked Billy in the balls, although it wasn’t very hard because of the angle.

Billy became enraged. How dare that little shit. “I’m going to kill you!”

“No, you won’t!” a voice from behind him said. Billy was spun around and felt the punch to his jaw before he registered Steve in front of him. Hell ya, he was still in a fighting mood. He took a swing but missed. Steve got him one more time, before Billy swiped his leg, making Steve fall backwards to the ground, dropping his bat. Billy pressed his advantage and straddled him, punching Steve in the face...once, twice, three, four times. Oh it felt good...until Max stuck Steve’s bat in between them.

“Stop! she yelled. “Or I swear,” she held the bat up like she was going to swing it into his head. Billy paused. He wondered if she had it in her. He almost was going to egg her on just to see if she had the guts when the other kid, who he still didn’t know, spoke up.

”Jesus Christ, we don’t have time for this.. We should see where those things are going!” The other kid yelled, voice cracking.

“Dustin’s right. We need to get moving,” Steve said from below him, a little groggy. “Stop being an asshole for one minute if it’s at all possible. This is bigger than us.”

Billy grinned down at him, taking in Steve’s somewhat battered face. He liked the rough way Harrington looked - and the glare that came with it. He enjoyed the way Harrington felt below him. “Oh yeah, tell me. What are they?”

“Tell you on the way,” Dustin said.

Billy licked his lips, still watching Steve. “But what if I’d rather stay here and finish you instead?”

Max waved the bat in front of him again. This time though, Billy grabbed it lightly, ignoring the pressure of the nails against his palm. He still had enough pressure on it to pull her forward. “Don’t tell me what to do,” he hissed.

Steve thrust up trying to dislodge Billy from his hips. “Just get off. You can beat me up later, I
promise, if you just get off now.” Billy laughed.

“Okay, pretty boy. I expect you to keep your promise,” Billy wiped blood off Steve’s face with his thumb and licked it. Yeah - it was gross, but well worth seeing the disgust on Harrington’s face as Billy patted his cheek. After he stood up, he held a hand down for Steve and pulled him up. “You still don’t know how to plant your feet.”

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“Why are we heading towards the man-eating monsters, again?” Billy yelled from the back of the group walking along the train tracks, in the dark. He took another puff of the cigarette waiting for an answer. He assumed his answer was a number of hands held up giving him the finger but again, it was dark and he couldn’t really see, but as there was no verbal response, he assumed it.

He was still trying to sort the entire story in his head - or what little they told him after the little dweeb with the headset admitted he kept one as a pet. Idiot. But he was a talkative one and since apparently his buddy was busy trying to get with Max - and wasn’t that just something he’d have to deal with later, the kid settled for filling the silence with a rapid fire retelling of events. Sounded like something out of a movie. Billy would have broken the kids arm for lying if Harrington hadn’t been setting such a fast pace in the front like a man on a suicidal, really stupid mission. Before Billy could ask questions though, the kid ran up to his new favorite hero leaving Billy behind.

So he turned the story over in his head, not understanding why they weren’t getting their asses back to their cars and high-tailing it out of there..

He threw the cigarette down and ran forward and grabbed Harrington’s arm. “I mean it. Why the hell are we headed towards them? I like a fight just like the next guy,” Billy paused at Harrington’s raised eyebrow.”OK, more than the next guy. But really what are we going to do when we get there? Two of those things almost us down and at least four left us to join more.”

The rest of the party caught up and stood there watching them face off. Harrington just turned to move away, but Billy held tight. “I hate being the sound of reason...but this shit’s insane.”

“Then leave, Hargrove. No one asked you here anyways.”

“I’m serious. All we got is your bat and my swinging cod piece against those things?”

“Hey...wait we’re here,” the kids started yelling in disagreement.

“Shut it! These kids shouldn’t be here, Steve. All you’re going to do is get them killed and while I entirely support Sinclair’s demise…”

“Hey!” the kids yelled.

“...and don’t really give a fuck about Rusty,

“DUSTIN!” Dustin interrupted but was completely ignored.

“I can’t go home without Max. As much as I hate the little bitch, my life is too valuable to me to lose it because she’s following some dipshits into some seriously whacky shit!”

Billy stopped when he saw Steve look at the kids. “Give us a second, will you?” Steve asked the kids. He led Billy a little further forward, away from them.
Steve leaned close to Billy and spoke softly. "First of all - stop yelling. I don’t want to attract their attention. Secondly, we’re only going to scout. When I figure out where they’re going, we’ll report back."

"Report? To who? The Scooby squad?" Billy asked.

Steve continued on as if Billy hadn’t said anything. "Third - these kids will just do it without me even if I took them home. Seriously - they’re dumb like that since you missed the entire sequence of events that led us here. I’m just trying to keep them as safe as possible. And no - not the Scooby Squad - to Chief Hopper. Can we just go now? We’re losing time. Or just take Max and go. Either way...I just want to get a move on.” Harrington glared at Billy and it actually sent a little shiver through him. He liked this side of Harrington. A little of that King Steve he’d been hearing about. It was a bit intoxicating. He inhaled deeply and got a whiff of the cologne Steve wore under his sweat from the fight. It caught him off guard so he just nodded and stepped back.

"Fine, maybe I’ll get killed and save Neil the effort,” Billy muttered as he decided he didn’t want to miss anything.

Steve looked back at the kids. “Come on - and for fuck’s sake - keep it down.”

They walked for what seemed to be another 15 minutes before they spotted what Lucas called the lab which seemed to be where they were headed too - like Steve forgot the part about going back to get Hopper. He was about to say something as they cleared the woods but heard, ‘Steve?’ from the least likely voices he thought he’d hear tonight.

“Nance?” Steve asked and Billy almost heard the wistful longing in Steve’s voice. Damn. She wasn’t all that hot. Steve was wasting himself with her.

“Billy?” Again - in unison, almost an octave higher.

“Freak, Bitch, how’s it going?” Billy asked calmly, knowing it would rile them up. He wasn’t sure if it was more fun to see them get aggravated or Steve on their behalf.

“Don’t,” Steve glared at him again, and Billy just smiled. If it wasn’t for the annoying kids and the man eating monsters, this would be one of the best nights of his life or since he arrived in Hawkins, at least.

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“What is he doing here?” Nancy asked Steve. They were in the back seat, sitting behind Byers who was driving the rest of the way to the Lab’s entrance. Billy had grabbed shotgun when he yanked Dustin out of the seat and yelled, “In the back.” He was partially turned to watch them. Maybe he should have sat in the back with Steve.

“Don’t ask.”

“Ok. Then what happened to your face?” Billy saw Nancy move Steve’s bangs away from his face tenderly, as if she had every right to. The girl irritated him. He glanced at Byers who also seemed a little irritated split between watching them in the rearview mirror and the road. Byers gunned the gas. At the same time, the whispered conversation was covered by the kids yelling about how awesome Steve was fighting the monsters as if Billy hadn’t done anything. To his surprise, Steve actually spoke up.
“Guys, guys! Cool it. Yeah, Billy and I each took one out,” he said answering an unheard question the Nancy must have asked. “They’re not like what we fought last year. Not quite as tough but there were so many more of them.” He pulled Nancy’s hand away from his face with a small smile then looked guiltily at Byers. “So, you really think Will’s in the lab?” he asked.

Nancy also glanced between Byers and Harrington like she was sucking lemons.

Billy leaned against the passenger seat taking in the tense body language and was entertained. This little party was getting more interesting by the minute. Guess the little love triangle hadn’t quite resolved itself yet. Billy licked his lips in anticipation. This was better than any soap opera his stupid step-mother watched. Plus, the bruises blooming on Harrington’s face made him hard to look away from but he managed to turn back to face front.

“That’s the one that went missing - last year, right?” Billy asked. Byers glared at him. Billy just thought he looked like he was passing gas,,,but no matter. He finally decided to light up another cigarette. “Your brother?”

“Yes...and no smoking in the car.” Jonathan said with gritted teeth.

“In this piece of shit car? Really?”

The smack on the back of his head surprised him. The order to “Be nice” wasn’t. Steve was really asking to get his ass kicked (or fucked, his imagination provided). Damn, adrenaline really made him horny. He turned to face front and rolled down the window, but he kept his cigarette.

See - he could compromise.

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Chaos was the only word to describe what the hell happened after their little party got to the lab. Turns out the littlest Byer had been in there...as had his mom and Chief Hopper and the youngest Wheeler. Billy had actually been on the way to their house looking for Max when he came across Steve’s car so he knew who the Byers were.

It was hard to follow Hopper’s story. But those monster things had definitely been swarming the place, alarms were going off, a lot of people were attacked or killed - in particular someone name Bob that they knew?

The kids were piled in the back of Hopper’s truck, Steve and his bat squeezed in the front between him and Hopper. Nancy and Jonathan apparently had the rest of the crew and they were all racing towards the Byers’ house instead of the police department. Billy would have questioned Hopper but he really didn’t want to pull Hopper’s attention to him. He was currently cussing out Steve for bringing the kids to the lab instead of driving the hell away from the junkyard as fast as he could.

He had a point. It wasn’t like their being there had made a difference. It was Jonathan and Nancy that had driven in as the getaway car. They were lucky Hopper’s car was there.

“I had no idea you were there! I didn’t want to lose track of them!” Steve argued back. It was fun to see King Steve getting chewed out.

“It was reckless! You all could have gotten killed. And how the hell did you end up there anyways?” Steve gave a very abbreviated version of what had happened. Hopper sighed as if he had no more fucks to give. “How did you think you were going to stop them? For crying out loud,
Byers was able to beat the crap out of you last year.”

Steve looked pained and turned away from Hopper. He stared straight ahead obviously ignoring the men on either side of him. Billy admired the rush of red that flushed Steve’s face from obvious embarrassment. That was some new intel. Byers looked like he couldn’t swat a fly without crying and he beat up Steve? The same Steve Billy just watched fight and kill these monsters.

When Hopper didn’t get an answer, he glanced at Billy. “And you, why didn’t you stop them?” This was directed at Billy. “If Harrington here is an idiot without an ounce of self-preservation instincts, why didn’t you stop them?”

“Ain’t my problem, ain’t my responsibility,” Billy answered.

“And yet, you’re here,” Hopper replied. He lit up a cigarette.

Billy looked out the window. “Just trying to get my step-sister home. That’s all.” He sighed. He really wished he could light up but decided not to take a chance. Instead he pressed his leg against Steve’s but got no reaction. He left it there. The heat felt good even if Steve just rolled his head back and closed his eyes, his hands gripping the end of his bat braced against the floor between his legs.

“I should just take you back to your cars and you should all go home,” Hopper said, taking in a long drag. The three kids finally spoke up - all over each other, arguing. Hopper held up a hand. “But you idiots would just get into more trouble.” He kept driving.

After a few minutes they pulled into the Byers place.

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Mrs. Byers held the keys out to her car. “Go on. Take it. Get the kids home.” Steve stared at her. “I’m not leaving you guys.” Nancy had already refused, even though she was the first logical one to ask as at least one kid was related to her and clearly Mrs. Byers knew her.

Steve clearly felt like he had something to prove. Billy was torn. This really wasn’t his mess. And it was stupid to let the kids stay here. Not that he had faith this raggedy group was going to be able to save them, but the kids would surely be no help. They hadn’t been so far.

He grabbed the keys. “I’ll take them.” Everyone stopped and stared at him. “Let’s go!” he ordered, but no one moved. “I promise I won’t sell the car for parts,” he said to Mrs. Byers. But just then they heard the sound of the demodogs get close. Too late now.

After a second round of howling, Hopper began giving orders. Billy was surprised Byers couldn’t shoot a gun. He assumed, based on the cabin living, some hunting must have happened. He was even more surprised that Nancy could. Hopper looked between Billy and Nancy and must have decided she was the more trustworthy of the two. Just as well. Bill had shot handguns but not rifles. Still, that left him with no weapon. Steve still had his bat. Sinclair looked ridiculous with his slingshot, the little Wheeler looked even dumber with the small trophy in his hand. Byers must of thought he could defend his mom by letting the beasts eat his side the way he covered her. Billy rolled his eyes and went to the kitchen and grabbed assorted knives. He kept the longest one he found but he handed out the others to anyone who wasn’t armed. Wasn’t much, but it was something.

While everyone was posed watching the front door, Billy kept an eye on the other walls and
windows. He doubted the things would use the front door.

The handle jiggled and Billy could almost sense the increased tension in the group as they faced the door. A sudden series of high pitched yelps from where the frmodogues had been made Billy very nervous. It sounded as if they had been scared off. One came crashing through the window - dead already. And if something could scare them off and kill one like that, he doubted that their army of kitchenware, sports equipment and two guns were going to be effective.

Still, everyone raised their respective weapons and the door opened.

And a little girl stood there.

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Billy wasn’t sure what to do with himself so he slunk into the background and listened. There was some sort of happy reunion with the freaky little girl and Hopper and the Wheeler boy. In all the discussion about the monster, they had neglected to mention a kid with psychic powers. Max had sneered at him when he quipped that apparently the girl needed no new friends when she had rejected Max’s handshake. No one was bothering to explain so he just listened. Contrary to popular belief, Billy was a good listener. He had to be. He listened to learn how to manipulate - from getting someone to blow him, to figuring the right way to needle someone to distract them from his real intentions to weaving his way into the upper echelons of the high school power structure to paying close attention to when his father came and went to avoid unnecessary interactions. Some days he believed his survival depended on it. He thought today was one of those days. Out of all of it, no one asked about the bruises on either his or Harrington’s face. He surmised that others assumed it was from the monster fight as the kids had been excitedly telling that story - but somehow they never mentioned Billy and Steve’s fight with each other.

When everyone got busy on the “Plan”, Billy traipsed behind and sorted through the Byers refuse for things to create their secret hiding place to interrogate Will. And he listened. He listened as the Wheeler chick tried to be nice to Steve for helping the kids. He listened as Steve acted like nothing he did was all the impressive. Then later, he listened from the porch as Steve confessed he had been a shitty boyfriend but he was a good babysitter (and what the hell? Shitty boyfriend? Not based on the stories Billy had heard - Steve had acted like Nancy hung the moon), he listened as Steve told her to go with Jonathan, the other guy. He listened to Steve say it was ok. He huffed and went back into the house. How could that be ok? Billy knew the rumors, knew they had fought and possibly had broken up, but it was clear that something had happened between Byers and Wheeler and Steve was ok with it? That didn’t make a lick of sense to Billy. Of course, Wheeler wanting Byers over Harrington didn’t either but each to their own he supposed. Maybe, after all this is over, he might be able to console Steve with some alcohol and see if he could find out if Steve might be willing to do some - experimenting. Liquor loosens tongues and all that. Billy would take what he could get - and he was honest enough with himself that he had been impressed in the showers by what Steve had to offer.

He had a lot of time to think and observe as everyone busied themselves. No one paid any attention to him. Nor to the dead demodog on the floor. He watched Max talk to the Sinclair kid. He half thought he should just grab her and go and fuck all of this. Her and Sinclair were not going to end well if his dad found out. As it was - getting home this late wouldn’t end well either. His dad was going to be pissed. He expected a few bruises by morning that were not already there. Or belt marks on his back.

But he didn’t move. He just sat in the chair, also ignoring the broken glass and dead demodog and
contemplated the enigma that was Steve Harrington.

Billy didn’t understand him. He had been the King of Hawkins High according to Tommy and Carol until he started dating Nancy. At first his privileged position brought her into their circle. Tommy didn’t like it but hey - whatever King Steve thought was cool - was okay by everyone else. He was the star of the basketball, swim and baseball teams, wealthy, good looking - everyone wanted to be him or date him. So he had ruled.

Billy had had to listen to Tommy and Carol complain about how Steve had changed in the last year. How he had started to be nice to the Byers freak, started complaining about Tommy’s behavior, not going or having parties, and generally just not living up to expectations. While he still participated in sports, he wasn’t as into them as he had been in previous years. He spent less and less time with the people Tommy thought were important. And it pissed Tommy off. Billy knew he felt betrayed.

That’s what had intrigued Billy about Harrington. Here was this pretty boy who had all the advantages. He'd heard all these stories about how Steve had ruled. He had dated a lot of girls (and clearly many of them were still crushing on him and that big dick that they giggled about).

And he seemed to have just given it up. For her. He had decided the smart girl was the one for him and had started to plan their nice little life out - like some damn romantic comedy. He heard stories about how he stayed with her through her best friend going missing, how he defended her from Byers’ stalking and how his parents loved her.

Billy could understand if Steve had just incorporated her into their gang and moved on. Truthfully, he could see Nancy pushing out 2.5 kids with Steve and buying a nice, suburban home with a fence. If it had just been that, Billy would have been bored.

And then she dumped him. By all accounts Steve was a nice guy, if too sheltered and privileged. What could Byers possibly offer after stalking her? He listened to Tommy ramble on about how Steve should have crawled back to them the previous year when they first broke up. How some of the girls had hoped he'd pick them after it became clear they weren’t dating anymore.

But then Steve forgave her for her apparent indiscretion and she forgave him for his part in the theater graffiti. Suddenly, Steve and Nancy were together again. And Jonathan - who had apparently beaten the crap out of Steve - had also been forgiven. And the three of them were all okay with each other. And Steve did not crawl back to Tommy and Carol. Steve lost his crown pretty rapidly after that between an angry Tommy and the disappointed girls. It was easy for Billy to come in and take it - not just because Tommy and that circle of friends wanted to get back at him and easily accepted Billy but mostly because Harrington didn’t seem to really care at all about his former place of glory.

That’s the part that intrigued him. That’s the part that Billy found absolutely fascinating in a place where there had been absolutely nothing else of interest. Billy had always been able to manipulate and garner attention, but the prettiest boy in town really didn’t care one way or another about attention or about Billy.

And now - the reason he gave all that up had once again dumped him and returned to Byers. And Steve was “Ok” with it. Maybe he wasn’t King Steve. Maybe he was Saint Steve.

Once Hopper and the weird girl left and Wheeler took off with the Byers clan to do whatever it was they were going to do, Steve walked into the house and headed straight for the kitchen, rubbing his temples like he had a headache. Billy understood. Byers and Wheeler gave Billy a headache, too, and he didn’t have any shitty history with them.
Steve looked around the kitchen for a minute and then started getting food out. He was banging cupboard doors around and checking out the refrigerator. Apparently he really was going for babysitter of the year. Billy was at loose ends since clearly none of the adults had trusted him enough to go with them, and since he wasn’t eager to leave, that left him watching the kids anxiously talk amongst themselves and Steve pacing the floor obviously trying to stay busy.

After a few minutes, we watched as Steve began pulling some things out of the fridge and setting them on the corner. Steve found the pots he had been apparently looking for. Billy could tell that, while he wasn’t overly familiar with the Byers’ kitchen, Steve knew his way around a kitchen. In a few minutes, Billy smelled tomato soup heating up and grilled cheese sandwiches. How pedestrian.

“Hey, shithheads, if you want to eat, get out here and set the table,” Steve yelled. Max and Sinclair jumped up and started to do as Steve asked. Mike and Dustin were arguing about something.

Billy started to head out. It actually didn’t smell half bad. He hadn’t eaten in some time.

Suddenly Mike yelled, “What the hell - how can you eat now? There’s like really important stuff going on! We need to help!” He ran into the kitchen and screamed at Steve.

Dustin ran in behind him. “Well, I’m hungry,” argued defensively of his new hero.

Mike rolled his eyes. “Of course you are. You always are - but there’s more important things than your stomach right now.”

Mike and Dustin started yelling at each other. Max and Sinclair froze as they watched. Billy watched Steve as he angrily plated up some sandwiches as they finished cooking and then turned on the kids.

“Enough! Right now there’s nothing we can do. But if something comes up, we’ll be no good to anyone if we’re starving. Fuel up.”

“I mean, I guess we could clean up,” Max suggested quietly. Billy knew this voice. It was the conciliatory one she used after Susan and Neil argued.

“After you eat,” Steve said, brooking no arguments.

“You heard mom,” Billy quipped with a half-hearted smirk.

Mike sneered at Steve. “Fuck you. I don’t want to eat. We should be doing something.” He turned to Billy, “And no one asked you to be here. Why are you?” Mike huffed and stormed out of the room. There was a long silence in the room.

Steve rolled his eyes but yelled at the closed doors, “Language, dipshit!” and then everyone laughed quietly and then got a plate and a bowl of soup. As there weren’t enough chairs the table, Billy took his and went out on the porch to keep watch. He didn’t need Mike to tell him he wasn’t welcome. No one paid him any attention. Plus, just because one demodog was dead inside, didn’t mean more weren’t headed this way. The whole hive mind idea Dustin had was just a theory.

The night actually seemed quiet, but the voices from the table carried out. After a few minutes, the Wheeler kid must have rejoined them. He didn’t hear Steve’s voice adding to the conversation but the kids were all talking over each other. Suddenly, a round of laughter filled the air, including Steve’s voice.

It seemed oddly warm to Billy and he didn’t know how to feel about that. He sat his empty plate
and bowl down and walked further into the woods, peering into the darkness. He walked until he couldn’t hear them anymore. This whole thing was crazy. He suddenly realized his entire understanding of life had just changed. And it wasn’t just about the Upside Down.
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He’d been navelgazing for quite awhile but he suddenly heard some voices raised in the distance, possible yelling but he was too far away to make out what was being said. He decided to head back. He was almost back to the clearing when he heard a car start up which confused him. The only car there was a beat up Pinto he thought belonged to Mrs. Byers. It dawned on him that Harrington must have decided to take off somewhere - but why? And was he now stuck there with those little shits!

He ran about to curse out Harrington as he saw the car peel out, but was gobsmacked when no one other than Max was at the wheel, giving him the finger when he yelled out her name. He raced after them and could see the backs of the heads of the kids - but it was dark so he couldn’t be sure if it was all of them. And where was Harrington? If he was in the car, why was Max driving? He raced back into the house - and there was nothing. He ran around, yelling for Steve feeling like an idiot.

Had something happened to him? Was that why? Maybe that demodog came back and Steve went after it? But then, why the car? Was he with them - but unable to drive? Why wouldn’t he be able to drive? Billy pictured Steve’s beautiful and bruised face and it occurred to him that maybe - just maybe the fight had caught up to him. Billy knew how his head hurt after one too many - and while he was used to it, he assumed Harrington wasn’t. He may have been scrappy with the demodogs but he may not have been able to take a punch. Now Billy was starting to spiral in circles - he knew head injuries could cause brain damage. He suddenly remembered Steve hitting his head on the ground a couple of times as well. What if...could it take that long? Could Steve have managed to stay upright all this time and only now have succumbed to them? Were they taking him to a hospital? Why wouldn’t they have asked Billy to...oh right - some of those injuries were his fault. No wonder Max gave him the finger.

And if they took Steve to the ER, there would be no demodog story. Only the fight - the fight between Steve and him that could explained Steve’s injuries. And while Hopper would have let it go - he wasn’t on duty with the police.

He was so fucked if the police showed up at his house. Being arrested for assault was not something Neil would allow. He’d probably put Billy in the hospital himself.

Billy thought of running, but since there was no car and it was too far to walk to his even if he could find his way in the dark, he sat on the stoop and tried not to cry. Instead, he started throwing trash around the yard. Who would notice the difference? Eventually, he realized he was stuck and he doubted the kids would tell the cops where he was. It would cause too many questions.

He decided if he was going down, he may as well do something useful with his anger. He thought maybe he should go look for Steve but if he wasn’t in the woods, that would just get Billy lost. He’d never been a Boy Scout. Instead he thought it best if he stayed at home base so he could at least tell whoever returned first that the kids took off voluntarily.

When he finally went back inside, he realized the demodog was no longer on the floor. It gave some credence to the first theory that maybe it hadn’t been as dead as they thought and Steve had been injured as a result. Or that they just all ran away and left Steve and/or Billy to fend for
himself. Maybe Steve was in the woods chasing it down now.

Fuck! He didn’t know what to think. He noticed dishes in the drying rack. So at least they had time to eat and clean up before whatever happened...happened. Billy paused realizing that he really had been gone for some time. It hadn’t felt more than 20 minutes but when he looked at the time, he realized it had been at least an hour since he had walked out into the woods. Weird.

Weirder though was seeing refrigerator shelves and food all over the floor which left him puzzled. What the hell happened? So he started there. He decided he’d kill time by cleaning up. Then his theory about the demodog still being alive was shot to hell when he found it crammed into the refrigerator. That was just gross. He didn’t care why they did it - but no way in hell was he leaving it there for Mrs Byers. She might seem a little flaky but she had at least been pleasant to him.

So he cleaned...and scrubbed and scrubbed again. He found aggressively cleaning was almost as satisfying as punching someone. It helped that he found out the Byers had a decent record collection. Cleaning to the Clash was a cathartic experience. And it kept him from thinking too much about the shit that would hit the fan come morning.

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NANCY’S POV

Nancy was exhausted but still amped up on adrenaline when she ran outside to see where the black smoke that had just been evicted out of Will was headed to. She was sweaty, hot, and emotionally wrung out as she watched the smoke spin away. It was swirling furiously like a tornado but seemed to be heading away from them. She felt a cool breeze against her hot skin and sighed. She glanced behind her and could see the Byers locked in a group hug and felt a sense of relief for them. She turned back to take a last look at the thing that had inhabited Will and took a sudden intake of breath when she saw a cloud of black right in front of her face.

“JONA…” Nancy started and then stopped. And stood there, frozen.

She felt a hand on her shoulder that shook her out of her trance. She blinked slowly as she tried to get her bearings.

“Are you ok?” Jonathan asked softly. “You’ve been here awhile.”

Nancy looked at him and wanted to say something...but she couldn’t remember what it was. She swore she had seen something that bothered her but she couldn’t for the life of her remember what it was.

“Yeah...I guess I just got lost in thought. I wanted to give you guys some time,” Nancy replied.

“I contacted Hopper. El should be closing the gate. It’s all them now. Let’s go in.” He squeezed her shoulder.

“Ok. El is closing the gate,” Nancy said, tonelessly and followed him back in feeling a little out of it. Everything was starting to catch up with her. She felt like she could sleep for weeks.

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Billy was still cleaning a couple of hours later when the sound of a car came rolling up. The Byers’ house had probably never been so scrubbed. All the drawings had been pulled off the walls and piled neatly on the table, dishes put away, all the floors cleaned (even with a crappy vacuum that sounded like it was on its last legs), and food put back in the refrigerator.

He looked out in trepidation but it seemed as if the Byers Team finished first. He watched as Jonathan pulled an unconscious Will out of the car and carried him towards the house, the two women anxiously following. Billy held the door open for them and didn’t expect the acknowledgement he didn’t get. He didn’t mind so much since their entire focus was on Will. It was actually kind of nice to see a parent and sibling actually give a damn about someone. He watched as they took Will to his room and laid him down on his bed. Billy went to the kitchen and, not knowing what else to do, wondered what Steve would do. He pulled out some glasses and poured water. He took them into the room and held them out to Mrs. Byers and Jonathan. Mrs. Byers was too busy holding onto Will but Jonathan glanced up and looked at him quizzically.

“Thought you guys might need it,” Billy explained without looking at him.

He heard a muffled and questioning, “Thanks,” as he walked out. Again, now that he wasn’t needed nor could he go anywhere, he sat on the front stoop again and got a cigarette out. He didn’t look up when Nancy came out and sat beside him. She held a hand out. He handed over a cigarette and his lighter to her.

“How’s the rugrat?” He asked, trying to sound like he wasn’t interested.

“OK, I think. But it was tough,” she said. “Long night.”

“No fucking kidding,” Billy huffed.

“Where are the others?” she asked. She sounded on the verge of freaking out but too tired to execute it.

“No clue. Took the fucking car and left me here.” He drew in a long inhale.

“Steve left? That doesn’t sound like...” Nancy started.

“Max was driving. Didn’t see Steve. Have no idea where he is. Don’t know if he’s...,” Billy started choking up. He coughed and looked away.

“What?!” Nancy got up and ran into the house. She came back out urgently calling into the radio she must have gone inside to get. “Mike, MIKE ARE YOU THERE! Answer! Are you ok?” She was urgently calling into the radio, heading back outside, clearly trying to not disturb the Byers.

There was a long silence and Billy watched her eyes start to panic. He was feeling the tension build as well.

“MIKE?” She called again.

“We’re about 5 - 10 minutes out. Over,” a crackling voice answered. Billy thought it was Dustin.

“Are you guys ok?” Nancy asked.

“Uh...yeah...mostly. Over. And you’re supposed to say ‘Over’ when you’re, you know, over..”
Another voice yelled, “Shut up, Dustin. Did it work? Is Will OK?” That was Mike.

“Yeah, Mike, Will’s ok.” Billy could see and hear Nancy visibly relax as she leaned back on the stoop.

“Is El back yet?”

“Not yet. And where the hell have you been?!” She asked firmly.

“Uh...I can’t hear you anymore...must be static.Bad rece...ption” Billy almost laughed hearing the other kids impersonating static in the background. They must think they are so smart.

"Give me that, you little shits.” Billy was unbelievably relieved to hear Steve’s voice. He was ok. He was ok. The tension rolled off his shoulder. He wished he understood why but he wasn’t up to examining himself that deeply.

The door creaked open and Jonathan was standing there looking down at them. He looked tired - more so than usual. “Everything ok?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Nancy smiled up at him and then stood up. “Go back to Will, we’ll talk later.”

‘Where are…” Jonathan began to ask as he looked around. Clearly he had just realized the others were missing.

“On their way. Go back. Be with Will. We’ll talk later.” Nancy kissed his cheek before sitting down again as Jonathan went back inside.

“Nance?” Steve voice echoed from the radio.

“Where have you been?” Nancy asked, this time she sounded more curious than pissed.

“Long story but we’re ok and will be back soon,” Steve replied.

“Over, Steve you’re supposed to say “Over!” Dustin’s voice rang out in the background.

“Ok...OVER…” Steve sounded harangued.

“See you soon, Steve,” Nancy smiled as she clicked off the radio.

Billy watched her in the moonlight. She seemed genuinely relieved Steve was ok. Steve was her ex and she still cared about him.

“Why’d you give him up?” Billy asked, uncharacteristically somber. “I mean, it seems like you still care about him.”

“I do,” Nancy replied.

“But Byers is better? I mean...he seems nice but...really?” Billy was curious. With the exception of annoying Harrington, that had rarely happened since he’d moved to this cowtown.

“I really love both of them,” she said, a small smile on her face as if she was having a pleasant memory.

“Kinky,” Billy quipped. “Didn’t think Hawkins was that progressive.”

Nancy just laughed. “There’s a lot about Hawkins you don’t know.” She patted his shoulder as she
stood up and went inside. Billy realized she never really answered him. Unless she had...and that gave Billy a mental image he wasn’t sure he wanted. Although everyone had always called Byers a freak. Maybe he was more of one than his milquetoast exterior projected.

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Billy was still trying to decide if he should continue to sit outside, risking like he was a worried parent waiting for the kids to come home or go inside and sit awkwardly where he probably wasn’t wanted when the old Pinto came up the drive. He could see Harrington was driving it this time but not much else since it was dark.

The kids were jabbering excitedly as they got out of the car. Mike ran passed Billy in a blur into the house yelling for Will. Max and Isaac tried to walk cautiously by and Billy almost let them until they hit the top step.

“Hey, assholes - thanks for leaving me behind.”

Max glared and the Sinclair kid muttered, “dick” under his breath. Billy chuckled. He guessed he still wasn’t their favorite person.

He watched and wondered why the other two were still in the car. Dustin was talking to Steve but they weren’t making any move to get out. He saw Harrington wave his hand sluggishly at Dustin then lay his head on the steering wheel.

Suddenly he heard Dustin yell, “Holy shit!” and jumped out of the car and ran around to the driver side, opening the door. “Steve - wake up! Wake up!!!” He sounded panicked and Billy had already run over. Sure enough, Harrington looked passed out on the steering wheel. He pushed Dustin to the side.

“What happened?” He pushed Steve backwards against the seat. Billy saw the bruises from earlier still blooming but he couldn’t tell if anything else was wrong. He pressed his fingers against his neck and there was a pulse, although maybe a little sluggish. He didn’t have enough knowledge to know.

Dustin was still babbling and not making sense and was starting to breath heavy.

“Slow down - what just happened. I saw you talking. He sounded fine on the radio...what was he saying to you.”

“Uh - he seemed fine when we got out of the tunnels and away from the demodogs - I mean he was limping a little and seemed winded but OK, You know. In the car - he was quiet but seemed ok I guess. I was about to get out and he tried to grab me - slurring something about feeling dizzy - then he just passed out! I don’t know why! I mean - maybe the adrenaline wore off and the stuff kicked back in - I don’t know.”

“The stuff?” Billy asked as he looked over Steve in the cramped driver’s seat. “What stuff?” He wanted to ask about the tunnels and the demodogs but it seemed unimportant at the moment.

Dustin quieted down and sheepishly admitted, “Uh, the stuff Mike knocked him out with? I don’t know what it was. Whatever they used on Will, I guess.”

“Jesus Christ - what the hell? You drugged him?” Billy was livid. He was going to kill those twerps. And was about to when Steve gave a long, pained moan. “Shit. We need to get him in the
“A little help would be nice.” Billy grunted.

Jonathan came up on Steve’s other side and grabbed Steve around the waist. Steve winced in pain and seemed to come around a little. “Hurts,” he muttered but he tried to coordinate his feet and walk with them but he was extremely groggy and was able to do little in the way of assistance.

Billy started heading towards the couch but Jonathan veered in the opposite direction. “Bathroom - I think he’s bleeding under his jacket.”

“His leg too,” Lucas spoke up. “Look at his leg.” Billy couldn’t quite see it from the angle he was at but he just followed Jonathan to the bathroom. Once in there, they sort of dropped him on the toilet seat but they each crouched down on either side to prop him up.

Nancy pushed in, passed the kids. “You guys stay there,” she said to the kids who were watching anxiously. She turned to Billy and Jonathan, “Take off his jacket and shirt.” And wow - under other circumstances, he would have been thrilled to take off Harrington’s clothes or make sarcastic quips about Nancy’s order, but he was worried knowing that not only were there new injuries since the afternoon but he had some kind of drug in his system. Which he hadn’t forgotten about, but stopping bleeding was a more immediate issue.

Jonathan tugged out one arm and Steve grimaced at the movement but managed to pull his arm forward before his head lolled back again. Nancy pulled the rest off.

“Jonathan, lift his arms. Billy, brace him at the waist while I take his shirt off.” Nancy said in a firm voice.

Steve lolled forward a little and chuckled while he squeaked in pain, “I love...when you’re bossy, Nance. Sooo very hot.”

Nancy laughed a little but just said, “Steve - concentrate. This isn’t the time.”

“OOOOHHHH...kayyyyy,” Steve said and pulled his arm to his side. “Feeling dizzy now..” He fell back towards Billy. “Owwwww…. he muttered and the shirt peeled away from the skin it was stuck to as the blood had started drying. It was clear there were some bite marks along his waist and hip.

“Can someone get me some paper towels?” Nancy asked over her shoulders.

“I’ll get them,” Lucas said.

“Is he going to be ok?” Dustin asked.

“But - he was just fine.” Max said. “He was fine…” she muttered. She was wringing her hands a bit nervously.

“Well, clearly he ain’t now,” Billy answered, irritated with all of them.

Lucas was back with the paper towels to Nancy and she started wiping Steve’s waist to see the
wound a little better. She hummed under her breath as she examined him.

Steve’s head fell forward. “Am I gonna live, doc?” he joked half-heartedly

“You need a hospital, Steve,” Nancy answered.

“Oh...I don’t know…” he trailed off and closed his eyes again.

“Who needs a hospital?” Joyce’s voice broke in. “Oh my god - what happened?” she exclaimed as she saw Steve. The volume of her voice must have brought Steve around again.

“Hey - sorry ‘bout the car, Mrs….B….,” he went out again.

“How long has he been losing consciousness?” she asked.

“He’s been in and out since getting out of the car,” Dustin answered.

“He drove like this?!?” she yelled.

“NO! NO! He seemed ok driving - just after we got here he, I don’t know started fading.”

There was a sudden burst of noise from the living room as the front door opened and Hopper came into the house yelling “Hello? HELLOO?”

“ELLLL!” Mike’s voice cut through the house as he ran to meet them.

Joyce had looked up at the commotion but returned her gaze to Steve. “Are those bite marks?” She knelt down in front of him, next to Nancy and ran her fingers over the puncture wounds. “How did this happen?”

Suddenly a cacophony of voices started explaining everything which was giving Billy a headache. He was about to yell when a deep voice broke, “One at a time...what happened here?”

Billy looked up to see Hopper now filling the bathroom doorway. It was getting crowded in here. Hopper pointed at Lucas. “You - keep it short and to the point.”

Lucas looked nervously at everyone. “Well - we thought we’d help you so we went to the tunnels to draw the demodogs away from you by lighting the hub on fire. When they headed towards us we ran and Steve lifted us all out of the tunnel before they got to us. We thought we were safe but as Steve was climbing up, a couple of demodogs came from behind and caught him on the rope. They tried to pull him down. He used one arm to swing his bat to knock them off while we tried to pull him up. I guess he was injured then. We couldn’t see since it was dark. He just collapsed at the top and we all laid there until we saw a bright light. We thought that meant El had done it. She did, right? I mean she...I mean yeah I guess you did or you wouldn’t be here. Then he staggered up and drove us back but he never said anything about being hurt.”

“Adrenaline,” Billy muttered. “Probably used the last of his to get you shithheads back here.”

“He lit the hub on fire?” Nancy asked, frowning.

Hopper turned to look at Billy. “You and Steve let them carry out this plan? Took them right into danger?” He was glaring at Billy.

“Hell no - these little assholes left me. I had no idea where they went. I was taking a smoke in the woods when I heard the car leave.” Billy argued. He was NOT going to take the blame on this one.
“So, Steve took them. What was he thinking?” Hopper took his hat off in frustration.

“It’s not his fault either,” Billy said. “He didn’t take them there.”

“Really? Then who drove them. I don’t see any other drivers here,” Hopper said.

Billy glared at Max behind Hopper’s arm until she quietly came forward. “I did. I drove us there,” Max confessed.

“Uh...huh. And where was Steve? Where were you?” Apparently Steve had awakened again.

“You were supposed to watch them! To keep them safe!” Hopper was angry and it pissed Billy off.

He stood up to argue but Dustin yelled, “He did. He did keep us safe. He saved all of us!”

“Yeah...you little shits are a lot of trouble...” Steve murmured again. He fell forward, head in his hands and groaned.

“We really need to get him to a hospital, Hopper,” Joyce said. “We can fight about this later but he’s been in and out of consciousness. He’s losing blood and he might have gotten hit in the head again fighting those things - or maybe the earlier fight is catching up to him.”

“Or it might just be the drugs that little Mikey back there shot him up with so they could go play heroes,” Billy shouted. He really needed to get out of there. He was starting to feel angry - not just at Hopper or the kids, but at Steve as well although he didn’t know why.

Suddenly all the faces looking into the bathroom, turned towards where Mike was with Eleven on the couch. Nancy stormed out of the bathroom. “You what?”

Mike stood up and yelled, “He wasn’t going to let us go! Kept saying all these stupid sports things like we were on the bench waiting for the A team to do their job. It was bullshit. We had to help and he didn’t want to. I had to do something!”

“You are in such shit, Michael Wheeler, Jr.” Nancy spit out between clenched teeth.

Steve groaned again and fell all the way forward onto the floor, slowed a little by Jonathan trying to keep a hold of him.

Hopper pointed to Jonathan and Billy. “You two, take him to my truck. I’m taking him to the ER. The rest of you...stay here or go home.” He looked at Mike with such utter disgust on his way through the living room and added, “We’ll have a long chat about this later.”
Chapter 2 - We Might Need Some Education

Chapter Summary

Steve gets back to school and his first day is full. Billy, Jonathan and Nancy are trying to figure out how to move forward and waiting for the fallout of their actions.

Chapter Notes

This is a lot of slice of life in the day of high schoolers with just the barest hint of the beginning of the plot creeping in. Also - still quite of lot of Billy's POV in this chapter but the whole story won't be so centered on his POV. I do find writing his voice is easier than some other voices.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2 - We Might Need Some Education

BILLY POV

Billy didn’t see Steve for another two weeks although he heard from the Hawkins High grapevine that he’d been attacked by a bear when he stopped to take a piss in the woods late one night. The story was that the Chief of Police had found his car on the side of the road and then had seen Steve lying on the ground next to it. Tommy and Carol and their posse had fun with the story about the bear making Steve Harrington his bitch.

Billy tried to laugh it off but he had had his own issues. Neil was none too thrilled when he and Max had finally come home at 1:00 am. After they had loaded Steve into Hopper’s truck, Jonathan had driven Billy to his car. Billy and Max had tried to come up with a cover story during the drive but nothing plausible had come to them.

Jonathan fortunately had a better imagination and actually suggested Billy had picked Max up at Will’s house but had stopped to help Jonathan because his car had broken down. It helped that Neil already knew Byers car was probably a piece of shit since their family was well-known for being poor. Billy was only smacked a few times for not thinking to phone home first even if Max had explained their phone was broken. That didn’t matter to Neil.

Both he and Max had been grounded for the same two weeks for staying out too long but at least Billy’s face stayed mostly intact. They both kept a low profile around the house and concentrated on school. Max because she wanted to be able to go to the Snow Ball and Billy because he was still adjusting to the new normal of knowing there were actual fucking monsters in the world. He actually started visiting the library when he could get away with it.

He was also focused on keeping his newly established reign at Hawkins High and Tommy and Carol savored every minute of hanging on their new, shiny friend.
After the first few days of their punishment when Neil and Susan had gone out for dinner, Max had finally given him the entire story as she knew it. She also let him know Steve was okay and out of the hospital. According to Dustin, who was checking in with Steve, he had gotten a total of 65 stitches between his side, thigh and face. It didn’t seem as there would be any permanent damage but might have some scarring on his thigh and waist.

Billy had sighed quietly in relief. He hated to think that pretty face would be scarred. Not that he’d ever admit that to anyone, ever. However his sigh must not have been as quiet as he’d have liked.

“Were you worried?” Max asked softly. She was sitting on the old leather recliner his dad usually sat in, bare feet tucked underneath her, looking as vulnerable as Billy had ever seen her.

He just stared at her, without answering. Magnum PI was playing in the background - one of the few shows the two of them agreed on. He turned in time to see Higgins’ dogs Zeus and Apollo growling at something and it sent a shiver up his spine. Another thing he would never admit was his new fear of dogs since that night. His heart raced whenever he saw the neighbor’s doberman now. It was stupid. Max didn’t seem to be having issues and she’d faced them alive. He’d only seen a dead one thrown through the window and then had to manhandle it out to the yard when he took it out of the refrigerator. Seeing those teeth when it fell to the ground gave him nightmares.

When he didn’t answer, he heard her faintly say, “I guess not. You don’t like him anyways. I can see why. He’s a better man than you. I’m going to my room.” She stood up and started walking away but as she passed, he grabbed her wrist.

“What?” she snapped.

He couldn’t look at her, but he said, almost under his breath. “You’re right.” In his head he was answering both questions. Harrington was a better man than him. And he hated him for it. And he was relieved Harrington was ok - because he thought...well he couldn’t even admit to himself what he really thought. It’s not like it was a possibility. Even if the dreams he’d been having recently made him feel like he was closer than he ever could be. They wavered between extremely erotic dreams to nightmares where he made sure Harrington never woke again by ordering the demodogs to eat him which they did. Sometimes though, they turned on Billy and ate him afterwards.

Erotic dreams about Harrington would have never surprised him, but the fact they were beginning to include Wheeler did. The nightmares as well. And they felt so real it took awhile to differentiate his dreamworld from reality. Billy had always prided himself on being a light sleeper and quick to come to attention, but lately he’d been sluggish and had a hard time waking up. Either way, Steve Harrington was taking up a lot of his thoughts whether he was awake or asleep and he hadn’t even seen him in weeks.

Max started to pull away after a stagnant moment but he held on, rubbing his thumb in circles on her wrist. He heard her sniffle and just knew she was going to cry. He had no idea if she had heard him or not, but he certainly heard her say, “I thought he was going to die, I thought we all were. He…. saved us. I wish he could be my brother instead of an asshole like you,” she hiccupped out, pulled away and locked herself away in her room. Maybe she wasn’t as unaffected as he thought.

He sat in silence until he heard a smarmy british accent saying, “Yes, I’m sorry. It’s just that you can’t know what it’s like to care for someone deeply and have your hope taken,” and he thought, ‘Fuck you, Higgins.’

He went to turn the tv off and agreed, pathetically with Magnum’s response of “Yes, I can.” Unfortunately, Billy didn’t have the luxury of enjoying that in Hicksville, NowhereIndiana. Or
even with his own family as, at best, they’d disown him. He knew his father suspected Billy had a preference for boys, but it had never been confirmed. As badly as his dad treated him now, he hated to think what would happen if the truth came out. He had to put Harrington out of his mind, one way or another.

He went to his own room. He started to put on Metallica but decided he was too tired to be angry. Instead, he drowned himself in the sounds of The Pretenders through his earphones singing ‘It’s a Thin Line Between Love and Hate’ and tried not to think of disappointed sisters, angry fathers, irritatingly reckless children, hungry demodogs and one brave beautiful boy he’d already tried to break, lying in a tunnel willing to sacrifice himself. The self-righteousness of it all made him want to vomit. He really was Saint Steve. And Billy almost hated himself for feeling such anger towards him. He didn’t know how you could want someone so much and hate them at the same time. Why couldn’t he stop thinking about him?

It was a long time until dawn came that night and for every night until Steve came back to school. He just never felt rested. Just restless.

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There was no doubt the day Steve came back because all the rumors of his bear attack came back to life in vivid, comic artistry. Someone had drawn a cartoon of Steve being humped by a bear and somehow gotten copies made and passed around and posted on his locker just before his arrival. Billy arrived just as Steve had gotten to his locker to see it. He also saw Tommy and a few of his pals around the corner sniggering. He was about to interrupt them when the crew confronted Steve.

“Look, the bitch is back! So Stevie, how have you been. It’s been BEARLY two weeks since we’ve seen you,” Billy could almost hear the spelling. Tommy was a moron.

“Yeah, heard you BEARLY made it out alive so we made you a get well-card,” Sam Patterson, one of the teams forwards added.

Steve smiled tightly. “I see that.” He opened his locker to get his books out and a bunch of teddy bears fell out. The boys started howling as did a number of people in the hall when they saw the pile of bears now at Harrington’s feet.

“Aw, I guess people don’t want you to be lonely, Stevie,” Carol, Tommy’s girlfriend said. She chewed her gum like a cow. Billy started to get angry but couldn’t decide if he should intervene or not. On one hand, as much as Harrington got on his nerves, Steve really was a hero. They all were and no one would ever goddamned know it. On the other, Billy had just established his own place and he couldn’t risk it. Defending Harrington would not win him points with the crowd, plus the likelihood of Billy accidentally letting something slip about his own feelings about Steve were too great.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to have to make decision. Jonathan broke through the group and started to pick up the bears for Steve. ‘Hey, these will be great to donate to the childrens ward at the hospital. Thanks for the donations, everyone. How did you know Steve was collecting?’” He looked up at the group as if they weren’t ready and willing to kick him while he was there. And Billy was a little awed. Quiet little Jonathan Byers stepping up to help Harrington. The boy had some balls considering his own history with that group.

“Well, I guess you freaks need to stick together, huh, Steve? Maybe Jonathan can fill in for Mr. Bear,” Patterson sneered at Steve, not even looking at Jonathan. The others shuffled around as if
waiting for a fight to start - eyes shifting between Steve and Jonathan to see who might throw the first punch. Even from a distance, Billy could feel the tension building.

“I’m sure he could do you BEARback too” Matt Jacobs, another team member, added with a laugh ripping the cartoon out of Steve’s hands. “Although, Mr. Bear looks pretty big here. Not sure little Byers there could satisfy a bitch like you.”

“This your work, Tommy?” Steve finally asked his former best friend in a droll tone, taking the drawing back. Tommy nodded and just laughed until Steve said, “I’m a little disappointed. I mean you got the moles on my ass right so kudos to you for paying attention to me in the showers, but my hair man, you messed up my hair. I work hard on that. Least you could do is make it look good.” Billy could see Steve shoulders tightening up and schooling his face to look bored. He wondered if King Steve was going to make a comeback.

Suddenly everyone started howling and jeering but this time at Tommy. This crowd was fickle. “He got you good, Tommyboy!” Patterson laughed. Billy could see Tommy wasn’t laughing, but turning beet red in anger. He was sure Tommy was going to throw a punch at Steve. Tommy did not take shit as well as he dished it out. Particularly if he lost face in front of his friends. Billy guessed it was time to interrupt and not let Jonathan take all the glory.

“Well, well, well..I see Harrington’s back.” Billy wandered up as if he’d just gotten there. “Have a nice vacation? Hope you’re ready to be wiped on the floor in practice. I’ve missed having King Steve to play with.” Billy sounded like he was taunting him as gripped Steve’s shoulder. He turned to everyone else. He could see Tommy was just waiting for Billy to take Steve down. Billy almost choked with satisfaction at seeing his face fall when Billy just broke through the group and walked past saying, “Gentlemen - see you on the court”

As he got down to his actual locker, he turned back and shouted, “By the way, nice toy collection, loser!” He started laughing but noted the group was breaking up as if they didn’t know what to do. He got the books he needed for his morning classes and headed to his first class. He spun one last time at the end of the hall in time to see the group headed towards him and Steve and Jonathan left behind gathering the bears. Huh, maybe they really were going to donate them.

He stepped up - kinda. And it felt good - kinda. Huh.

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JONATHAN’S POV

“You ok?” Jonathan asked Steve as he eyed Billy walking away, followed by his new entourage trying to catch up to him. He knelt down and picked up the assortment of bears laying at Steve’s feet.

“Yeah, they’re just assholes.” Steve joined Jonathan in picking them up.

Jonathan wasn’t quite sure what to say. Steve’s face was still discolored and he was holding himself stiffly - but Jonathan wasn’t sure if it was because he was still not well or if he was just putting a wall between them or his other, seemingly former, friends. “You look better,” he finally said.

“Honestly, a meatloaf probably looks better than me right now,” Steve quipped.

Jonathan chuckled a little. At least Steve was trying to laugh about it.
“Do you think the hospital would want these?” Steve asked while examining one of the bears. “It seems a shame to waste them.”

Jonathan had only said that to interrupt the group but it actually wasn’t a bad idea. “I don’t know. Maybe? Or this close to the holidays maybe someone like Goodwill or Toys for Tots could use them. I could ask my Mom. She’d probably know.”

“Can you put them in your car and figure it out later?” Steve asked.

“Why my car?” Jonathan asked, thinking how nice Steve’s car was.

“Because I still have a slightly used bat in my trunk and I haven’t properly washed the car. I’d rather not risk getting demodog goop on toys for tots.”

“Good point,” Jonathan said.

They were both late for their first class. Steve said he wasn’t worried since he was just getting back. Mrs. Marshall was bound to go easy on him after seeing his bruises. She was a soft touch for her students. Jonathan had study hall first so he’d just claim he stopped at the library first.

His morning went by quickly. He caught a couple of glances of Steve during the day but no one seemed to bother him. He had seemed like he was concentrating on just keeping one foot in front of the other. Jonathan could sympathize. Once he was out with the chicken pox for a week and when he returned to school, it seemed as if things he used to do easily were three times as hard. He opted to let Steve work through it and Nancy didn’t seem prone to checking on him. He assumed that things between them were a bit awkward.

Truthfully, Nancy and he hadn’t even discussed some things in depth. They were too busy trying to move forward. For Jonathan that meant taking care of Will who hadn’t returned to school yet while balancing work and homework as well as finding time to spend with Nancy. For Nancy, that meant trying to patch things up with Mike who had been grounded for a week for sneaking out while anxiously waiting to see what the fallout would be from their mailings. She had cancelled the last two dinners with Barb’s parents because she said couldn’t face them alone but she wasn’t comfortable taking Jonathan so suddenly since she’d been taking Steve for a year. They weren’t quite comfortable telling anyone about their changed relationship status. They had agreed to try to play it cool until after the holidays.

At lunch, Nancy was quiet.

“Are you ok?” Jonathan asked wondering if that was his question of the day. He started his morning asking both his Mom and Will, followed with his brief conversation with Steve and now Nancy.

“Yeah, just tired. Haven’t been feeling too good lately,” Nancy said, poking at the chicken and noodles on her plate. “Can’t stop thinking about if anything’s going to happen about - you know...why is it taking so long? It’s been two weeks.”

“I guess - I mean we mailed it - so that takes time to get there. I’ll bet it has to go through some secretary before it gets sent to a reporter or editor then i guess they have to decide if it’s anything worth following up on. If it is, they would have to have the reporter do some research which would take some time i would think. I’m just guessing. I never really thought about how things get looked into.”

“You never watched ‘All the President’s Men?’” Nancy asked with a small smile.
“Not really my type of movie,” Jonathan answered. “I only know how Clark Kent and Lois Lane do it. Will loved Superman.”

“Will, huh?”

“Yeah, he was a big Superman fan - both the comics and the movies.” Jonathan could remember all those crayon drawings of Superman Will had done when the movie came out. It was his first big movie hero. Will had been about 6 or 7 and Lonnie had actually taken them to see it as a family night. One of the few good memories Jonathan had of Lonnie. It was actually the first movie Jonathan recorded with their then new VCR when it aired on tv in 1982. It had been a crappy machine but Lonnie had gotten it somewhere and in the middle of one of his attempts to return home, had brought it for the kids.

“Not you?”

“I was more of a Batman kind of guy,” Jonathan said. “The mysterious loner. Mostly, I wanted the Batmobile.”

“I liked Wonder Woman when I was little. I made fake bulletproof cuffs out of cereal boxes and Barb would pretend to be the bad guy and let me catch her. We used a dog leash as the Lasso of Truth.” Nancy smiled sweetly as she reminisced.

Jonathan took her hand under the table and squeezed. He really wanted to know more about their friendship. He knew Nancy missed her. Even if Nancy got justice for her, there would always be a Barb-shaped hole in her life. Jonathan only had felt the bare minimum of that, but even thinking Will was dead for a couple of days was enough for him to understand something about grief.

“I know we’ll hear something soon. Barb would be proud of you,” Jonathan whispered.

Nancy nodded. “We should probably get to class. We still on for the library after school?”

“Sure,” Jonathan said, hoping he wouldn’t have to explain the bears sitting in his trunk to her.

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NANCY’S POV

Nancy headed off to her Biology class. She hated feeling so anxious. It wasn’t like her. She’d been restless and not sleeping well waiting for the proverbial hammer to come down. Part of her was afraid nothing would happen. What would she do then? She already felt horrible that she’d avoided the weekly dinners two weeks in a row but she couldn’t face Barb’s parents without resolution though. And she hated that she didn’t feel like she could take Jonathan. She knew he would go, but in some weird way she felt like it would be throwing it in their faces that her life was moving on but their daughter’s wasn’t.

She hoped things would settle once it was all out. She still had some lingering doubts that there would be no repercussions. What if Steve had been right? What if the government would stop the news from getting out? What if her family got caught in the cross-fire?

As it was she was wondering how they kept anything about the lab quiet. A lot of people died that night. Surely, most of them lived in Hawkins? Didn’t some of them have kids that went to this school? Why wasn’t there something about somebody’s parents dying? She’d only heard of one. Tina’s dad. The very same Tina whose party they had just been at. She said her parents had been
travelling but last week and there had been an accident on their way home. Her dad didn’t make it. Her mom was still in critical condition, but expected to live but she was in a hospital in Indianapolis. Was that the truth? She wasn’t close enough to Tina to find out even if she was in town. Rumor had it, she and her aunt had gone to the city to stay with her mom. Services for her dad were on hold until Tina’s mom recovered according to her own mom.

Nancy was beginning to have more questions than answers yet again. She felt like she needed to do more but had no idea how or where to start. She was so tired already.

“Nancy? NANCY!” a voice broke her out of her reverie. She felt a small tap on her shoulder.

“What?!” Nancy snapped with a disgusted grimace at the boy behind her.

“What’s the answer for number 15?” Chris Watterson asked quietly.

Nancy looked down and realized her test page was blank. She hadn’t even put her name on the paper yet. Looking up, she realized there were only ten minutes left in class. Shit! How had she lost track of time?

“That’s Chris!” Chris asked urgently, but kept his voice quiet. Mr. Carson did not take cheating lightly. Nancy gave him the finger and focused on her paper. It was a good thing she was a fast reader and a good student, because there was no way she was getting higher than a C+ on this test since she’d never have time to finish it.

Maybe Mr. Carson would let her redo it if she claimed illness. Probably not.

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STEVE’S POV

Steve kept his head down and tried to focus on the teachers throughout the morning. Sure he had kept up with the schoolwork at home as best he could, but he’d been alone for two weeks with only occasional visitors. Being around this many people again was giving him a headache. And the balance between putting up with snarky words from his former friends, the over-solicitous caring of his teachers and one mind-numbing discussion with a guidance counselor about whether he was being bullied or having problems at home or if he had been drinking or doing drugs when he’d been injured was making him want to get in his car and just drive away and never come back. Clearly Mrs. Murphy did not believe the bear story. Her husband was a doctor who had been called into the ER that night and seen Steve’s injuries and claimed they were not consistent with Hopper’s story.

Steve suggested that maybe Mr. and Mrs. Murphy watched too much Quincy and that nothing was wrong. Hopper was not lying and no, his parents would not be available for a little talk.

He’d lost his entire lunch hour to that discussion. At least she let him eat his packed lunch while she had yammered on at him.

He was aggravated by the time he made it to 7th period which he shared with Billy and Tommy and had the unfortunate luck to sit close next to them - Tommy to the left and Billy behind him.

“Good to see you back, Mr. Harrington. I trust you’re caught up in the reading,” the teacher said as he walked in a room decorated with posters of quotes from various books in an ineffective attempt at brightening up the dim and dingy grey room.
“Yes, Mrs. Winters. Thank you.” Steve replied as he sat down, only to feel a tug on his hair from Billy from behind him. He could feel the breath on his neck when Billy whispered, “Missed you, pretty boy. Ready to get your ass kicked on the court this afternoon?”

Steve rolled his eyes and missed the incoming spitball from Tommy. He had hoped that maybe things might have changed. That Tommy might have come around once he had heard how injured Steve had been, but he knew he was kidding himself. If Tommy had, he would have called while he was out. He finally realized that Tommy was never getting over the fact that Steve chose Nancy. He had also hoped that maybe Billy might leave him alone as well. He may as well have wished for a magic pony and a date with Cindy Crawford.

“Mr. Hanson!” Mrs. Winters yelled. “That’s enough. Trade seats with Miss Althouse here,” she ordered, pointing to the first seat in the middle row, right in front of her. Steve tried not to laugh. Tommy was going to be pissed. He was. He smacked Steve on the back of the head on his way by.

“And that’s detention tomorrow afternoon,” she added. Mrs. Winters may seem senile, but she was sharper than she looked.

Amber Althouse shuffled past and sat awkwardly down in Tommy’s old seat looking at her feet, clearly embarrassed at the attention from her classmates who were intently looking their way to see if anything interesting would happen.

Billy groaned. “Cow...,” he muttered his breath. “But maybe she’s just perfect for you, huh Harrington?” he added so close to his ear that Steve felt the breath on his neck.

“Shut up,” Steve hissed from the other side, hoping Amber hadn’t heard. She seemed like a nice girl, but Steve couldn’t deny the old him probably wouldn’t have paid her any attention. She was shy, heavy-set and on the plain side. He felt guilty that he had been that shallow - but at least he would have never actually said anything to her. He looked over and saw her flush even more. Yeah, she had heard that. “Sorry, he’s such a dick,” Steve whispered to her with a small smile, willing her to hear his apology for never acknowledging her before. She half looked up at him with an unsure smile.

“You wouldn’t know a dick if you saw one since you ain’t got one.” Billy said to Steve interrupting his moment with Amber. The class laughed and most of them missed Billy adding to Amber, “You ain’t missing nothing, honey.”

Steve was just relieved that Billy didn’t insult her even more.

“Mr. Hargrove, why don’t you come up here as well and leave Mr. Harrington and Miss Althouse alone?” Mrs. Winters frowned and pursed her lips.

“What did I do?” Billy yelled. “I can’t help it if Harrington doesn’t have a dick.” The entire room erupted in laughter again at his gaul except Steve, Amber and Mrs. Winters. Steve knew Billy would King Billy in no time if he kept this up. This story was sure to spread by the end of the day about how awesome Billy is.

“And you’re joining Mr. Hanson in detention tomorrow.”

Billy groaned but stood up and walked forward to the seat Mrs. Winters indicated. Steve knew it was a fake moan because he knew that Billy knew just what he had done to cement himself as the new, cool guy and Steve a ‘has been’. If Steve cared about that, it might have bothered him more. Instead, he just shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes at Amber as if they were having a private joke. She blushed and laughed a little. He felt a little better.
Jeremy Matthews strolled to Billy’s seat and sat behind Steve muttering, “Awesome. Can’t see over your ginormous hair.”

But at least he left Steve alone while Mrs. Winters reviewed the merits of Heathcliff and Catherine and their ‘against the odds and societal conventions’ romance.

Ugh...Steve didn’t want to think about any kind of romance at the moment. So far, no one had asked him about Nancy but it was already clear to the student population that they had broken up and were not getting back together. He was still hurt and angry about it even as he missed her. He was trying hard to not let anyone see the damage and to forgive both her and Jonathan but it was hard.

Logically he knew you couldn’t help who you loved and that both Nancy and Jonathan were fundamentally good people, but there was an underlying feeling of betrayal he couldn’t help. A deep sense of hurt that neither of them had even called him while he was out - her more than him since he and Jonathan had not really been friends regardless of the help the guy gave him that morning. But what really sucked was that he knew at this point if she asked to come back, he’d be hard pressed not to say yes and he’d be thrilled about it. He hoped all the dumb sayings were true and that time would heal things between them.

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**BILLY’S POV**

After classes finished, Steve was a little late to practice. Billy watched as Steve gave the coach his doctor’s note. The coach nodded and sent Steve into the locker room to change. He watched Steve come out and go to the far end of the court to work on free throws by himself. Billy assumed the coach wanted him to warm up slowly.

Billy wished Steve had worn shorts, but instead he had on some old, grey sweatpants that Billy assumed Steve was using to hide his wound. Of course, it was also winter in Indiana so most people were not wearing shorts. Billy was one of the few in shorts and, of course he played skins, but he ran hot so the cold never bothered him. Most people thought he would be since he was used to the warmth of California, but he’d taken to the chill of Indiana pretty well. More than Max at least. Shame about Steve though, he had nice legs. Probably better if Billy didn’t think about them though - or of the previous night’s dream of those legs wrapped tightly around him. Maybe neither of them should be wearing shorts. He refocused on the layup he was trying for after Patterson almost stole the ball from him.

About halfway through practice, Steve rejoined the scrimmage for a bit. As Billy expected, Harrington had a horrible game. He was winded more than usual and clearly having some issues with stiffness. He expected Steve also had a major headache based on his facial expressions. Having Tommy and his crew adding more accidental shoulder pushes and quiet taunts the coach couldn’t hear wasn’t helping.

At least he thought the coach hadn’t been listening until a shrill blow of the whistle stopped all the action on the court after a trip from Jacobs had Harrington on his back.

“Well boys over here now!! On the bench.” The large man looked as pissed as Billy had ever seen him although he’d only been at the school for less than a month so what did he know? It was hard to believe everything that had happened that first week he’d moved to Hawkins that led to Billy and Steve’s confrontation because the two weeks after that had been staggeringly boring without
Harrington in school. Billy had just focused on making sure of his place in the new hierarchy.

Once all the players sat down the coach started going into the usual spiel about being teammates and working together. However his voice was tight, as if he was trying to contain his anger. Billy had sat behind everyone up on the fourth row of the bleachers. Harrington sat apart from everyone except Drew and Terry who looked as if they purposely sat near him. No one purposely sat near Billy even when they all acted like they loved him. Well, King Steve must have had friends other than Tommy before everything. Billy was not going to begrudge him that at least.

He had tuned the coach out altogether. In fact, he’d been staring out the windows that sat high in the gym that gave no view other than the sky, the occasional bird and a few tree branches if the wind blew just right. It was a little hypnotic. Of course, Billy was also exhausted so it didn’t take much to distract him.

“Hargrove? HARGROVE!” the shout shocked him out of his daze and he turned to see the coach yelling at him. “Did you hear a word I said?” the coach asked, obviously irritated. Billy blinked and realized no one else was in the gym except for him, the coach and Steve, who was watching him warily.

Covering for himself, he improvised, “Yeah yeah - we’re a team. We need to work together and not fight. Got it.” He tried to sound like he was bored but he was mostly confused. It felt like it had only been a minute but when he looked at the clock - at least fifteen minutes had gone by and he’d had no idea. It wasn’t the first time either. Since THAT night (in his head he capitalized it), he felt like he kept spacing out. Nothing big, just losing awareness of his surroundings. For most people it wouldn’t be a big deal, but Billy was always aware of what was going on around him. He had to be. Living with his dad made it a necessity. His exhaustion was catching up to him.

“You’re dismissed, Hargrove. But I mean what I said. I hear of any more fights from any of you, you are off the team.”

And yeah - Billy hadn’t heard that part at all. He got up to head to the locker room but looked back and the coach was sitting down next to Steve. He wondered what that was about but he needed to get showered and dressed to pick Max up so for once he had to put Steve out of his mind and focus on following the rules. If he got kicked off the team, he may as well dig his own grave. Neil would be furious.

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STEVE’S POV

“How are you feeling, Steve?” Coach Bellamy asked as he sat next to him, sounding sympathetic.

Steve was trying to not hold his ribs where they ached. He looked up and put a brave face on. “I’ve been better...but I’m getting there. Sorry. I seem to be a little out of shape.” He gave a self-deprecating smile.

The coach nodded. “Understandable. It only takes two weeks to lose conditioning and with your injuries I imagine it’s even harder. We don’t have our first real game for another month so there’s time to get you back in fighting form.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Steve looked down at his legs and his fingers nervously pulled at the hem of his shirt.
“So - a bear huh? A little out of season, aren’t they?” From the corner of his eye, Steve could see the coach staring at him as if trying to figure out why Steve would lie to him and if he waited long enough, Steve would blurt out the truth to cover an uncomfortable silence. Steve waited him out. He knew the technique. His dad had used it on him enough. His guidance counselor had just tried it earlier that day. He wondered if she and the coach had discussed it. Finally, the coach just patted him on his knee and said, “That’s pretty hardcore actually. You should be grateful to be alive - no matter what the other kids are saying. Don’t let them get to you. It’s not important.”

Steve stood up to leave. Without looking at the coach he said, “Yeah - I know. I uh...have to go so unless you need anything else?”

“How’s your dad?” the coach asked, unexpectedly changing the subject. “He in town?”

Steve turned to look at him wondering where this was going. “Uh - no. He’s travelling.”

“Uh huh. And your mom?”

“She went with him. I mean I have the doctor’s clearance to drive and everything, so there’s no need for them to cancel any other plans. It’s hard for them to change their schedule.”

“Oh - so I guess we won’t see them at Father/Son game next week?”

Steve shook his head even as he heard the added ‘again’ in his head. The Father/Son game was an annual tradition. Steve’s wasn’t the only father who wouldn’t be there - but he was one of the few students who had never had either parent or siblings attend any games or the end of season dinner. They were too busy.

The coach frowned at him, like Mrs. Murphy had. “I just feel like yours are the only parents I haven’t met - except Hargrove’s of course since he’s new.”

“Well, they’re busy. They have to travel a lot.” Steve was uncomfortable. He started shifting his weight from foot to foot. He never liked discussing his parents. Fortunately, he saw Dustin standing in the doorway to the gym waving at him. "Hey, coach, thanks for the pep talk and all - but I need to go.”

The coach looked over at Dustin with a question on his face but he never asked it. Instead he stood up and said, “Maybe start running. A couple of miles a day - but start slowly. Morning’s probably best but whenever it suits you. Just stay away from the woods - ok?”

Steve tried to chuckle. "Ok, coach. For the team’s sake, I’ll try to not get eaten by a bear.”

“Sounds like an old campfire song I once heard, but Steve...you are important to this team. You’re too good to waste.” He clapped Steve gently on the shoulder and headed into the locker room.

Steve was appreciative of the coach’s sentiments. It was nice someone thought kindly of him. And maybe running would be a good idea anyways. He should probably keep in better shape if this Upside Down stuff kept happening. He walked over towards Dustin wondering if he could do both track and baseball in the spring. He’d always done baseball, but he’d never been on the track team. Senior year seemed like a weird time to start but he still liked the idea of it.

“What is taking so long, man? We need to get to the arcade!” Dustin asked almost as urgently as when he had taken Steve to catch Dart.

“Sorry. Coach kept us late. Let me just grab my stuff from the locker room. I also need to grab some things from my other locker as well.”
“And that’s why I’ll never do any school sports. They suck up your life!” Dustin huffed.

“Or,” thinking on the coach’s words, “they can make it better, Dustin. It’s not always a bad thing. Too bad we don’t have hockey as a school sport,” he joked. Clearly, Dustin had a knack for it based on his description of what he had done prior to Steve’s arrival that day. Maybe when he’s recovered, he and Dustin could play some one on one at the rink. Steve had never played a lot, but hockey was a fairly popular pastime in a place where winter lasted forever.

“Okay - maybe I’d do that. But we have to go.” Dustin said.

“OK. Hold your pants on. I’ll be back in a minute,” Steve said as he turned to walk away.

Just as he was about to enter the locker room, Dustin yelled, “Are you going like that or should I sit down and wait for you to pretty yourself up?”

Steve leaned back, holding the door open. “I can either be sweaty and stinky or you can be late. What’s your choice?”

“I can hold my nose in the car.” Dustin wrinkled his face.

“Ok - yeah then I’ll be right out.” Steve actually laughed to himself. He found Dustin amusing although he didn’t know why. He just found himself liking the little shit more and more.

Fortunately no one was left in the locker room. Everyone must have used the exit to the hallway when they left. Even Billy was gone which implied he probably also didn’t shower. And why Steve was thinking about that was beyond him. Maybe it was still the effects of the concussion. Or that stupid campfire song the coach mentioned that was now going through his head.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed. I had fun trying to remember exactly what I studied in high school back then.

Also - I’ve changed some things since I first started writing this section - please let me know if any names are inconsistent or a particular plot point is confusing or contradictory (mostly being I changed from already having had Barb’s funeral to having it not be done yet. I think I got the references all out - but let me know if I’ve missed anything. I actually decided I want to expand the events of the story of the Lab unfolding and the funeral itself in a future chapter.

Okay - next up we'll see Steve hanging out with a few of the kids as more of the plot unfolds with some new information about Steve's parents and his hobbies.

By the way - that camp song the coach mentioned is “Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah (A Letter from Camp) by Allan Sherman. It was something we actually sang as kids because it was funny.
Chapter 3 - The New Normal

Chapter Summary

Steve finishes his first day back at school. Now he just needs to get through the rest of the day. And we start to see some Babysitter Steve outside of potential world-ending calamities.

Chapter Notes

Mostly Steve's POV and some Jonathan POV in this chapter. Steve gets to spend some time with Dustin, Lucas, Mike and Will. Joyce makes an appearance as well. And we learn Steve has a cat (this one will not be eaten - I promise!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3 - The New Normal

STEVE’S POV

“What took so long?” Mike Wheeler asked as Dustin and Steve finally made their way to the car. “It’s cold out here!” His voice squeaked in irritation, which then clearly irritated Mike even more as he grimaced at the croak that had come out. Steve almost chuckled remembering the awkward time when his own voice began changing. All three of these kids were just getting there.

“Hi, Steve. Good to see you too, Steve. You’re looking better, Steve. And thanks for driving our desperate adolescent asses to the Arcade so we don’t have to freeze them on our bikes in this weather,” Steve quipped, not wanting to let Wheeler’s tone slide. He didn’t really know why he was driving them except that Dustin had called that weekend and asked and Steve found he didn’t want to let Dustin down. He was getting fond of Lucas, too, mostly based on the boy’s level-headedness of the night of the events and of Dustin’s stories about him.

Mike was an aggravating pain in the ass who had clearly never liked Steve when he was dating Nancy but was now begrudgingly accepting of him. Steve wasn’t sure if that was because he had sort of proved himself as a worthy member of the party or because he liked being able to game at Steve’s house now (also at Dustin’s request). Steve liked him well enough although wasn’t sure he forgave Mike for injecting him with drugs. Apparently Hopper had had a long talk with him about how dangerous what he did was and made him apologize to Steve but he didn’t know how sincere it was. Steve had let it slide and accepted it so the kids could play but he also knew he’d have to stand up for himself if he didn’t want Mike Wheeler walking all over him again. He sighed wondering if that ran in the family.

Let’s face it, Nancy sort of did that the entire time they were together - not that Steve minded at the time. He was aware he tended to go along to get along but he realized now that maybe that was something he would have to address with himself. It’s why he had been friends with Tommy. It’s
why he even dated a few of the girls before Nancy, it’s why he usually let Nancy decide their plans. It was just easier not to argue. After all, that’s how he ended up in the middle of everything anyways. He had just gone along with Dustin with few questions or arguments (and even when he argued, they all just ignored him).

The few times Steve did stand up for himself, it didn’t end well for him. Billy Hargrove being one case in point as his face still demonstrated. His parents another. He’d only stood up one time for himself where it stuck, but it also fundamentally changed his relationship with them and not for the better. That had been a long time ago. The Halloween party was a far more recent example. Whenever he stood up for himself, it seemed there had been very real, and usually bad, consequences so he usually went along with whoever he was with. In the case with the kids, it was a good thing he was there in the end, but it could have just as likely ended with disaster.

Not to say he didn’t want to help where he was needed like that night, but he was beginning to suspect he would be a mat for everyone to walk over if he didn’t learn to stand up for himself more. While he never wanted to be Billy Hargrove, there were some things to admire about being a selfish dick. He sighed. For now, he would just try to make sure the little shits acknowledged that he didn’t have to do anything for them and they should actually appreciate it and not take it for granted. Steve had also learned the dangers of that.

While Nancy was to blame for some of what happened between them, Steve had also taken her return to him and their time together for granted. Had taken for granted that she had chosen him over Jonathan rather than just as a substitute for him. Even if they were playing coy in public and not displaying their relationship. Even if she hadn’t told him they were over yet, it was clear to him they were and he couldn’t really blame her for it.

Steve had just assumed he was being a good boyfriend and therefore taken for granted that since he loved her, she loved him, too. He had never really recognized the pain she had been in and that she needed someone to help her cope. Steve had been that someone because he was there and he wanted to be but he never just asked her what he could do to make it better. Instead of listening, he had tried to fix it by trying to forget and move forward. Instead of acknowledging her emotions, he tried to use logic. He took for granted that she could deal with it the same way he did. That was a definite fail. He’d been thinking over their entire relationship while he’d been recovering and could kick himself over the missed opportunities when he could have been there for her in a more substantial way - and if he had then maybe she would have responded in kind. He admired so much about her but maybe he never really understood her. He probably should have taken that Intro to Psychology class that had been offered in junior year. He’d add it to the list if he got into college.

“His stupid coach kept him late,” Dustin said, rolling his eyes as he got into the passenger side.

The other boys got in the back. “Well, since you were late, we had to deal with Max’s douchey brother,” Mike spat out.

Steve’s heart sunk and he turned around. “Are you guys ok? He didn’t hurt you or anything?” He was looking closer at both boys, inspecting them for injuries. In the end, Billy had helped them out but Steve remembered the encounter at the junkyard between them and knew Billy had issues with all of them.

“Yeah, he just glared at us as Max got in the car,” Lucas said.

“Yeah, but that glare clearly said he wanted to kill us,” Mike bit off.

“If he ever bothers you, let me know,” Steve said. “I’ll deal with him.”
“What are you going to do? Distract his fist with your face?” Mike said, sarcasm dripping.

And that hurt more than Steve thought it should until both Dustin and Lucas shouted “Hey!” And Lucas smacked Mike’s arm saying, “Not cool, Mike.”

Steve started to turn away but Mike spoke up, almost sheepishly, “Yeah...I’m yeah..that wasn’t cool. Sorry, Steve.” Then he turned out to look out the window.

Steve glanced at Lucas who shrugged his shoulders but added, “I never said ‘Thank you’, but I do appreciate you sticking up for me back at the junkyard. I know it got lost in the fight with the demodogs and stuff, but I do remember you trying to keep him from hitting me.”

Steve nodded with a grim smile. “Sure...but be careful around him. I suspect he holds grudges.”

They got to the arcade and Lucas and Mike walked off with a “See you later,” but Dustin hung back a bit.

“Something on your mind, Dustin?”

“Don’t mind MIke. He’s missing El again and gets really testy about it.”

“OK. So, Hopper’s not letting them see each other yet?”

“No. He’s letting them trade letters now but no phone calls or visits yet. He promised it would be soon but you know how they are.”

Steve nodded - but he didn’t know El at all. He could only assume how bad Mike was. Nancy had told him of some of the things Mike had done over the last year that had gotten him in trouble. They had talked a little bit about that, but again Steve had had no ideas or suggestions for Nancy to help Mike and, at the time, Mike had wanted no interaction with Steve.

“He’s also really sorry about what he did to you but I don’t think he knows how to deal with it. Not that he’d admit it,” Dustin added, surprising Steve.

‘Why do you say that?” Steve asked.

“Did Hopper tell you how he talked to Mike?”

“No. He just said that Mike now had an understanding of how dangerous it was.”

“Well, yeah. Hopper took Mike to a home where they care for people with brain damage who can’t care for themselves. Some of those people are there because of drug overdoses - like they didn’t die from overdosing but are so brain damaged they’ll never be normal again. And I guess it’s very similar to how El’s mom is now even if the reasons are different. Hopper then asked if that had happened to you as a result of Mike’s actions, would it have been worth it? Would El have thought it would be worth it? Then he told them how many people die of overdoses every day. Just because they had done it to Will, didn’t mean it was ok to do to Steve. They knew what the right dose was that Will needed, Mike had just shot Steve up with no thought of any potential consequences. He then asked if Mike wanted to see the morgue.”

“What! He...what!? No...that’s too much,” Steve said, shocked.

“You’re right. He didn’t. Instead, he made Mike write a paper on drug overdoses and death in order to be allowed to exchange letters with El with the promise of being able to see her before
Christmas. I think it got the point across but it’s really upset him. He’s never had to deal with the consequences of his actions going wrong.

“He told you all of this?

“I’m surprised too but my mom’s a nurse so he had questions for her. He said it was for health class, but since I have that same class, I knew it wasn’t so he told me why he was writing the paper. I haven’t said anything to anyone else.”

“Thanks for telling me. That...must have been hard on him.”

“We still on for tonight?” Dustin asked, changing the subject as he got out of the car.

“Sure thing. See you later,” Steve said as Dustin closed the door and headed inside. He had to rethink his stance on Mike. It sounded like the apology had been heartfelt and Steve thinks he can truly forgive him. He also probably doesn’t really want to know what the actual outcome could have been like. He was just grateful now that he had full recovery. Maybe that was why Dustin had tried to stay close to Steve as well. Nothing like realizing you almost lost someone to make you appreciate them.

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He decided to head home to shower and do some homework before picking them up again. His was beginning to realize how much his ribs were aching after practice.

Since it was Monday, Dustin’s mom would be working late. Dustin had come over the last couple of Mondays to watch movies with Steve and eat whatever Steve had on hand. He knew it was Dustin’s way of checking in on him as he recovered. It was nice that someone did other than Hopper who called several times over the last couple of weeks. Steve assumed it was Hopper’s form of an apology for assuming Steve had risked the kids and taken them to the tunnels voluntarily.

He grabbed the mail and started looking through it on his way to the door and thought about dinner. Maybe some Stouffer's lasagna? That was easy enough.

The phone was ringing just as he got inside though, so he raced to pick it up, but no one was on the line. Just static. But given how he’d heard about the Byers phone, it gave him a momentary pause. No lights flickered so he assumed everything was ok. He went back to close the front door and sat the mail down, including the unopened card. He couldn’t think about that now.

He felt his cat winding around his legs in greeting. “Hello, Penny,” Steve reached down to pick her up. Her long white fur felt silky against his hands. She’d had a lot of extra grooming the past two weeks since Steve had been home. “How was your first day alone in some time?” Her blue eyes just stared at him before she head-butted his nose, asking to be let down.

“Yeah, I know. Missed you, too.” Penny was really named Penelope Fluffykins courtesy of a drunken choice by his mother a few years ago, but Steve just called her Penny. She was really more his cat anyways since he was the only one ever home with her. “Guess I should feed you early since Dustin’s coming over later and I know you don’t like company.” To say Penny was aloof was an understatement. Nancy didn’t even know about Penny since she always hid when there was company.

He got her food together and refreshed her water then got a drink and some tylenol himself before
heading upstairs to take a shower. The warm water felt good over his stiff ribs. The practice was starting to get to him. He was glad the stitches were finally out although he could see they were going to leave small white scars. They were not that noticeable but still annoying. He hoped by the time swim team started practice, they’d be gone. That wasn’t until January though so he didn’t need to decide quite yet if he was quitting. It had been tough in the past to balance basketball and swim competitions, but his coaches had worked it out. His dad wouldn’t be too happy if he quit any sport he was in even if he was overscheduled. Better for those college applications since his grades were pretty average. He was a pretty consistent C+/B- student except for gym, math, French and typewriting where he did better. He struggled most with English and history but he was still passing.

He had considered quitting the swim team the previous year between wanting more time with Nancy and less time in a pool given Barb’s situation. It had actually been Nancy to convince him if he didn’t get back into the water then, he never would. She had been right. It wasn’t as enjoyable now but he was proud he’d stuck with it. He chuckled at the thought of his baseball skills being significantly better this spring. Now that he thought about it, track was out. He’d just have to run on his own time. Baseball started just after basketball ended but it was still tough schedule.

Penny came walking into his room, yowling for some more attention. He sat with her for a few minutes before she became bored and wandered off. He started on his French homework since it was the easiest. He may not love literature or chemistry but he had a knack for romance languages - given his parents love of travel and his usual summer trips to either Spain or France - his mother’s favorite vacation spots. When she was home she liked to practice French with him when she was sober or swear and cry about his father in Spanish with him when she wasn’t.

Steve still hadn’t decided if he was still going to Paris in June or not for his graduation present. He had convinced his parents to allow him to take Nancy and he was going to ask her on Valentine’s Day - but well...that wasn’t going to happen now. At this point, there was no one he would really want to travel with. In the past, Tommy had joined him on a few of his summer trips but that also wasn’t happening. He still had friends in school but none of them were close and it was really too late in the year to try to make any of them deeper before they all scattered after high school. Without Nancy, who would Steve even consider taking with him? For no reason Steve could think of, a brief image of Jonathan photographing gardens in Barcelona popped in his head. Then, right after an image of Billy attempting to pick up a Parisian lady popped into his head and made him laugh. That would be hilarious - if he actually liked Billy, which he didn’t. The guy was still a douche.

About an hour into his studies, the lights flickered. His heart raced as he reached for the nail bat propped against his desk. He kept a few of them around now. They were easy and cheap to make and it was cathartic to pound the nails into a bat when he was having a sleepless night. He stared hard at the ceiling for a good five minutes, but nothing happened. He sat the bat back down and turned back to his calculus work that he had started after his French and got two problems in when the doorbell rang.

He went down to answer it, but no one was at the door. He looked around but neither saw nor heard any cars and no one was walking down the road. He kind of wished he’d brought the bat down.

He double checked the locks and started to head back upstairs but he saw movement out of the
corner of his eye in the backyard. Cautiously he approached the sliding glass door and peered out
the window. He didn’t see anything so he slid it open and slowly walked outside, willing his pulse
to slow down. His own pool wasn’t his favorite place anymore although in late December it wasn’t
full. It may be heated but not in the deepest of winter did even his parents want that electric bill so
they usually drained it the first week of November. Or Steve usually did. His parents were never
around to do it.

He was about to give up when he saw a small movement by the treeline. There was no fence
along the back which never made much sense to Steve. His dad had fenced the front of the pool
but not the back along the treeline - as if people might not just walk around it.

He finally recognized who was standing there. “Will?” The small boy stared at him, almost
blankly. Steve walked towards him. “Will, are you ok?”

He got within a few feet and Will blinked at him, looking a little dazed. “Steve?” He sounded
confused and tilted his head like he was studying Steve.

“Hey, buddy. You ok?” Steve asked, concerned.

Will looked around and then blushed. “Yeah - I guess….I guess I lost track of time.”

“What are you doing here? It’s cold out.” Steve reached out and put his hand on Will’s shoulder.
At least the boy was properly dressed in a good, if old, coat. His brother always seemed
underdressed for the weather to Steve. He had briefly wondered if they didn’t have enough money
for things like that, but it seemed as if Will was taken care of. Of course, knowing Jonathan, he
probably sacrificed something to make sure his brother was taken care of. Steve was a little
envious of that. Maybe he should go through his own clothes and see if there’s anything he could
donate to Goodwill or Salvation Army. He guessed his conversation about the bears earlier that
day had gotten Steve thinking about things like that. He turned his focus back on Will. He could be
charitable later if the mood was still there.

“Nothing. I was just walking around,” Will said sheepishly.

Steve frowned. He wanted to ask if that was a good idea given his history but before he could say
anything Will spoke up.

“Please don’t say anything to Mom - or Jonathan...I just needed to get a way for a bit.”

“Who’s supposed to be watching you?” Steve asked. He knew they were keeping a close eye on
the kid and would probably panic if they knew he was missing.

“Mom was home but she needed to run to the store and I didn’t feel like going with her. I
convinced her to let me try to stay alone. I mean, I’m 13 already.”

Will looked so annoyed and Steve sympathized. At 13, he also felt like he was big enough to stay
home alone. At the time he thought he was fortunate his parents did as well and started leaving for
longer and longer amounts of time so long as the twice a week housekeeper was willing to drive
Steve as needed. Once he was 16 and a licensed driver, the Harringtons thought wasting money on
a housekeeper was unnecessary and Steve was old enough to take care of the house himself.

“Well, I get it, Will, but this is not the way to win their trust. If your mom comes home and you’re
not there…” Steve left it trail off with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, yeah… I’ll head back,” Will looked so disappointed. Like he wanted to come inside and
hang out or something which struck Steve as odd. Will barely knew Steve and probably didn’t
care for him that much given his track record with Jonathan.

“Hey - it’s like almost a mile. I’ll drive you back. Besides, I need to give something to your
brother.”

Steve didn’t really have anything for Jonathan but it was clear that Will, like Jonathan, didn’t care
for people “babying” them. Which left the idea of giving Jonathan one of his old coats out.
Instead, he decided on a nail bat. He had plenty now and realized it really was Jonathan’s idea and
he should have one. Steve grabbed one of the new ones from the garage and loaded it in the car
while Will was getting into the passenger side. He ran inside to get his keys. When he came out,
Will was going through his glove compartment. He slammed it shut when Steve got to the car, but
Steve had already seen him.

“Uh….sorry. I shouldn’t have…” Will trailed off. He was blushing madly, clearly embarrassed.

“It’s ok, man. I don’t have anything incriminating in there.” As if he would leave anything for his
dad to find.

“Uh...well I did see this?” Will held up a small piece of paper, “I think it’s a parking ticket?”

Steve took it and grimaced. “Shit...I mean - yeah I forgot about that. Guess I’d better pay that.”
He looked closer. He still had a couple of days before it was late so he gave himself a mental note
to stop by after school the next day to pay it. “See - no harm done. You actually helped.” Will
grinned at him. “But I don’t recommend you snooping in anyone’s medicine cabinets,” Steve joked
even as he thought of the cornucopia of happy pills stocking his parents medicine cabinets. Steve
turned the car on, remembering to hit one of the presets to a station to something Will might like.
Steve knew some of his taste in music was not everyone’s favorite. The new station was in the
middle of ‘On the Dark Side’ from Eddie and the Cruisers which was okay with Steve since he
really enjoyed that movie.

“Ok” Will smiled again and then stared up at the house as they pulled out of the driveway. “Your
house is really big.” Will said, slightly awed.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Steve replied. He wasn’t sure what else to say. It’s not like he hadn’t been
there before but maybe he was feeling a little awkward, too. Steve and he had never spent time
alone together. Will didn’t seem like he wanted to say anything else anyways. He had turned his
head and gazing out the passenger side window. He was so quiet, Steve could have forgotten he
was there except he saw him nodding along with the radio in his peripheral vision.

Of all the kids, Steve knew Will the least, except for El. And Steve still carried a residual trace of
guilt for the things he had said about Will and his family to Jonathan the previous year so he
wasn’t quite sure how to continue a conversation. Hanging out with 13 year olds was relatively
new and usually Dustin more than made up for Steve’s lack of participation in any conversation.
Will seemed content just looking out the window. In that respect, Jonathan and Will were
obviously brothers. The hike between Steve’s and the Byers was less than I mile, but by road it was
more like two and a half - all residential and slow. Still it didn’t take long to get there.

When they pulled up, Steve gave a sigh of relief not seeing either of the Byers’ cars in the long
driveway.

Before Will got out of the car, he turned to Steve and said, “I just...I wanted to get out of the house.
It’s too much...sometimes it’s too much in there. It doesn’t feel safe.” Will almost whispered the
last part as if he were ashamed of that feeling.

Looking at the front porch reminded him that the few times he’d been there, he’d been fighting for his life. That gave anyone pause. He wondered how the Byers could stand living there after what they’d been through. Steve nodded at Will. “I know what you mean.”

He got the bat out of the car and then looked at Will, looking towards his house sadly. “Hey, hey...I get it.” Will suddenly hugged him out of nowhere and Steve didn’t really know what to make of it. He’d hardly had any interaction with the kid before now but he couldn’t just leave him. He patted Will’s back with one hand and said, “Hey, Dustin’s coming over for dinner and movies tonight. I can wait here until your mom gets home and ask her if you can come, too. Would you...is that something you’d like to do?” Steve wasn’t sure where the impulse to protect these kids was coming from. It’s not like he’d ever had siblings. But he couldn’t just leave Will like that without giving him an option.

Will leaned back and looked at him with a hopeful smile. “Really? I could come to your house? With just you and Dustin there? Um...I mean yeah - but why?”

“I don’t know. It’s a Monday and we don’t have anything else to do, I guess.” Steve felt a little silly. He guessed it did seem odd to outsiders.

“What are you making?” Will asked.

“Nothing too strenuous. I’m just heating up some frozen lasagna and garlic bread. Maybe toss a salad for us growing boys,” Steve ruffled Will’s hair. “And I’m sure Dustin will bring a lot of snacks.” He smiled down at Will who grinned widely up at him. Steve knew he didn’t want to disappoint him. He almost felt like the Grinch getting his heart to expand three times its size. It was ridiculous and he was probably setting himself up for a lot of disappointment when the kids realized he wasn’t the cool hero they seemed to occasionally think he was.

“Oh yeah. Dustin does love his Three Musketeers and his Milky Ways and his potato chips and his...everything.” Will was laughing as he listed out Dustin’s favorite snacks.

Steve laughed with him. “Yeah - but what is it with the Cheetos though? They taste like dirty sweat socks.” Steve grimaced. They were the worst snack ever invented.

“How do you know what dirty sweat socks taste like?” Will asked with a cheeky smile.

“I play basketball, man. The boys locker room stinks so bad after practice, you can practically taste it.”

“Ewww...” Will wrinkled his nose.

“Ewww.... is right,” Steve agreed.

Joyce Byers’ car came rumbling up the drive. Will looked around Steve and let go. “Speaking of ewww, Mom was going to make tuna casserole so anything you make has got to be better,” Will snickered.

“Hi, Mrs. B.” Steve waved as she got out of her green Pinto. He put the bat down and he and Will went over to help her with the groceries. He was always shocked when he saw how small she really was. Mrs. Byers always seemed a little larger than life to him - whether it was from all the stories and rumors he heard from before he knew her to her remarkable courage facing literal demons for her sons. His own mother couldn’t even face a weekend with him without Prince Valium and a bottle of Chardonnay nearby.
“Hey, Steve. How are you?”

“Fine,” he replied.

She looked closely at his face with doubt but nodded. “Well, you look better than the last time I saw you. And how many times do I have to tell you to call me Joyce?” she asked with a smile.

“I know. It’s just weird to call my friends’ parents by their names.” He picked up two bags and was still able to grab the bat on the way in. Will held the door for both of them.

He dropped the bags in the kitchen and gave the bat to Will to put in Jonathan’s room. Joyce just eyed him warily. “And he needs that because…”

Steve shook his head. “No - it was his to start with. Or rather the original. Figured I owed him one.”

Will came bouncing out and asked excitedly “Mom - Dustin is going to Steve’s tonight for dinner and to watch a movie. Can I go?” Please?”

She looked at Steve. “On a school night?”

“Dustin’s mom been working late on Mondays lately so he’s been coming over to my place for dinner. I usually have Dustin home between 9:00 - 9:30.”

“Are you sure? I can’t pay…” Joyce hesitated.

“Oh - it’s not really a babysitting thing. Just kind of happened.” Steve shook his head. He sometimes thought his life just seemed to happen to him rather than him making it happen.

Joyce laughed and looked at Steve knowingly. “Yeah - Dustin often ‘just happens’.”

Steve chuckled and agreed the kid was a force of nature but he was a good kid. “I’m sure Dustin would love to have Will there. I don’t always get his nerdy references.” Steve smiled at Will.

Joyce was quiet as she thought about it. Steve knew she was more than overly cautious about Will being away from her or Jonathan for long. And as much as Mrs. B wanted Steve to call her Joyce, it didn’t mean she trusted him with her youngest. Lord knows she probably didn’t trust him with her oldest after the previous year but they never discussed it. During the long pause, Steve heard a distinct drip, drip, drip from the kitchen faucet and turned to look at it.

Joyce narrowed her eyes at the sink as if it had personally attacked her. “Yeah - I’ve been meaning to get that fixed...I just.” she trailed off, looking a little embarrassed.

“I can fix that for you.” Steve was eyeing it closely. Looked like a basic rotary faucet. Unless something drastic was going on, he could fix it. Lord knows he’s had to do it at his own house once or twice. His parents may have a lot of money but they sure don’t like spending it when they have someone who should be man enough to do this stuff himself. Hurray for Al at the local Ace Hardware who was usually patient enough to talk him through stuff, Steve might not get As in chemistry, but he wasn’t too bad with a wrench.

“You can?”

“Yeah.” he looked at his watch, “But not right now. I have to go pick Dustin up from the arcade. But yeah. Probably take about an hour. If you need it tonight, I can do it when I drop Will off. Or tomorrow. I have a short errand to run after school.” At this, Will snickered and Steve winked at
him, “But after that, sure.”

“Tomorrow is good...yeah. I can’t pay you for that either but…”

“Consider us even for me leaving a dead demodog in your fridge.”

Joyce and Will laughed. “Yeah - I heard about that. Dustin pitched a fit when he realized it was
gone. You’re lucky Billy took care of that before I saw it.” Joyce said with a smile. “Hopper had to
burn it later when we realized it was still sitting outside.” It was the most relaxed he had ever seen
her. “So - OK, Will, you can go tonight. I’ll save the tuna casserole for tomorrow night when
Steve can join us. As a thank you for fixing my faucet.” Joyce smiled at both of them, looking
pleased.

Steve was hard pressed not to pull a face at her. He also hated tuna noodle casserole. But he’d take
what he could get. It was nice to be invited. Sure to be awkward if Jonathan was going to be there,
but nice.

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**JONATHAN’S POV**

Jonathan was later than he expected to be, sure his mom would be either holding dinner for him or
fussing at leaving a plate while Will and her ate without him. It had taken longer than he expected
at the library. He just went to do some research on his Civics paper but got caught up in reading
some history of how the FBI was formed. He wondered how much of that was bullshit - which
sounded like Nancy’s voice in his head. She really liked that word.

Ever since he had had to sign those non-disclosure papers the previous year, he had begun to think
about just what the government was capable of. After the last round of events he was beginning to
get more paranoid. Although as Nancy had reminded him several times, *just because he was
paranoid didn’t mean no one was out to get them*. He was beginning to jump at every black sedan
he saw parked on the street or people he didn’t recognize loitering. He wasn’t sure if it was just
him or if there really were more strangers in town lately.

During the last couple of weeks Nancy and he had held more and more discussions about what
more they could do to prevent this happening again. Jonathan wasn’t sure if there was anything
more they could do. It seemed so big and overwhelming - but, then again, he had also thought
they’d never be able to bring any kind of justice to Barb and he thinks they managed that once it
got out.

Nancy still wanted to do more. Jonathan just wanted to keep everyone safe. He understood there
might be a larger picture and Nancy was determined to follow it, and he wanted to be there for her,
he also knew they were probably still being watched. Maybe even more so now, even if he had
combed through his car to make sure there were no obvious bugs planted in it leftover from their
visit to the lab.

Once it was out, someone would have to realize that someone in their small group had given up
some kind of information that led, hopefully, to the lab’s closure. While the general public still
wouldn’t know the truth - there were people that did. And again he was reminded of the subtle
threats the men in the black suits had given a year ago.

It was all giving him a headache. He just wanted to eat dinner, listen to some music and chill for
the rest of the night, even if he still had some other homework to finish first. He wanted everything to be normal again. He hopes that once Nancy gets justice for Barb that maybe she’ll relax. Maybe they could try just being teenagers in..what love? Or was it too soon for that? In ‘like’ seemed to little for what he felt for her. Except for a few times, she’d been a little standoffish after everything even if she held his hand and kissed him goodnight. He wanted more.

Of course, trying to find privacy was tough. He’d had a moment of jealousy thinking of how empty Steve’s house always seemed so it had probably never been a problem for the two of them. Jonathan could sneak into Nancy’s room but they had to stay so quiet that not much actually happened. Well, once or twice because Jonathan was fairly quiet but Nancy made more noise and was more demanding than he would have expected. What did he know? She was his first. Maybe most people were noisy. Of course, he’d be the exception.

The door creaked open catching his mom’s attention. He was surprised to see her laying on the couch with her feet up, smoking. Just like Nancy, his mom rarely relaxed.

“Hey, Mom. You feeling ok?” He sat his backpack down by the door and took off his coat.

“I’m fine, honey. Just...taking a few minutes to myself.” She took a long inhale and smiled at him. “What time is it?”

“6:30. Sorry I’m late. Got caught up. Did you and Will eat already?” He looked around but didn’t see his little brother.

“No..Will’s over at Steve’s tonight so we’re on our own. Are sandwiches ok? Don’t think I want to cook tonight.”

“Uh...why is Will at Steve’s?” Jonathan was confused. He heard that the party had done a couple of game nights there the last couple of weeks - but not on a Monday. Steve apparently had let them use his house to play a game a few days after the events. Will hadn’t even gone back to school yet - neither had Steve. Will had wanted to go as the kids wanted to check in on both him and Steve but no one - including his mother wanted to be at the Byers house. The events had been too recent.

His mom had driven him over then and then again the following week when Dustin said Steve had given in to his superior wisdom that a house as nice as Steve’s should be enjoyed by more people. And that Dustin’s mom had made chicken soup for Steve. Steve had been nice enough to send half of it back home with Will.

“Apparently, Steve’s been babysitting on Monday nights for Dustin or something - but at Steve’s place. Steve invited Will to join them.”

“When did Steve...?” He trailed off. He could understand Dustin getting the party together but Steve? When did he do that?

Which made Jonathan realize he had not really checked in on Steve since that night other than the brief encounter that morning. He got updates from Will who got them from Dustin, but he himself had not. Not that Steve and he were friends exactly but he felt like maybe they were comrades in arms or something so he probably should have checked on him more.

Joyce sat up to put out her cigarette. “He stopped by earlier to leave you a bat. I almost had a heart attack when I saw it. Will put it in your room.” She waved towards his room.

He walked towards his room. “He returned the bat?” he asked as he walked in, but when he saw it, he thought it looked different. The nails were silver instead of dark and the bat look newer.
He heard Joyce moving around the kitchen, he assumed getting things together for sandwiches. He put the mystery aside and joined her.

As they sat eating ham sandwiches and potato salad, they chatted about their day. They laughed about George Sutton coming into Melvalds to complain again about the Pepsi/Coke conspiracy (which no one else had ever heard of) and Jonathan discussed how Tracy Jones had accidentally lit her hair on fire over a bunsen burner because she was flirting with her lab partner. No one had been hurt but the smell of burnt hair had permeated the classroom for the rest of the period.

Joyce was rinsing the plates off and said, “Steve’s coming by tomorrow to try to fix the faucet. Can you believe that?”

“Well, he could have been more careful,” Jonathan thought. “He’s always been a klutz.”

“Steve? Thinks he can...what?” Jonathan couldn’t fathom someone like Steve being handy - except with a nail bat apparently but that was kind of sports related so it didn’t count.

“Yeah, he noticed it and says he’s pretty sure it’s a simple fix so he was going to look at it tomorrow after school. He seemed like he knew what he was talking about.”

Jonathan didn’t really know what to say. Why would someone like Steve know how to do that? Jonathan felt bad. He kept thinking about trying to work on it but plumbing wasn’t something he’d done and he just never got around to it. There were too many other things around the house to keep running - and their cars which always seemed to need new parts.

When he didn’t say anything, his mom added, “So how does Steve seem to be doing? I know he said he’s fine, but to still have bruises two weeks later. I can only imagine how his stomach looks.”

“Uh...I haven’t really seen him, except briefly. I guess he seems ok.” Jonathan admitted. In rush he added, “We don’t have any classes together with him.”

“We? Do you mean Nancy?” Joyce asked.

Jonathan flushed and fiddled with his fork.

“Are you two dating?” Joyce asked with an interested smirk.

“I, uh, guess,” he admitted. They hadn’t really said anything to anyone but since they spent most of their time together, he thought everyone assumed it. They didn’t plan to announce it until after the holidays. Particularly at school. He also had the habit of downplaying anything good that seemed to happen to him, considering how rarely that happened so he didn’t want to risk it yet.

“You guess - you don’t know?” she said, teasingly.

“I mean - we’re still sorting it out,” he mumbled.

“Oh - wait she was dating Steve, right? So they broke up? When did that happen?”

“Yeah...uh recently I guess. Um, I have homework.” Jonathan was mortified at the searching look his mom was giving him. He got up and went to his room. He pretended like he didn’t hear her mutter, “Oh honey...” like she just knew Nancy was going to change her mind again and go back to Steve. He couldn’t even find it in him to be mad. Steve was a good guy - or at least he’d been there far more than Jonathan would have ever expected - and he was good looking, the kids liked him and apparently had more skills than he had given him credit for.

And In no way was he jealous. An hour later the phone rang and his mom yelled that Nancy was
on the line for him.

“Hey, Nancy.” He thought about calling her Nance but since Steve had, he didn’t want to repeat it. Plus he didn’t want anyone to get the idea of calling him Jon. He loathed that nickname. Sometimes people called his dad Lon instead of Lonnie and it was just too similar.

“Hey, Jonathan. How are you?” Nancy asked.

“Good.” He liked hearing her voice. And she was good at carrying conversation. He sometimes faltered but it was easier with her.

“I was working on my essay and I wanted to discuss a few thoughts if you don’t mind?”

“Sure,” Jonathan sat down and listened to Nancy. She sounded relaxed. It was nice. It had been a rough couple of weeks. They’d had a lot of discussion about the Upside Down, the government conspiracy, possible fallout from those events and their own burgeoning relationship. Plus Nancy had been having trouble sleeping, her anxiety about the fallout of their actions seemed to be getting the best of her.

Jonathan hadn’t quite known how to help her since he felt a little guilty since she had been right. He had gotten Will back. She had not gotten Barbara. And he hadn’t been there at all during the past year to help her through it. Steve had. Even if he hadn’t managed it right, Steve had still been the one there and trying and Jonathan hadn’t. And he didn’t want to make the same mistakes. At least trying to get justice for Barb had to be a step in the right direction.

After the actual work discussion, they moved on to a couple of other topics before Nancy asked, “Hey, are you working Friday?”

“No. I have to do the matinee on Saturday this week.”

“I thought maybe we could do something,” she said, a little hesitance in her voice.

“Yeah, like what?” Jonathan asked, already feeling slightly heated.

“There’s a party at Jessica’s but it’s supposed to be small. Then maybe we could take dinner up to quarry before we go and uh - practice that thing we’ve been practicing?”

This was all so new to him. He’d never had a girlfriend and he’d gone straight from not ever dating to losing his virginity within a couple of days. Nancy had given him quite the education not just at Murray’s place but in the back of his car as well and twice in her bed and his at least once.

He didn’t want to think of where she’d gotten that education though. Not because he cared that she’d slept with anyone before, but because of who that someone was. It made him uncomfortable in ways he didn’t understand. His inner photographer’s eye couldn’t help but imagine the visuals of how Steve and Nancy looked together. (Or of the photos he had actually taken that he couldn’t quite bring himself to destroy the negatives of). Of how her fragile frame hid such strength. Of how his athletic body could be graceful. Of how both their skins seemed soft to the touch. Of her blue eyes sparkling up at him, running gentle fingers through his beautiful, thick hair and down his broad back and slim waist. His large hands caressing her breasts. His soft lips on her - his tongue exploring expertly - that thing Nancy wanted Jonathan to explore better. It wasn’t Jonathan’s fault he was new at this and she was a patient teacher but...

Yeah...he wasn’t jealous of Steve Harrington at all.
Yup...slow plot is slow but it is coming. I just really like expanding the day to day stuff too and have some fun. Hope you enjoy this!
Chapter 4 - An Overture of Sorts

Chapter Summary

Steve, Dustin and Will have a fun evening together. Nancy and Mike have some sibling bonding over their relationship issues.

Chapter Notes

There is some reference to violence and sex - but it's dream-related. If that's a thing for you - you can skip the last section which is Billy's POV. It's short so you won't miss too much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4 - An Overture of Sorts

DUSTIN’S POV

Dustin was surprised, but happy to see Will in Steve’s car. Not as happy that Will had shotgun but he decided Will deserved a few good things so he climbed into the back without argument. He noticed his book bag had been moved to the backseat from the front passenger floor where he had left them earlier.

“Hi, Will. What’s the occasion?” Dustin asked, waving generally in Will’s direction.

“Will’s joining us this evening. That’s ok, right?” Steve asked, giving Dustin the eye in the rearview mirror. He suspected that Steve thought Dustin was starting to feel a little proprietary when it came to Steve’s friendship even though it had only been a couple of weeks. Maybe he shouldn’t have spoken so freely about feeling like he was being left behind with Mike and El being reunited and Lucas and Max spending time together. Or it was how he felt special when Steve admitted to him that he was sure Nancy and he had broken up and that Nancy and Jonathan were together even if they hadn’t discussed it officially. He felt privileged that Steve would talk to him even if he threatened to ‘replace all his chocolate with exlax if Dustin so much as breathed a word to anyone.’ He hadn’t. He wanted to prove to Steve that he could be his stalwart squire or something like that. Steve was really awesome. And if Steve could be generous enough to let Jonathan have Nancy gracefully and still be kind to Jonathan’s younger brother, Dustin could be big enough to share Steve with Will. His friend deserved it even if they weren’t as close as the others were.

“Cool with me. How are you Will? Glad to see you up and about.”

Will smiled as he glanced in the back at Dustin and Dustin felt a surge of protectiveness over the slight boy. It was good to see him bouncing back. “Good. Miss being with all of you.”
“When can you come back to school?” Dustin asked. He thought Will still looked a little wan and pale but truthfully, Will never seemed to have a lot of color.

“I’m coming back on Wednesday. Mom didn’t want me doing a whole week for the first time. But I’m caught up on my homework. Jonathan’s been bringing it home for me.”

“You’ll be back just in time for the new project in woodshop. I think I’m going to make a jewelry box for my mom for Christmas.” Dustin’s mom might be better off financially than Will’s mom, but that didn’t mean he wanted her giving him money to buy her a present. He wanted to do something special for her, especially as he was still feeling guilty about Mews. His mom was really torn up about it. He had finally broken down and told her he found Mews dead in the woods the previous week but had already buried it since he didn’t want his mom to see Mews that way. The way she had praised him for being so thoughtful and brave had made his insides squirm. He hadn’t told anyone else yet. He felt so stupid for holding on to Dart, as if somehow that had made him special, and all it had done was cause all of them pain. A costly lesson his mom would have said had she known the truth. He was working very hard to not show his distress over the entire thing. More important things had happened than just a boy and his mom losing their pet. If Will had been surprised when Dustin had cried at Bob’s funeral, he didn’t ask. His mom had been surprised that Dustin wanted to go but had offered to go with him.

“Ooh...that’s a good idea. I think mom would like one, too. What do you think, Steve?” Will’s voice broke him out of his reverie. Right - stay on the topic at hand.

Dustin watched as Steve blinked as if surprised Will would want his opinion. Dustin wondered sometimes if Steve was really as confident as he let on. Based on their discussion about Nancy and Jonathan (and Dustin knew well that Steve had left a lot out), he thought not. Still, Steve seemed to regroup and answered, “Will, I think your mom would love anything you made. Plus, I’ll bet you could paint something really cool on it. Something no one else could do.”

Dustin enjoyed seeing Will’s face beaming at the compliment. “Did you make one for your mom when you took shop? Did she like it?” Will asked Steve earnestly.

Yeah, Dustin could see Will was starting to see Steve was as awesome as Dustin thought he was. He pushed down any feeling of jealousy that somehow Steve might like Will more. He knew it was stupid that he sometimes felt like a third or fifth wheel in his own party, but he couldn’t help it. Will already had a supportive brother and Dustin wanted Steve to be his because Steve had been nothing but supportive in the short time Dustin knew him.

“Oh, pretty sure I tried to do a birdhouse.” Steve replied with a laugh. “Not sure the birds liked it.” He looked back at Dustin with a self-deprecating smile. “Dustin, I’m sure your mom will love yours, too,” as if he knew Dustin might want some reassurance. Steve then looked around the parking lot. “Where are the others? Do they need a ride?” Steve asked.

“No. Mr. Sinclair just picked all of them up. They left a couple of minutes ago,” Dustin replied, feeling better. He just had to get over himself. Will deserved anything good he could get. So did Steve. Dustin could make sure both of them got it and in turn, he was sure they’d be there for him. That was how families worked, right?

“Sorry, I was a little late,” Steve said.

“I knew you’d come. No worries.” Dustin knew Steve only asked about the others to change the topic of conversation. He had noticed Steve had a habit of not wanting to discuss his parents. He was beginning to wonder if Steve’s parents existed. He’d only been to his house a few times but he had never seen them. And while Steve’s house was beautiful and huge, it never felt like anyone
else lived there other than the few framed photographs in the foyer, he would never even know what Steve’s parents looked like. When Dustin asked, he just said his parents travelled a great deal but of course they existed. Why else would he be stuck with a perfectly ugly floral wallpaper in the living room?

They pulled out and headed towards the house. “Hey - I tried to rent Empire Strikes Back but they were out. I picked up the Last Starfighter instead. Hopefully, that’ll be good,” Steve said.

“Aw...crap. I really wanted you to see that one,” Dustin whined. “I can’t believe you didn’t see it in the theaters.”

“What can I say? I’m new to all this nerdy stuff. You’ll have to be the Oki Dawn Kenosha to my Lucky Skyrunner.”


“Like I wouldn’t know them by now with as much as you talk about them,” Steve said, clearly happy that his joke worked. “It’s so easy to get you going.”

Dustin definitely felt better that Steve was not going to just disappear. He smiled to himself as he looked out the window, listening to the radio as they pulled into Steve’s driveway.

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**STEVE’S POV**

Usually when Steve was getting food ready, the party was in the basement already playing. Steve’s basement was a finished den, complete with an elaborate entertainment center, pool table and a full, locked bar (as if Steve didn’t know where the key was). It was where his parents liked him to be when they were home. Out of sight, but in their custody so to speak. Other than the basement, which had a powder room, and the kitchen, the party had no reason to go to any other part of the house and, to this point, no one had.

When Dustin had been there alone, he stayed with Steve in the kitchen while he cooked or in the den where they watched movies. Now that Will was there, the two of them apparently decided to go exploring the house and Steve hadn’t realized it while he was busy putting a salad together and trying to figure out if the dressings were still good. It was so hard to tell with blue cheese since it was bad to start with.

He only realized they weren’t in the den, as he thought, when Dustin shrieked - “You have a grand PIANO! Dude! A huge-ass Grand Piano!”

Steve looked up at them. “Uh, yeah. My dad plays. He’s a concert pianist. That’s why he always travels.”


“I don’t know. My parents grew up here. He still also owns some businesses here that belonged to my mom’s dad that they don’t want to sell so it’s easier to stay here I guess.” Steve groaned at the thought of those businesses. His dad wanted him to eventually take over since, in his words, Steve wasn’t going to use his natural talents for anything better, he may as well work to keep his family’s
businesses running smoothly instead of the “idiots currently running them” as if his dad hadn’t been the ones to hire them in the first place.

Ugh...Steve hated most of his Dad’s business partners and he only saw them on rare occasions. The thought of spending a minimum of 40 hours a week with them was already exhausting as the inevitable was taking shape as graduation neared. The only reprieve he saw was to go to college if he could get in. His dad would allow, and prefer, that or to go off on his own without any familial support. Steve wasn’t sure what he could do to support himself without his parents. He’d waited too damn long to take any of it seriously. He really didn’t know what he wanted to do when he “grew up.”

“Do you play?” Will asked, shyly.

“Enough to keep it tuned,” he said, dismissively. He was never good enough for his father to be happy with. That’s what his dad had really wanted. A musical genius for a son. Years of practice had not made Steve the prodigy John Harrington had thought his son should be. Instead, it made Steve hate playing. At age twelve, he refused to do any more recitals and he never told anyone in town he played. He took up baseball instead much to his father’s disgust and his mother’s reluctant agreement in the hopes it was a phase he would get over. The hours of screaming matches echoed in his head of his father insisting he still practice even if he wasn’t doing recitals, bartering practice time with permission to play sports and the red knuckles Steve often wore from the ruler smacking his hands when he played incorrectly. He was grateful when they just decided to stop coming home so much when they realized Steve was never going to follow in his father’s footsteps.

“Bullshit. I’ll bet you’re good,” Dustin said. Steve saw the look on Dustin’s face and appreciated that Dustin believed he could do that. Truthfully, he was a better musician than he was an athlete, but he’d never admit that to anyone.

“You think, huh?” Steve asked as he pulled the lasagna out of the oven. He sat it on the counter to cool a bit while they ate their salad. Dustin went to sit at the table and Steve yelled, “Hey, wash your hands!”

Dustin rolled his eyes but joined WIIl at the sink and did as Steve asked. Steve went after them and they all sat down.

“Yeah, I do think, Steve. You have a habit of downplaying your abilities. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that.”

“Yeah - no I don’t think so. I’m really not that good at anything,” Steve said without thinking. He wasn’t looking for compliments. He just knew he was mostly average in most things - with slightly higher abilities in a few areas, like most people. The only thing he was really great at was the one thing that brought him no joy.

“Really? One of the highest scorers on the basketball team for two years, captain of the JV baseball team - and the only year our team actually made the playoffs, and broke the Hawkins High Mens 100 yards butterfly and 500 yards freestyle records. I’d say you’re pretty good at something.” Dustin sounded defensive and like he was insulted on Steve’s behalf. It was a nice feeling.

“So - you’ve been looking into my sports achievements.”

“Of course. You’re in the party now. I..we..have to know what you bring.” Dustin was sounding pretty insistent that Steve was part and parcel of the Party now.
“Well, don’t ask my English or Chemistry teachers what I bring. Pretty sure that will ruin any chances I have of impressing you. Plus, don’t be too impressed with my sports achievements. Hawkins High isn’t exactly a school that is scouted by colleges. Our basketball team is generally in the last five of the rankings and the swim team is worse. Baseball is the only sport where we’ve ever made the finals.” Sometimes Steve wonders what could have happened had his parents opted to live in an area where the schools were better. Would Steve have risen to the challenge or just not ever participated?

“There’s that self-deprecation I was talking about,” Dustin said while rolling his eyes.

“Will you play for us after dinner?” Will asked quietly. “I’ve always wanted to learn an instrument but...we just couldn’t do it. Other than the school band, I’ve never really heard a live instrument.” Steve grimaced at the thought of the school band, even their “jazz band” that had better players in it. They were pretty awful. There was one guy, a year older than Steve that had been a good trumpet player but he pretty much outshone all the other students.

“Really, that’s uh...not even church?” Steve thought most had choirs and organists and such. Steve only ever attended a Presbyterian one when his parents where home for the holidays and they wanted to make a public appearance. He went a few times with Nancy since her family tended to go more regularly, but it wasn’t his scene.

“No. We don’t go. Mom had a bad experience after...Dad left...so yeah she says there are better things to do on a Sunday.” Will seemed a little embarrassed at mentioning his dad and Steve felt bad for him.

“I’m surprised Jonathan doesn’t play guitar, with as much as he loves music” Steve replied, moving to a safer subject.

“He did briefly but Dad hated him practicing in the house. Eventually he just sold the guitar.” Will looked sad for a moment but then looked up at Steve again, “So will you play for us?”

Steve almost said no but Will was looking so hopeful he couldn’t bring himself not to. And he knew he couldn’t purposefully play badly like he did for his parents when he had wanted to stop performing. It didn’t work anyways except for ending public performances.

“You don’t want to see the Last Starfighter?” Steve asked instead hoping to catch their interest in another direction.

“I’d rather hear you play,” Will said and Dustin nodded in agreement.

“Ok...I guess. But no laughing at my choice of songs. And I’m really out of practice so don’t get your hopes too high.” He really wasn’t. On nights when he couldn’t sleep and was alone, he often wandered down and noodled on the keys a bit, particularly the last few weeks when he was bored. And he had to keep it tuned.

After cleaning the kitchen, they went into the Parlor as his mother called it after Steve admonished Dustin to leave the sodas and cheetos behind. It was a stark, elegant room with the piano as the centerpiece. Any food spills would be hard to clean. Only water was ever allowed in the room. The room was usually hidden behind two doors but the boys hadn’t bothered to close it after their discovery.

Steve sat down at the keys and did a quick warm-up of scales, trying to think of what to play for them. Will and Dustin sat on the white sofa and tried to get comfortable. It was weird for them to be so quiet but finally Steve felt ready to perform.
“I’m going to play you one of mankind’s greatest works of music. I hope you appreciate it.” Then he proceeded to goof around with ‘Heart & Soul’ and ‘Chopsticks’ which made Dustin and Will laugh loudly. Steve noticed Dustin getting up during ‘Chopsticks’ and looked around and the photos displaying his several of his dad’s performances.

When ‘Chopsticks’ finished, Dustin said, “Very funny. Pretty sure you can do better than that.” He showed Will a frame that Steve already knew what was in it. It was one of his last competitions and he had won first place. While his mother had congratulated him, his dad had proceeded to tell him everything that was wrong with his performance. Steve had just wanted for his dad to say he was proud of him for once and acknowledge how hard Steve had been trying, but he hadn’t. That was when Steve knew that no matter how much he managed to achieve in his performances, it was never going to be enough. That was when Steve said, “No more” and gave up. His mom had framed the photo in the hopes to remind both of them that Steve could do it and his dad should be proud, but it never worked. In the long run, she chose his dad to support.

“What did you play to win this?” Will asked. Steve knew the boys had no idea what the story behind the picture was. They only saw a smiling Steve accepting his trophy for first place when he still thought his dad would be happy. Steve wasn’t going to disappoint these boys the way his dad had.

So Steve pulled out ‘Moonlight Sonata’. Standard fare but one he’s known since he was 7. He stuck to an easier rendition, not adding any elaborate flourishes or embellishments. Certainly not as good as the framed performance was. It would have never been good enough for any recital but it seemed to impress Will who gazed at Steve adoringly. Even Dustin seemed impressed, even if he was flipping through scores that were tucked in a small chest near the piano. Steve needed the scores for many pieces but some, like ‘Moonlight Sonata’, he still knew it by heart.

“‘CATS!’ Oh my God, my mom loves this soundtrack! She wants to see it sooo bad,” Dustin said holding up some sheet music. Suddenly Dustin’s voice cracked, “Can you play this?”

Steve looked at it and back to Dustin. He thought he saw Dustin’s eyes water up and he suddenly thought of Mews. He wondered how Dustin was doing with that. His own thoughts turned to Penny who was in hiding from the extra people in the house. He can’t imagine how he would feel if something happened to her.

Dustin was waving the paper at Steve. It was his mom’s sheet music for ‘Memories’. She played decently and loved Broadway. His dad tolerated it even if he thought it was hokey. She was still trying to get Steve interested but it wasn’t his favorite even if he enjoyed the times they practiced together without his dad around. She had picked up the sheet music on her last trip and brought it home for him. He hadn’t tried it out yet but he had listened to the soundtrack itself several times.

Seeing how important it seemed to Dustin, he said, “I can try.” Steve looked it over. Seemed easy enough. “Hey, I’ll need someone to turn the pages while I play.” Dustin volunteered.

He started and was pleasantly surprised when Dustin started singing softly. It was a tad wobbly but grew stronger as Steve played even if the key was a little high for him. He had to nod at Dustin to turn at times. Clearly, Dustin didn’t read music but obviously he knew the soundtrack.

Will applauded enthusiastically when they ended. “Wow. That was really good. I didn’t know you could sing, Dustin.”

“Don’t tell anyone, ok? Can you imagine if Troy found out?” Dustin said, sort of pretending like he wasn’t wiping a few tears away.
Will grimaced. “He’s a jerk. But that was really good. I like that first thing you played, too. It was cool. What was it?”

Steve laughed. “That was Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. I don’t think your brother would think it was cool but it was fun to play again.” He turned to Dustin, “You sound really good, Dustin. Who knew you had pipes?”

Dustin smiled at both of them, clearly enjoying the praise. “Hey, could we maybe perform that for my mom?” Dustin asked. “I think she’d really like that,” he added softly.

“Sure. I think maybe we’ll try a lower key though. But let’s keep this between us, yeah?” Steve suggested. He also didn’t want it getting around that he was the nerdy piano guy. He was having enough issues in school as it was between Tommy and Billy. He’d stopped playing publically by the time Tommy and he became friends and Tommy thought all the band geeks were just that - geeks and ripe for picking on. He knew he shouldn’t be worried about it but he just wanted to get through the rest of the year and graduate peacefully. Once he did, whatever he decided he was going to do, maybe he’d have more courage to get out there again. But he was pretty darn sure the violin collecting dust in the basement was never going to see the light again. He hated violin more than he hated piano. But even he had to admit that this had actually been fun.

“We’ll need to practice more,” Dustin said. Steve had a sense Dustin just wanted a reason to keep coming over but it would be nice for him to do something like this for his mother. At least Dustin’s mom would appreciate the effort he put in even if it wasn’t perfect. And Steve wouldn’t get a ruler to the knuckles when he played a passage incorrectly.

“OK,” Steve agreed and Dustin hugged him. Steve ruffled his hair and knew the performance meant more than just a gift for his mom and he promised himself he would talk to Dustin about Mews when they were alone and make sure Dustin was ok.

Suddenly, Will was standing behind Steve and put a hand on his shoulder, breaking the hug between Steve and Dustin. It almost made Steve jump. He hadn’t noticed Will moving. “That was really incredible. Could you play some more?” Will asked. “I really liked that first one. Made me feel really good. Didn’t know music could make you feel good.”

“Yeah, yeah I can do a few more rounds before I take you home. ‘Memories’ again to rehearse or something new?” Steve asked.

“Can we rehearse some more then maybe something else?” Dustin asked.

“Do you know anything else like ‘Moonlight Sonata’?” Will asked, eyes bright.

Steve was pleased the boys seemed so happy. “I think I may have created a monster, huh, Will? You really seem to like that. Don’t blame me if your brother catches you listening to NPR, although maybe he’d think that was cool.”

Steve considered that even if Jonathan preferred music like the Clash, he could see Jonathan liking NPR just because most people didn’t. Steve would never admit to listening to it himself while he was still in high school. The one time Tommy turned on the stereo in the living room and Tchaikovsky’s ‘Piano Concerto in B flat minor’ blasted through the house, he pranced around making fun of the boring “fairy” music. Steve had lied and said his mom must have changed the station last time she was home. He would never admit he had actually been listening to Gustav Holst’s “The Planets” performed by the Berlin Philharmonic that NPR had aired that weekend. It was one of his favorite orchestral suites - particularly ‘Mars’ - and his parents hadn’t bought that version yet.
“What’s NPR?” Will asked.

“Oh - it’s like PBS, but for radio. They play classical music a lot,” Steve replied. “Do you not have any music classes?”

“Yes - but it’s so boring,” Dustin said.

“Yeah, I don’t remember ever hearing anything that made me feel like that before,” Will replied. Steve enjoyed seeing the smile that seemed to radiate from Will. He’d never seen the boy so relaxed, not that he knew Will all that well. But he could relate. There was something about live music that just felt good.

“Better than ‘Should I Stay or Should I Go?’” Steve asked in a teasing voice.

“Yeah - way better.” Will seemed awed - in the truest sense of the word. "I never felt like that when that song is on."

“Geez, definitely don’t tell your brother that. He’ll never let me watch you again!” Steve joked before turning back to the piano. He half thought he should introduce them to ‘The Planets’ since the ‘Mars’ section so heavily influenced John Williams’ music for "Star Wars". And yes - he was nerdy enough to not only know Star Wars (regardless of what he’s told Dustin), but know who the composer was. Mostly because his father had had a fit that “classical” music was being used as background noise in garbage Hollywood crap. Steve went out and bought the "Star Wars" soundtrack the next day just to spite his dad. Dad was a bit of a PBS snob. Nothing but news and documentaries for them when they were home and deigned to watch the “boob tube.”

Yeah - the kids might like it. However, none of it was appropriate for piano so they ended up doing Memories two more times in a new key that worked better for Dustin’s voice. Then Steve played around with ‘Claire de Lune’ and ‘Fur Elise’ which Will seemed to really enjoy. His face was lit up in delight when he finished. Finally he performed ‘Old Time Rock and Roll’ to end their night in laughter as Dustin and Will danced around in their sock feet while Steve played and sang his heart out. His voice wasn’t nearly as good as Dustin’s but it was good enough and it made them happy. After everything they went through, Steve felt they all deserved a little fun. It was the best time Steve had playing piano in a very long time.

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NANCY’S POV

“So planning more human anatomy studies with your boyfriend?” Mike asked, this time with more humor than the last time he asked. He was standing in her bedroom door holding something.

“Shut up.” Nancy said as she finally hung up. She was looking forward to Friday and a chance to just be teens for a bit, fully aware of the irony of that sentiment. But now it was ok since she’d done what she set out to do. She was hoping she’d see some justice for Barb soon. They all survived the Upside Down yet again. Except for Bob, but she didn’t know him and couldn’t quite dig up enough remaining feelings about him. Too much had been buried in Barb, Jonathan, Mike and...Steve. She just couldn’t spare anything else for someone she didn’t know. If that made her selfish or inconsiderate, she’d own that.

She felt guilty and confused about Steve. He’d risked his life and almost died and it just about crushed her knowing that. She hated that she seemed to waver between still loving him and being
so angry that she wanted to scream that he had risked himself in those tunnels and at the junkyard.

She kept telling herself she chose Jonathan - she loved Jonathan. And she did. But then Steve’s face would appear out of nowhere and she’d remember she once thought she loved him too. Logically, she knew her and Jonathan made more sense. She even felt more attracted to him when they were together but sometimes Steve’s presence made itself known. She had an almost unbearable urge to seek him out - but she didn’t know whether she wanted to kiss him or hit him sometimes so she avoided him altogether. She had been glad he hadn’t been in school the last couple of weeks. She wasn’t sure what would happen when she did see him.

The dreams of her and him were unwanted and when Billy began appearing in them, she didn’t know what to think. It didn’t feel right. She wanted to dream of Jonathan but was getting her ex and the guy that just about killed him instead. She had no idea what that could mean if anything. She expected nightmares after everything but not the kind she was having. The dreams of the three of them merging together left her feeling horny and wet but they were almost worse than the nightmares of Billy and Nancy consuming Steve, destroying him in vengeance for something she couldn’t remember. It left her feeling unsure about everything, including Jonathan. She wondered if he had picked up on anything being wrong so she was trying to force herself to move forward as if nothing was happening. The gate was closed. It was behind them and it was Nancy’s own psyche playing mind games. She wasn’t going to let it win. Even if she had noticed that sometimes she caught herself spacing out for long periods of time. She just needed to control herself. She was good at that.

So now she was going to act like it’s Miller time. Get some good memories in to start overtaking the bad if that was possible.

Mike threw a pair of sunglasses on her bed. “I was going to give these back to him at the next game night but since you’re seeing him Friday, you may as well. He left them in the kitchen when he dropped me off the other day after gaming.”

“Jonathan was here the other day?” She looked at the glasses but while they looked familiar they weren’t Jonathan’s.

“Jonathan? No, Steve, you moron. You know, your boyfriend. You know we’ve been at his house gaming?” Mike rolled his eyes at her.

“You’ve been gaming at Steve’s?” Nancy was confused. This was the first she had heard about it. Of course, she’d been busy with school, anxiously waiting for justice, her own research and of course Jonathan.

“Uh, yeah. He hasn’t mentioned it?”

“No, I haven’t uh, spoken to him recently.”

Mike looked at the phone and then looked at her like she was insane.

The silence went uncomfortably long. “That wasn’t Steve. That was Jonathan,” she finally said.

She actually saw the connection hit in Mike’s eyes. “Does your boyfriend know you were going to ask Jonathan on a date?” Now he sounded like the sarcastic shit she knew so well.

“Mike, Steve's not my boyfriend anymore. We broke up.” Mike was the first person she said that to. She'd have to tell Jonathan since they had planned on waiting until the New Year to tell anyone.

“When did that happen?! We were just getting used to using his house. It’s so cool. Did you know
there’s a heated swimming pool. Heated!”

“Uh, yeah I knew that,” Nancy said, feeling a little overwhelmed at memories of Barb all over again.

“Aw, man. I was just starting to like him, too. Guess we’ll have to start playing here again.” Mike huffed as he sat down next to her.

“Why?”

“Because it’ll be awkward. I mean, I can’t imagine he’d want his ex’s little brother and his friends at his place after he broke up with her. It’s because of all the …stuff, right? Decided he didn’t want to be involved anymore.”

“No, that’s not why,” she answered.

“So, then what did you do?” Mike asked, a familiar accusatory tone lacing his voice. Nancy remembered Mike always wanted to find who to blame for anything bad that happened. She wondered if it occurred to him that sometimes bad things just happened.

“Why do you think it’s my fault?” Nancy asked, annoyed. “I'll have you know I ended it,” she said, trying to sound convincing.

He stood up again and glared at her. “You broke you with him? Why, for crying out loud?”

“I thought you thought he was a douchebag?” Nancy said, with air quotes around the douchebag.

‘Well. that was before he saved me...and Lucas and all of us. I mean he even saved you and Jonathan last year after Jonathan beat the crap out of him. Why on earth would you break up with him after that?’

“It was before that actually - not the last year stuff, but we broke up at the Halloween party - or the day after or I’m not really sure? So I think you and the party will still be welcome.” She tried to smile at him.

“What happened?”

Nancy wasn’t sure why she was going to tell Mike. But she really had no one else who was in the know. She had told Jonathan some of it and of course he was supportive but she couldn’t really tell him how guilty she felt about what had happened. Normally she would have talked to Barb, but that wasn’t an option. Her mother - just no. And a big no to Steve. She hadn’t spoken to him since that night and every day made it more difficult. She knew he had returned to the school that day but she avoided him. And since Jonathan hadn’t mentioned anything, she put off the inevitable another day. Pretending it wasn’t going to happen. The irony of that thought was overwhelming.

She took a big inhalation. “We fought. He wanted to go to the party but I didn’t. He asked for one night to pretend to be normal teenagers and I was really angry with him. I didn’t handle it well. Let’s just say I’m not good friends with alcohol and I said some pretty harsh stuff to him.”

She hesitated while she waited for him to make some comment on her drinking. When it didn’t come, she whispered guiltily, “Apparently, I told him he was bullsh*t. That our relationship was bullshit. And then didn’t tell him differently the next day when he gave me an out.” It felt both better and worse saying that out loud. She truthfully wasn’t proud of how she’d handled that.

She wondered if Mike heard her. There was a long silence before he finally said, “And he still
came to help when Dustin asked?”

“Yeah.” She was fiddling with a loose thread on her bedspread.

“Do you know why he was with Dustin? I mean, of all people, how Dustin ended up with Steve Harrington?” Mike finally asked.

She looked up at him quizzically. “No, I guess not.” It had never occurred to her to ask. It’s not like Steve and Dustin had any kind of relationship before other than his girlfriend’s brother’s friend.

“Steve came to the house looking for you. He had flowers - roses, Dustin said. I’m guessing he came to apologize.”

“He came to apologize - to me? I was the one that…” she trailed off.

“Yeah...so it seems like he’s not the one that’s bullshit, Nancy.” Mike's voice was unexpectedly soft and almost sympathetic.

She felt miserable. She had loved Steve in her way but she resented that he kept trying to move forward, that he couldn’t figure out how to help her mourn. He didn’t know Barb that well, she didn’t think he liked her but she had come as a package deal with Nancy and he liked her well enough to invite Barb in and not let Tommy and Carol shit all over her friend. So when he asked her to tell him she loved him, she thinks subconsciously she wanted to punish him for not being what she needed. And realized he probably wasn’t going to be. They handled things so differently and maybe weren’t meant to be together.

“I know,” she admitted.

“I just hope you treat Jonathan better. He deserves it, too.”

"He does,” she agreed, pushing her own doubts down about how she rushed things. Truthfully it probably was too soon but what was done was done. And while Steve might have been able to forgive her for her bullshit, Jonathan wouldn’t survive it. And she couldn’t do that. She’d made her choice and she’d have to live with that. She was beginning to recognize her own selfishness from the last couple of years: from pushing Barb to go to a party she had no interest in just to support Nancy and then Nancy just left her alone - to pushing her way into the funeral parlor to make Jonathan talk about photos while he was supposed to be picking out a casket for his little brother (who does that?). To not being there to help Mike while El was missing because she was too caught up in her own grief and guilt about Barb, to pretending for a year she loved Steve because she needed someone and he was there. He gave up so much for her but what had she given up for him? Only Jonathan, but only because he hadn’t moved fast enough for her. She settled for Steve and she knew it and then resented him for it.

Looking back, it hadn’t been fair. Clearly he loved her and she had, without realizing it, used him. And finally to almost making Jonathan miss his brother because she had to be sure justice was served. God, what if they had stayed away another night. Everything would have happened without them. Would they have succeeded anyways? Without Nancy and Jonathan? She was not liking the picture she saw of herself. She had always thought she was a good person but now she had doubts. She wanted to be a better person. She needed to be one. She was strong - she could do this. Barb would have been the first to say ‘you can be who you want to be’. And she wanted to be better - like Steve was becoming. He’d had no reason to help Dustin and he did. He’d had no reason to try to protect Lucas or Max and he did. She winced as she remembered chiding him with “You are such a cliche” and he still loved her. Turns out he wasn’t and maybe she had been.
She felt Mike’s hand on her knee, patting her. “We all make mistakes, Nancy. Just try not to make it too weird. I like Steve now. And I like Jonathan. Kind of. He’s a little odd, but he’s Will’s brother so I have to like him.”

“Got it. Make sure my love life doesn’t impact your party, That’s not selfish at all,” she said with a small smile in recognition of her own flaws. But he was right. She knew she could be strong and fearless but had made mistakes. It was time to rectify that. Starting with Steve. If nothing else, he needed to know that he was not a shitty boyfriend. He didn’t own that.

“You got it,” Mike said as stood to leave.

“So, have you heard from Eleven?” Nancy asked without even realizing she was going to ask.

“Only in letters. Hops at least letting us do that even if I can’t see or talk to her yet,” Mike replied. “He says he hopes he can loosen up on things soon but there are still safety issues.”

“And you’re ok with that? Wait - I thought he took you to see her a few days after everything?” She was confused. She knew Hopper had taken him out for a day. She had assumed it was to see El. Mike had seemed pretty upset afterwards but she assumed that it was just the stress of everything.

“Uh...no. He took me somewhere else...that I don’t want to talk about. Anyways - yeah I’m ok with waiting for little bit now that I at least know she’s ok.” Mike answered. “Anyways, hope your date goes okay, Friday.”

She felt a little better, if a little concerned about what Mike didn’t want to talk about. Mike didn’t hate her. Not more than usual. She wondered if Steve would feel the same way.

Mike got up to leave but before he did, she said, “Hey, if anything’s bothering you or you end up wanting to talk about...whatever it is you and Hopper did...you can talk to me ok?”

“Yeah, I will. Goodnight.” Mike closed the door behind him.

As she changed for bed, she noticed the picture of Steve and her from the jr prom last year on her bulletin board, almost lost behind some random notes and other photos tacked up over the year. It was the only she hadn’t taken down. She thought she should probably take it down before Jonathan noticed if he started sneaking into her room the way Steve had. She almost laughed at the imagined visual of Jonathan saying “like a ninja” as he tripped over his own feet. Steve may not be overly graceful, but Jonathan was even less. Neither one of them would ever win dancing awards.

Two bright, beaming faces looked back at her. She was wearing a pretty light blue slim-fitted gown with a sheer wrap and Steve wore a well-fitted tux with a dark blue cumberband, kerchief and bow tie to match her dress. He had even picked out a beautiful corsage to match. He’d wanted to be sure he complimented her outfit. Outside of mourning for Barb, she had been happy many times over the past year and that night was one of their finest. Mostly because Steve had gone out of his way to be sure she had a good time. Yeah, he was never a shitty boyfriend - just one that never understood how to handle Nancy’s grief. She gazed longingly at the photo and wondered if Jonathan would even want to go this year. Sure, they were both working the middle school’s Snow Ball in a couple of weeks, but she doubted they would even dance. It didn’t seem like something Jonathan would be interested in doing if he wasn’t working it. Plus, it was expensive. She knew Jonathan couldn’t afford tickets, let alone a tux or suit. And she was damn sure he’d be insulted if she suggested she pay at least half.
At least she had one prom under her belt. She could live without going to any other ones. She’d have to convince Jonathan it was not something she wanted to do if he actually questioned her about it. In the long run, those weren’t the important things. She and Jonathan could pack a late night picnic and watch the stars at Lovers’ Lake instead. She tucked the photo into her desk drawer after taking one last, long wistful look at Steve. He really was quite handsome. She hoped the ache inside her would ease up soon and that he too would find someone, ignoring the twinge of jealousy that was already flaring up at the thought of another woman’s hands on him. Of his hands touching another woman as tenderly as they once touched her.

Grrr! What the hell was wrong with her? She couldn’t do this to herself. She wanted to be with Jonathan - so why was she thinking of Steve? She couldn’t have both. She made her choice and she had to learn to live with it. She slammed the drawer shut and got into bed. She thought she might have trouble sleeping but within minutes of turning the lights out, she fell asleep.

Nancy woke in a start at 4:00 am, she could still feel the way Steve felt inside her as she rode him, could still see Billy as he held him down while Steve screamed. Other images were fading and she was grateful she couldn’t quite grasp what they were. It had been a haze of red and violence and sex that left her disturbed even without remembering the details. Some kind of piano music was playing in the background. It was a familiar tune but she couldn’t place it. Her skin was sweaty and she felt clammy and a little nauseous. She ran to the bathroom but kept herself from vomiting. She rinsed her face with water and went back to her room and realized there was a cool chill to the air.

Checking the windows, she found one was slightly opened. She quickly locked it shut and went to go back to bed when she noticed a fall leaf on her pillow. Even as she tried to reassure herself it just blew in the window, she decided not to go back to sleep. She was feeling too restless anyways, as if some kind of drug was moving through her veins. She went downstairs and turned the tv on and she found an old episode of Rat Patrol playing to take her mind off things.

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BILLY’S POV

Billy woke in a panic and a cold sweat. He didn’t know why ‘Moonlight Sonata’ was stuck in his head but it was an unlikely musical soundtrack to go with the images still staining his eyeballs of the Wheeler chick riding Harrington as Billy held him down, the thick feel of Steve’s shoulders under his hands as Billy held him down and eagerly watched their merging.

The surreal dream had changed Billy’s nails into long, sharp claws, sinking into Harrington’s skin as if he himself were also merging with him. He watched eagerly as she rode Harrington to completion and, as he screamed out an orgasm, she had raised her own clawed hand up and swiped into his vulnerable stomach and gutted him.

Billy then bit down into Harrington’s neck and the two of them fed off him, his blood tasting sweeter than anything he’d ever tasted. There was the oddest sensation of absorbing Harrington’s energy into himself, but he could also feel Wheeler inside his head as well as they all became one. It seemed like an eternity before Harrington’s heart stopped, his body convulsing the entire time until it was over. There was a trembling of energy that coursed throughout his body making Billy feel restless and charged before he and Nancy turned to each other and grinned through bloody teeth.

“That was fun. Let’s do it again,” Nancy said with a leer Billy thought he could never in a million years imagine on her face. He turned to look at Harrington who was now whole once again, with a
terrified look on his face as this time Billy took Nancy’s spot and rode Harrington until he was the one swiping through Harrington's stomach with his razor-sharp claws and then the whole thing repeated again in their original roles.

Billy stared at the ceiling, not knowing how to make the images go away. He felt an unrecognizable thrum flow through him, growing stronger and creating a yearning that Billy didn't understand.

Part of him was horrified to find he was half-hard under the sheets as the sensation of literally crawling under Harrington’s skin clung to him. The other part savored the exquisite taste of Harrington's blood that seemed to linger on his tongue.

Some part of him had always wondered if he was capable of extreme violence. If there was a possibility he could kill someone just by beating them to death for nothing but the sheer joy of it. He often worried about his own stability and how much his father had managed to fuck him up over the years. The fact that he was horrified by the dream images now gave him hope he wasn’t beyond redemption quite yet.

Chapter End Notes

Some of the key pieces of plot are starting to fall into place. And we learn Steve's a really good pianist (and a slightly above average athlete if only by Hawkins standards). Hope you enjoyed this!

FYI...I may be a bit harsh on Nancy but she and Steve will eventually work things out. I recognize that I have issues with how they dealt with her and Steve to make way for Jancy. Don't get me wrong. I don't dislike Janey. I actually think they are probably more well-suited to each other. Just how they did it left me feeling icky. I was probably the only person not cheering when they got together basically a day or two after Steve and Nancy broke up. Maybe that's because if you think someone loves you and find out they never really did, that's just an awful thing to go through and maybe I'm projecting. In my head, it needs more resolution to make it reasonable to believe that Steve could ever be friends with them after that. But I also try to remember they're teenagers and sometimes teenagers make decisions without considering all the consequences, particularly ones that have gone through trauma. I generally admire Nancy's intelligence and drive, just not some of her emotional decisions. Anyways - there won't be too much more navel-gazing into that except how it's driven by the plot.
Chapter 5 - Fixing Leaks

Chapter Summary

Nancy and Billy are a little tired from their sleepless nights and Jonathan is having some unsettling thoughts about them and things in general. Hopper asks Steve for a big favor while also learning something new about Steve.

Chapter Notes

OK - up front I said we'd get the lab public and on to Barb's funeral however this didn't happen as planned. This story is getting longer by the day!

A big note - I am updating the tags to include Asexual Will. He does develop a kind of a crush on Steve but it's not romantic exactly. For some who might see a bit of where this plot is going, just know that how Billy and Nancy are interpreting certain impulses, actions and visions are very different because it is based on their particular desires and history with Steve. Will's mind will NOT interpret the events in the same way because he does not think or desire along those lines. Jonathan however doesn't quite understand Will's sexuality so for now he will be thinking along the line of "Will likes boys" but he is an awesome and concerned older brother and will support Will no matter what.

I'm posting this now to be clear that in the future there may be some scenes of described sexuality between the older teens that seem like Will is present in some way or witnesses it - BUT HE IS NOT seeing quite the same thing. In his mind, he is not experiencing it the same way. Nothing like that happens in this chapter but I want to put that out there (and why there is no "underage tag" because that is NOT happening). Some events will viewed only through the lens of how the people themselves may interpret them. It's not how some things actually are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5 - Fixing Leaks

JONATHAN’S POV

“Are you ok?” Jonathan asked. Nancy had barely said good morning when she got into the car. She had only muttered half verbal responses to Jonathan’s attempt at conversation. Finally he decided to ask her something that might get her attention.

“Can Steve really fix faucets?” He was still perplexed by the thought of Steve being handy in any way.

“What? I can’t imagine but why are you asking?” She asked with another yawn, even if her eyes
widened at the odd question.

Jonathan explained Steve’s offer to his mother the previous day. “I mean - it’s cool I guess. I just
never pictured him being handy in any way but I can’t imagine he’d lie about it.”

“No, Steve wouldn’t lie. It’s not like we ever talked about that kind of stuff and I never saw him
do anything at his house but then...we didn’t spend that much time there.” She trailed off, clearly
thinking about something.

“You didn’t? I thought...you know with his parents gone a lot that maybe you…” Jonathan didn’t
know how to ask what he was asking without sounding like a jealous idiot. All he could remember
was how Steve and Nancy looked through Steve’s bedroom window and just imagined an entire
year of that.

“No...after Barb went missing...I just never felt that comfortable there. He usually came to my
house.”

Jonathan tried not to smile at the thought that maybe Steve had been cockblocked like he was, just
in a different way. Nancy seemed to misinterpret the smile.

“To study!” She was smacked his shoulder.

“Oh huh...to study.” Now Jonathan was laughing. He may be a jealous idiot but he wasn’t stupid. It
was clear that she and Steve had sex. He was no expert but Nancy was clearly more comfortable
with it than he was and she had to have learned it from somewhere. Maybe he should be grateful
since it kept them from both being completely clueless.

“You don’t have to hide it, Nancy. I know you and Steve...were together.” Jesus, he couldn’t even
say it out loud though. He feels like his face was burning up. He certainly enjoyed it but he was
still reluctant to discuss things in depth. Any conversations about sex they had were because Nancy
initiated them, although he made sure to pay attention and respond honestly to her. He wanted to
live up to her expectations.

He couldn’t help but occasionally wonder how he compared to Steve. Not physically so much. He
was pretty sure based on rumors that Steve had nothing to be embarrassed about in that department
but he knew enough that just because you had the equipment, you didn’t always know how to use
it. He wanted to be a fast learner but he also wanted to be better than Steve for Nancy. It may
sound ridiculous (and even to himself it did) but he couldn’t help but feel this was temporary and at
some point she would decide she preferred Steve. And he’s not sure if he would blame her. He
would never admit to the number of times he’d, without planning to, imagined how Steve and
Nancy were together or how sometimes he thought that was hot.

“Well, it doesn’t matter if we had been together. You and I are now together, Jonathan. You have
nothing to be jealous of,” Nancy reminded him and squeezed his knee.

“I’m not jealous,” Jonathan argued. And he almost thought he meant it but there were still some
lingering doubts. “I’m not even sure how we got here. I just wanted to know if he was handy.
Guess I’ll find out. Apparently he’s coming over this afternoon to fix the faucet for mom. I
just...think it’s weird. Why would he want to do that anyways?”

“I don’t know. I don’t recall him ever offering to help my parents out around the house. Why was
he there anyways?”

“Oh - he said he was dropping off a nail bat for me? That’s weird too, right? And it was new. Like
he just made it. But why is he doing that? We’ve never been friends. I mean we get along now -
but I would think he wouldn’t be too happy with me now.” Steve was a confusing subject for him.
He liked understanding where he stood with people and he couldn’t quite get a grasp on how he
and Steve were supposed to relate to each other. It seemed like some kind of tangled sailor’s knot
of mixed emotions.

Nancy shifted in her seat a bit. “Maybe it’s his way of showing he really is ok with you. And me.
Ok with us. I think...no I know he already knows about us. He didn’t call me at all the last couple
of weeks and he always called. I mean - yeah technically we broke up I think although we didn’t
really talk about it but just the fact he didn’t call means he knows we’re over. And he sent me with
you,” she said.

“With me? What do you mean?”

“That night. With you and your mom. I was going to stay with Mike and the kids. Steve had no
reason to stay and he’d already protected them once. I thought he...would want to leave. But he said
should go with you and he’d take care of them.”

So much had happened that he had never thought about. So many little details it had been hard to
keep track of everything. “Oh. Wow. I never really thought about it. Everything was so much at
that moment, it never occurred to me how it all happened. But...no I can’t imagine Steve would
leave in the middle of everything.” He was sure of that at least and he appreciated it. “I’m grateful
you were with us. We all got lucky.”

“Mmm,” Nancy hummed in agreement and then yawned. “Maybe he just wants to be friends with
you? It’s really just occurred to me that he doesn’t have many actual friends anymore. I doubt he
wants to reconcile with Tommy. Maybe he wants to be friends with someone who might be able to
understand everything. Shared trauma and all, wasn’t that what Murray said.” Nancy grinned
tiredly at him.

“With me? Doubt it. After all, he didn’t invite me for dinner. Only Will and Dustin got that
privilege,” Jonathan joked back. Although the thought didn’t surprise him as much as it should.
Now that he thought about it, she was right. Steve didn’t seem to have many friends. Sure
everyone had always been friendly with him, but he had mostly hung out with Tommy, Carol and
Nicole prior to dating Nancy. Everyone else just seemed to be acquaintances. And, Jonathan and
Nancy were the only people his age that knew about - well everything. It wouldn’t be that
surprising if Steve wanted to be friends with others in the know. Huh, he’d have to think about that.

“Invited to dinner? What do you mean?” Nancy asked, eyeing Jonathan.

Jonathan explained that Will went to Steve’s for dinner and that apparently Dustin had done it
several times. The fact that Will had been so excited that morning talking about how much fun he
had at Steve’s had left Jonathan feeling oddly left out - a feeling he was well familiar with.

“Will was at Steve’s last night?” Nancy asked, brows furrowed in concentration.

“I know. Weird, right? But he seemed to really enjoy himself so I guess it’s ok,” Jonathan said.
“Steve’s living up to that damn good babysitter aspiration he told you.”

“Huh, that’s interesting,” Nancy said, eyes closing as if concentrating on something. She pinched
the bridge of her nose and rubbed her eyes.

“Are you really ok?” Jonathan asked as they parked in the parking lot. It was only half full as it
was still early. They had planned to spend a little time in the library before class.
“Didn’t sleep well and have a bit of a headache,” Nancy replied. She yawned again and stretched as she stepped out of the car.

“Do you want to go get some coffee? We have a few minutes. There’s a 7/11 down the street or we can stop at McDonalds.” Jonathan was concerned with the deep circles under her eyes.

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea.” She got back into the car. “McDonalds it is. I’m actually craving some hash browns.”

“Grease and caffeine. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were hungover,” Jonathan joked.

“Yeah - I think I learned that lesson the hard way,” Nancy smiled wanly. “Remind me to never try anything labelled ‘Pure Fuel’ ever again.”

By the time they returned, it was cutting close to first period. Fortunately, most students were not early arrivals and there was still plenty of parking. Jonathan was able to pull back into the same spot.

Nancy got out of the car and put her coffee and purse onto the roof. After setting them down, she stretched and yawned again. Even though she looked tired, the way the dawning sun was hitting her face made her look soft and vulnerable and Jonathan loved it. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath of the chill air. He quietly got his camera out of the back seat and took a quick picture of her.

“Jonathan!” Nancy yelped when she realized it. She was looking less than her best but Jonathan thought she still looked adorable.

“What? I was told to take more candids for the newsletter and the yearbook,” he said with a smile.

“I don’t think they want photos of how bored we are before we even get to class,” she said with a smile. “Take some other people’s photos. Look, there’s Nicole and Carol.” The two redheads were standing closely together, shivering in the cold but laughing together about something. Jonathan could only imagine who the targets of their gossip were.

“I don’t think they want me taking their photo.” Jonathan grimaced, remembering the encounter from the previous year. He knew Nicole avoided being in the dark room with him anymore.

“Oh...right,” Nancy said, now sounding deflated.

“But, look there’s Sam Patterson. Is he peeing in the bushes?” Jonathan asked. Patterson was a typical stupid jock but even he should realize there’s a bathroom within 30 feet of the entrance.

Nancy looked and laughed. “No, he’s just dumping out a drink. Probably can’t see the bottle from your angle.”

Jonathan still took the shot because, sure enough, through the camera lens, it looked like he was peeing in the bush. It was funny even if it never saw the light of day.

While Nancy was getting her books out, Jonathan heard the distinct sound of Billy’s Camaro pulling in. He didn’t know Billy personally outside of the brief encounter at his house, but from all accounts, the guy was an ass. They hadn’t spoken at all since that night. Even so, Jonathan had his camera on him and took a photo as he got out of his car. He was about to say something to Nancy when she turned towards Billy. Jonathan lowered his camera as he noticed a flush creeping up her face. Good thing too, because Billy turned towards Nancy and the two of them stared at each other a beat longer than seemed normal. He was pretty sure Billy would try to beat him if he caught
Jonathan taking a photo without permission. Jonathan couldn’t afford another broken camera.

“Are you really ok?” Jonathan asked Nancy again. Third time’s the charm he thought to himself.

Nancy shook her head and faced him again. “It’s…it’s nothing. Just still trying to wake up I guess.” She started to gather her belongings and then paused again.

If Jonathan hadn’t been paying attention to Nancy and how she had been looking at Billy, he might have missed how they both turned at the same time towards another car pulling in.

Steve’s BMW pulled in and parked several spots away. Billy and Nancy froze in their spots and watched Steve Harrington get out of his car, get his books and race into the front door as if he were late. As soon as he was through the door, the first warning bell rang. Both Billy and Nancy shook their heads as if coming out of a daze and started walking briskly towards the school.

Jonathan felt a chill go up his spine. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right.

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The day went by normally. The other shoe never dropped and Jonathan felt a bit ridiculous that he had been wary at all. He had three classes with Nancy and only one with Billy but they both seemed ok, if a little tired. Well, Nancy more than Billy since Jonathan didn’t really know him. He’d only been in Hawkins less than a month. An eventful month, but only a month.

At lunch, Nancy asked him if he thought they should ask Steve to sit with them. He doubted Steve wanted to. He felt for the guy. Being on the outside sucked although the few times he had seen Steve during the day, he seemed in remarkably good spirits. He wasn’t sure if that was just Steve putting up a good front or not. Clearly he was still recovering and hadn’t won too many new friends since being back, but Jonathan hadn’t caught any incidents like he had the day before. Most people left him alone. Maybe that was enough for Steve to seem better. Maybe it had been the night before. He didn’t know details but Will had enthusiastically said he hoped he could go back to Steve’s again because he really enjoyed himself when his mom had asked. Jonathan felt a little odd seeing his little brother be so happy about spending time with Steve.

If Steve was going to be spending time or babysitting Will, maybe Jonathan should get to know him better. He already knew Steve wasn’t quite the jerk Jonathan had always thought, but he had never considered being friends with him. Maybe Nancy had a point. Although, even if Jonathan had never had a girlfriend before, he suspected if Nancy and he broke up, he wouldn’t want to go back to being just friends. And certainly not with her new boyfriend. He was beginning to really like Steve but he could understand if Steve didn’t want to spend time with them quite yet. Soon though, Jonathan thought he’d reach out to Steve and hope his hand didn’t get slapped away. He was hoping his theory as to why Steve might want to be friends held true.

“I think we need to give Steve a bit of space. He’s been through enough and...maybe we should talk to him privately first?” Jonathan half asked, half suggested.

Instead of answering, she just hummed as she watched Steve across the cafeteria. But it was a tune that Jonathan thought he knew. “What are you humming?” he asked as he took a bite of baked beans that were somehow deemed the appropriate vegetable to go with pizza by the cafeteria gods.

“What...oh I don’t know. I woke up with a tune in my head I can’t get out,” Nancy replied. She smiled at him and took his hand under the table.
Warmth flooded through Jonathan. He loved being the focus of her affections. “I hate when that happens because it’s always a song that sucks.”

“Wheeler, Byers,” Hargrove greeted them as he walked passed them and sat down across from Steve.

“Shit, that can’t be good,” Jonathan said under his breath and went to get up. Maybe Steve wouldn’t want to talk to Jonathan and Nancy, but he was sure Steve didn’t want to deal with Billy. He’d heard the rumors of shoulder checking, rough playing in basketball and the general dickishness Billy had towards Steve when Billy had first arrived. Even if they had had some sort of truce since that night, Jonathan didn’t think it would hold. He’d taken notice of how Billy had been staking his claim as Hawkins royalty.

Nancy held on to his hand. “Leave them. We’ll interfere if we’re needed. Maybe Billy’s going to try to be friends now.”

Jonathan doubted that but he stayed in his seat.

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**STEVE’S POV**

Steve had at least finished his pizza before being disturbed. He was feeling better than he had in days, except for the food which was disgusting. He looked up at the motion of someone sitting across from him.

“King Steve! How are you, buddy?!” Billy asked before reaching over and swiping the pudding cup off of Steve’s tray.

Steve looked around expecting to be surrounded by Billy’s other sycophants. He had already been collecting Steve’s old friends before their throw down, but with Steve missing two weeks, it was clear that Billy had finished it with a few exceptions. All of Steve former friends were now Team Billy. Not that Steve cared much. He just kept the mental countdown in his head of only six months to go and he was done. He was going to focus on grades, his sports, considering his future (whatever that might be) and enjoying time with his new friends even if they were middle schoolers. He had even managed to get a very short run in this morning per his coach’s advice. Not as far as he would have liked as his ribs were still a little on the achy side, and his legs felt tight but it was enough for now. He just appreciated that he seemed to be a fast healer.

“Just peachy, Hargrove,” Steve replied, grabbing the pudding cup back. He quickly spooned it into his mouth just to show Hargrove he couldn’t take his food. Instead, Billy just grinned at him and licked his lips. He then grabbed Steve’s milk carton and finished it off instead.

“Sorry. Growing boy gotta have some milk,” Billy said. He didn’t sound sorry at all.

“Growing to be a pain in my ass,” Steve muttered. Just that morning Billy had hip-checked him into his locker door after third period as he walked passed and yelled, “How’s the princess this morning?” Steve had clonked his head on the corner of the door. It didn’t break the skin, but he was annoyed all the same. In math, Billy sat behind him and kept poking his back through the class making it hard for Steve to pay attention.

“You ever going to tell me the entire truth of what happened in that freaky place,” Billy asked, leaning forward, legs stretching out under the table, resting too easily between Steve’s feet. What
was with the dude always trying to invade his space? “I mean - I know there were some kind of freaking monsters - but where did they come from? Who was that girl? How did she close whatever it was she closed?”

“Shhh...we can’t talk about it here. Has no one been to talk to you yet?” Steve asked while looking around nervously. Steve not only had to sign the forms the previous year when the government had found out about his small part of the events of ‘83, but they had revisited him in the hospital when he was alone to reiterate the serious consequences of discussing any of the recent events. Did they not know about Billy? Or Max?

“No. Haven’t seen any one of them since that night. Not even the freak and the bitch are talking to me.”

“I don’t mean them. And don’t call them that.” Steve said, almost reflexively.

Billy tilted his head and just stared at Steve which unnerved him. Steve finally whispered, “I mean the government. No one came to give you any warnings? Made you sign anything?”

“Nope.”

That stumped Steve. He knew he hadn’t mentioned Billy’s or Max’s participation. He kept his version of the story very brief on details, claiming extreme fatigue from injuries and pain killers. The agents hadn’t seemed particularly interested in his story anyways. No doubt demo dogs weren’t nearly as interesting as other parts of the puzzle but he had no idea who told what to whom.

“So what gives?” Billy asked again.

Steve decided not to worry about it for now. Maybe Billy and Max weren’t in the crosshairs at the moment and he’d just as soon keep it that way. “Max didn’t give you the scoop?”

“No. Not sure why. I’ve asked. Even threatened to break her new board. She just hides in her room and ignores me.” Billy didn’t look particularly put out by that.

“Maybe because you’re generally such a shitty person even your sister wants nothing to do with you,” Steve quipped.

“Step-sister,” Billy corrected, as if Steve cared about it. “And I’m hurt. I thought we were going to be besties now. I was ready to pinky swear and everything.” Then Billy just stared at him and smiled while he tried eating a few more bites.

Steve was unnerved by the sudden silence and stillness from that side of the table. It felt like he was studying Steve. Steve decided to end whatever the weirdness was that was Billy Hargrove. And just broke the silence. “Yeah, whatever. I’m leaving. Here, have a cookie,” Steve said and threw the stale sugar cookie at him in the hopes it would start a cease-fire. He went to get up from the table to get away. He had lost his appetite anyways. As he did so, Billy’s feet hooked behind Steve’s ankles and pulled forward, toppling Steve backwards off the bench and onto the floor.

It made just enough commotion that the cafeteria erupted in applause and laughter. Steve, not wanting to let Billy get the best of him, just jumped up and bowed to everyone. “Thank you, everyone. That’s the end of the show. Be sure to tip your waitress.”

He turned back and gave the finger to Billy who was howling with laughter. “One day, you will learn to plant those feet!” So much for a cease-fire.
He heard Jonathan ask if he was ok as he stormed past the two but he didn’t answer. It sucked his good mood was going straight down the toilet and he couldn’t deal with anymore drama. He only had three classes left, none of them with Billy so the day was looking up. Until he remembered he had to go pay for a parking ticket, pick up his tools then go over to the Byers later to fix the damn faucet. He guessed he’d probably end up seeing Jonathan anyways unless he was working. Why had he volunteered to do that?

He had tried to argue his way out of the parking ticket with Hopper when they went to pick up his car from “that” night at the junkyard. He was lucky they hadn’t towed it since they got there before the tow truck. Hopper had refused because he couldn’t come up with an “normal” explanation of why Steve’s car was there in the first place.

“Hey kid,” Hopper said, walking out of his office while Steve was handing cash to Flo. “You got a minute?”

“Uh, sure,” Steve said. Hopper had been nice to him but they weren’t exactly friends. Steve took his receipt from Flo and followed Hopper into his office. It was the first time he’d ever been in it. Seemed basic and a little cluttered, but Steve made his way to the desk and sat down across from Hopper.

“Everything ok, kid?” Hopper asked, lighting a cigarette. “Back at school yet?”

“Yeah? Guess things are ok,” Steve replied.

“I’m a little surprised I haven’t heard anything from your parents. Did they buy the cover story?” Hopper asked in a conversational tone that Steve was sure was a front for something else.

“Yeah - they did. They thought about grounding me for being out so late and being so reckless but since I was already out of school on medical grounds, they didn’t bother. Figured I learned my lesson well enough.”

“I’m assuming the bruises and injuries were enough for them to see you didn’t need any other punishment?”

“I guess.”

“Huh. So they didn’t have any other questions for me? For the doctors? Because I checked and Dr. Owens said they never followed up with him. And he said you showed up alone to have your stitches removed by your family doctor instead of following the protocols you were given.” Hopper was staring at him as if he could figure out some deep mystery about Steve.

Steve sort of remembered the name Dr. Owens as the one in charge at the lab although he had never met him. The people who had reviewed his “non disclosure agreement had told him all follow-ups had to be coordinated with Dr. Owens - even if the man himself had also been injured. Steve had ignored that part and just had his stitches removed by his family doctor who had received the false report about the bear attack from the hospital anyways. Some overzealous nurse had sent them before they could be intercepted he guessed. It wasn’t like Steve had revealed anything to his doctor.

“I forgot about that part actually. I was a little out of it when they went through their instructions. Dr. Pelger’s office called to check up on me after they received the hospital report. I just
scheduled the follow-up with them but they don’t know anything else either.” Steve hoped that reassured Hopper.

“Don’t worry. You’re not in trouble about that. But you know if anything “not normal” seems to happen, you do need to follow-up with Owens? They gave you his number for reason. You were bit by the demo dogs. In fact, I called you in here because Owens has asked to see you to do some follow-up blood work.” Hopper leaned back in his chair.

“Did something come up in the initial work?” Steve asked, worried now. They had taken some blood samples while he was still in the hospital just to verify nothing was wrong. He had never run any kind of fever nor had heard anything about bad test results so he assumed everything was ok.

“Not so far as I know but they wouldn’t necessarily tell me. Although, I think if it had, they’d have already put you in quarantine.”

Steve wasn’t sure that made him feel any better. Knowing they could just come and take him and hide him away. Logically, he could understand why that would be a precaution but it still made him uneasy. Would they even tell anyone or would Steve just go missing? He felt like he was feeling a little faint.

Hopper must have realized what Steve was thinking. “Owens assured me if that ever happened, he would tell me. I don’t trust the people from the lab but so far I trust Owens. I think he’s a man of his word. We just don’t want to be surprised like we were with Will.” He put his cigarette out.

“I thought Will was getting checkups though and they didn’t catch anything,” Steve said.

“Well, Will never said anything about vomiting up reptiles. Are you throwing up any unidentifiable creatures?”

“NO! Of course not.” Steve ran his hand through his hair.

“And I trust you’re smart enough to tell me if that were to happen?”

“Yes. I don’t want to go through anything like Will did. I will call if there are any issues.”

“Ok then. I think we’re square. So - in terms of the blood tests, Dr. Owens can come to your house this week but we need to be sure your parents aren’t around.”

“Sure. They’re travelling this week. It would have to be after school since I can’t really miss anymore classes,” Steve said.

“Your parents are gone again? Weren’t they gone when you were released from the hospital? Or are they still gone?” Hopper was looking at Steve curiously.

“They do a lot of business out of town,” Steve answered without really answering. A method he was very familiar with doing with nosey people.

“Steve, be honest. When was the last time you saw your parents? Did they even see your injuries?”

Steve hated these conversations. Whenever adults asked him about his parents, he always felt like they were moments away from having social services called. For crying out loud, Steve was turning 18 in the spring. It didn’t matter anymore. Which was good because Steve was a shitty liar to people he respected - and Hopper was one of the few he did.
He struggled for a second before finally deciding not to lie. “I don’t know. Early October I guess.” He was only guessing because he only saw them in passing. They had actually left for their fall tour after Labor Day but had stopped in for a weekend because the tour was near and they wanted to do a quick check-in along with a list of “fall/winter” maintenance tasks Steve needed to do. “But they check in by phone all the time and I always have enough money to cover anything,” he hurriedly added in the hopes the conversation would end.

“Jesus,” Hopper said in disbelief. “How long has that been going on?”

“Does it matter? I’m almost 18 now,” Steve said, getting a little worked up. No one had really noticed anything before except Tommy and Carol who, of course, loved having an empty place to play house in.

“I could charge them with child neglect, Steve.” Hopper had leaned forward and was looking earnestly at Steve. He appreciated the concern but there was no need for it. Hopper had better things to do.

“What good does it do now? I’m almost an adult. It’s not like I have any brothers or sisters. And...it would be embarrassing,” Steve added quietly.

“I don’t really care about embarrassing them.”

Steve stood and waved his arms around frantically. “I don’t mean them! I mean me! I don’t want to suddenly become a target of pity for the bored gossips of Hawkins because poor, lonely rich little boy Stevie never had parents that loved him! Christ, my reputation has already crashed this year. I’d never get through the rest of high school, let alone anything else with that hanging over my head. I just want to move on.” Steve shouted and then realized he said more than he had meant to.

And Hopper knew it, seeing the look of shock on his face. He held his hands up. “Fair enough, Steve. You certainly seem to have grown up well enough without them.”

There was a pregnant pause in the room while Steve gathered his thoughts, running his hands through his hair once again in his usual nervous habit. It was a tic he used to calm himself down. When Hopper didn’t say anything else, he was relieved. It seemed as if Hopper wasn’t going to pursue that topic.

After he calmed a bit, he decided to change the conversation. “By the way, it seems neither Billy nor Max hasn’t had to sign anything? You know anything about that?” Steve sat back down.

He was grateful the Hopper followed the change. “Well, no one knew of their involvement so I decided not to tell anyone. No need to entangle anyone else. Truthfully, those agreements are a joke. Kids can’t consent to sign them. They’re not legally binding. They were used as a scare tactic. I don’t appreciate that.”

“Oh...so since I was only 17 when I signed it, it’s not valid?”

“No. Although I don’t suggest you pushing that,” Hopper said with a grimace. “In fact, the real reason I called you in here is I need your help with Eleven.”

“I thought it was for the blood tests,” Steve said, in a confused tone.

“That too - but your girlfriend’s antics have finally caught up to us,” Hopper stated, looking pained.

“Uh...she’s not my girlfriend anymore...I don’t think at least,” Steve said quietly and looked down
at his hands.

Hopper just stared then shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. The Hawkins Post has started asking about the lab. Some agents stopped by and we had a long chat about what was going to happen. I’ve been told to expect some reporters from other media agencies soon to come into Hawkins and start noseying around.”

“So Barb’s parents...are they...?” Steve wasn’t sure how to ask about it.

“They’ll be told she died of a chemical asphyxiant that leaked from the lab.”

“Well, I guess that’s something then,” Steve said. “Nancy did what she said she wanted to do. She got some justice for her.” He wasn’t sure how he felt about any of it. On one hand, he was relieved that her parents would have answers - even if they were the wrong answers. But at least they’d be able to move on and not keep looking for their daughter.

“It is good. In many cases, parents never know. I can tell you from experience, it probably is harder never getting any kind of closure.”

Steve suddenly remembered Hopper’s daughter. He didn’t know the details but he was aware of the fact the he had once lost a daughter. No wonder he was so attached to El.

“Anyways, the reporters will be wanting to talk to me and I don’t want any of them to get any ideas of them following me. The mayor and I have already discussed a media briefing in the next couple of days when more details come together and Owens is sure that is when they will announce Barb’s death publicly.”

This was a lot for Steve to take in. He didn’t understand what his part in this was supposed to be.

“I need your help hiding El for a few days just in case. And I need you to give Nancy a heads up. I just talked to Joyce, so she’ll tell Jonathan.”

“I, uh, I’m sure Jonathan will tell her. Pretty sure they’re dating now.” Steve didn’t mean for it to come out as bitter as it did.

“What? When did that...nevermind. Sorry about that but I don’t have time for teenage drama. I still need help with El. If your parents aren’t home, could she stay with you for a few days?”

“Yeah, I guess...but why not with the Byers?” Steve was thinking this was really an odd request. He barely knew El. How comfortable was she going to be staying with Steve? And Steve wasn’t used to people around, particularly not kids. Although, knowing how Hopper felt about her, Steve felt proud that the man would trust him with such a responsibility even if Steve wasn’t his first choice.

“I’m a little paranoid that reporters may find more than one interesting story in Hawkins. If they dig too deep, they may decide a story about a missing boy, first found dead and then found alive is too juicy. We got lucky no one ever asked too much about that. Plus, we know the government is keeping tabs on the Byers so they are a risk for El. You should probably avoid them for a bit as well. As much as the agents keep tabs on us, they haven’t learned about her yet and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Uh okay. I guess I can watch her if she’s okay with it. “Yeah...I guess I can make sure the guest room is ready. Should I get anything special for her? Also, I should tell you I was at the Byers yesterday and I’m going over there to fix their faucet later today,” Steve said. “It may be too late if they’re watching the Byers.”
He swore Hopper looked at him as if he were an alien. Steve had the brief thought that Hopper might actually say, “Who are you and what have you done with Steve Harrington?” And it would have been said with the tone of surprise that he’s come to expect from everyone who has no expectations that Steve is capable of much of anything.

He didn’t. Instead he said, “OK. Wasn’t expecting that. You haven’t spoken about El while you were there have you?”

“Uh no. She’s never really come up in our conversations.”

“Good. Just keep it that way. No harm done since they already know about you I guess.”

Probably best not to talk about Billy or Max either. Try to follow your normal routine. Pretty sure agents are still in town keeping an eye on all of us as well. So no one else should come over - particularly the kids.”

“Uh...Dustin comes over regularly already now. That’s going to seem weird if he doesn’t.”

Hopper thought for a bit. After a minute he finally said, “Yeah, ok. I think he’d be ok. But he needs to keep his mouth shut. Lucas could come over too. But no Max since they aren’t aware of her at this point. And really no Will or Mike. If anyone does accidentally see he, claim she’s a cousin that’s visiting.”

As Steve was driving back to his house, after picking up a few groceries in anticipation of his house guest, he noticed a shiny black sedan sitting in the Holland’s driveway and two men in dark suits on their doorstep. As he noticed the door opening, he half-wanted to pull in to be there for Barb’s mother when they gave her the news her daughter wasn’t coming home. He was so close to it until his voice reminded him he needed to stay under the radar for El. The voice sounded suspiciously like Hopper so he kept driving to pick up his tools before going to the Byers.

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**JONATHAN’S POV**

It had been a long, but almost pleasant afternoon with Nancy. She had been a little worked up since she had noticed a black sedan in Barb’s driveway. As far as Nancy knew, none of Barb’s relatives had a car like it. She had asked if Jonathan thought they should stop but he didn’t think that was a smart idea. If it wasn’t anything about Barb, they’d just be interrupting a family matter. If it was, odds were someone would figure out it was Nancy and Jonathan that had sent the information and that put both of their families at risk.

Reluctantly Nancy agreed. She had to get home anyways. Her mother was expecting Nancy’s help with Holly since Mrs. Wheeler was going to a book club meeting and Jonathan had to get home to watch Will.

He saw the BMW in the drive and made sure not to block Steve in. He shouldn’t be surprised that Steve kept his word but he still was. He walked in to see Steve’s long legs stretched across the kitchen floor and his head under the sink as Will stood by him asking questions.

“How, I think that’s it. Will, turn on the faucet now.” Steve’s voice echoed just a little. Jonathan watched as Will reached over and turned the water on. Water flowed freely so Jonathan at least knew Steve hadn’t broken anything.

“OK, turn it off and see if it drips like it was doing.”
Will complied and watched for a few seconds. “I don’t see anything.”

“Crap. I see a small leak under here, too. I think this is just loose. Can you hand me the wrench?”

Jonathan sat his books down and then walked over to see Will trying to find the wrench. He finally got it and handed to Steve who had one hand held out for it.

Jonathan was smiling at the scene until he noticed Will staring at Steve’s waist where he shirt was now rutched as he was reaching for whatever he was he was fixing. Will’s gaze fixed on the scars of the bite marks from the demo dog that had bitten Steve. Jonathan could see they were healing well but the red still stood out on Steve’s lean waist. Was that only two weeks ago?

Jonathan wondered if Will was still feeling guilty. He had confessed to having nightmares about those men that died and how it had been his fault for luring them there. But he had also confessed the real reason he felt guilty was not because he caused their deaths so much as because he had lured them away from Dustin, Lucas, Max, Steve and Billy at the junkyard and he was happy that the soldiers died and not his friends. He had wondered if that made him a bad person to feel that way. Of course Jonathan reassured him that Will was the farthest thing from a bad person.

He saw too late Will reaching down to press into the scars littering Steve’s waist followed by a, “Hey! OW!” as Steve startled and apparently hit his head from the shock of the unexpected and probably somewhat painful touch.

“SORRY! SORRY!” Will shouted and backed off quickly.

Steve slid out, rubbing his head. “Hey, it’s okay. Will. You just surprised me. Did you need something?” He was rubbing his side where Will had touched him.

“No...I just. I hadn’t seen those scars before. You really...you really could have died.” Jonathan’s heart broke at Will’s shaky voice. “Like Bob.”

“Hey, hey...but I didn’t. I’m ok. You’re ok, Will.” Will threw his arms around Steve and hugged him tightly and Jonathan could hear him sobbing. Steve shushed and smoothed his hand down Will’s back. If Jonathan wasn’t so worried about his brother, he would have been touched by Steve’s concern.

After a minute, Steve looked up and noticed Jonathan. He mouthed, “I’m sorry.” Then whispered to Will who turned to see Jonathan there. Blushing furiously, Will got up and backed away from Steve, trying to stop his tears.

“OK, I’m going to finish fixing this and then we’ll get some ice cream, ok?” Steve asked in a soft voice.

Will nodded but ran out of the room into his own room, clearly embarrassed.

Steve and Jonathan both looked towards the closed door. Steve sighed.

“I’ll go check on him,” Jonathan said.

“Ok. I’m almost done here. Can you tell him and your Mom I can’t stay for dinner? Something’s come up.”

“Sure.” Jonathan turned to go but thought better of it. “Steve?”

“Yeah?”
“Thank you.”

“No worries. I don’t mind helping.”

“And I don’t just mean the faucet,” Jonathan added.

“I know,” Steve said with a smile and then tucked back under the sink.

Jonathan knocked softly on the door and opened it gently when he heard a quiet “come in.” Will was sitting at his desk, his back hunched over.

“You okay, buddy?” It really was his question of the day.

“Yes. It’s just. He must hate me.”

Jonathan walked over and crouched down to look at him. “No, why would you think that?”

“He has all those scars now. I know he probably has some on his legs. And some of them are my fault. They probably hurt and girls will think they’re ugly.”

“No, they aren’t your fault. We’ve talked about this. If anything, you helped save him. And he helped save you so you’re even. I don’t think there’s anything to worry about. I’m sure Steve will still be able to get girls just fine,” Jonathan said with a grin.

“Yeah, he is still pretty I guess,” Will said with a shy smile. “You’re sure he doesn’t hate me?”

Jonathan frowned a bit. It’s not like he wasn’t aware that maybe Will might prefer boys or even that Steve was, objectively speaking of course (as Billy Hargrove seemed to announce all the time - and how there aren’t rumors about that guy’s preferences is beyond him). Now was not the time to address it though. “Well I’m pretty sure he’s out there fixing the sink because of you. It certainly isn’t because of me.”

Will turned to look at him, his eyes furrowed. “Do you not like him?”

“It’s complicated. Steve and I well...we haven’t always gotten along too well. But he seems to have really changed.”

“And then you stole his girlfriend after beating him up last year,” Will stated bluntly. Jonathan thought he almost sounded angry about it.

“It’s not that simple either,” Jonathan said without knowing how to explain the intricacies of what happened between all of them.

“I know. He kind of bullied you a little before, right? I mean - not like Troy or anything - but he wasn’t as nice to you as he is to me.”

“I think we were both at fault but we’ve both changed. I’d like to think that’s all behind us. That we’re all friends now.”

There was a knock at the door. “I’m finished. Do you want that ice cream?” Steve asked from behind the door.

Will leapt up, suddenly seeming happier and opened the door to join Steve for some ice cream. Jonathan looked at Will’s desk and noticed a new drawing Will had done earlier. Steve’s face surrounded by musical notes. He sighed. He really hoped Will didn’t nurse that crush he seemed to be developing for Steve for too long. That was just something Jonathan wasn’t sure he was
So - this story is getting long and I know it's taking some time to get to more plot. Hopefully you are enjoying the very slow build. I do know the general plot points and generally how I will be getting there but I want this to cover some time and I like spending "normal" time with Steve, hence the pacing. I should mention though that this is the last of the story I have written up to. I hope to continue a weekly posting but now I will be writing it as I go so forgive me if I end up being a few days late moving forward. Next chapter will have El joining Steve and getting to know Penny. I hope to also cover Barb's funeral at that point and start covering the media coverage of the lab leak and prepping for the Snow Ball.
I'd appreciate any hellos or comments if you are enjoying the story!
Chapter 6 - Things Feel Almost Normal, Don’t They?

Chapter Summary

Steve gets a house guest, Nancy and Billy have an unexpected encounter and Jonathan is worried about Will, again.

Chapter Notes

OK...so that bit where I said I’d have the lab reveal and Barb's funeral. I lied. Again. Sorry - I got sidetracked on another part of the story. So I won't promise it again. I'll get there when I get there. I seem to be enjoying some of the just day to day stuff here and so very slowly adding plot. I believe this may end up being the longest story I ever wrote. Hope that's okay with all of you!

Adding warning: Probably a bad (if brief) French translation. Also a little Billy/Nancy but not entirely Billy/Nancy if you get it? And nothing too extreme. Although skip Billy's POV if that kind of thing bothers you. I will sum up in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6 - Things Feel Almost Normal, Don’t They?

STEVE’S POV

Steve didn’t stay long after Jonathan, Will and he had finished off the tub of strawberry ice cream in the Byers’ refrigerator. He felt bad that he had to tell Will no when the boy asked to come over again. He felt even worse lying about how his parents were home so Will shouldn’t just show up like he had the day before. He was trying to accommodate Hopper’s wishes about not speaking about Eleven but lying to those big brown eyes was hard.

Hopper and Eleven were supposed to be there around 8:30. Dark enough to conceal but early enough to not have neighbors being nosy about late night guests. Mostly Eleven. The plan was Hopper would drop her off a block down then watch to make sure she made her way into Steve’s backyard where the door would be open for her. As Steve always left the backyard lights on now, the porch light would not seem odd to any casual observer.

He wasn’t sure if she would have eaten dinner before they came or not so he wanted to be sure there was something for her to eat without making a big meal. There was still a little lasagna left over from the night before or, new to Steve’s freezer, a box of Eggos.

Fresh sheets and towels were put for her and he made sure the guest room was ready but he wasn’t sure what else to do with himself. How does one entertain a child you didn’t know well? Particularly one that could potentially snap your neck with a thought if she you deserved it.
He’d picked up a few movies before stopping at the grocery store and still had the movie that he and Dustin hadn’t watched yet.

Steve was unloading the dishes when he heard a small squeak and then jumped at the “Hello, Steve.” The tone was flat and soft. She stood just behind him, her hair in lazy curls rather than the slicked back look from the night he met her. Her eyes were dark, but it looked like from exhaustion rather than smeared eyeliner. She wore baggy jeans and a bulky sweater under an oversized coat and carried two small suitcases.

“Jesus, you scared me,” he said.

“Sorry.” She looked wary and Steve felt guilty. He probably her as much as she did him, but for different reasons. She probably trusted few people, and almost none of them were adults except Hopper and Joyce. She knew Jonathan and Nancy too, but had never had much to do with them. She may only trust them because of Will and Mike. Steve - well he had no connections like that.

He thought, based on the look she was giving him, that the only reason she was here was because Hopper was putting his faith in Steve.

“So, hi. I guess this is a little weird, huh?” Steve said with a smile. “I mean. I know you barely know me but I hope we can be friends.” He held out his hand in the hopes it would seem reassuring.

“Mike doesn’t like you.”

Well, that was blunt. Not surprising but blunt.

“Ok. Yeah, he never really has, I guess.” Steve ran the hand that had been held out through his hair and laughed nervously.

“But you helped him. And Dustin and Lucas seem to like you so I guess it’s ok.” She held out her hand.

That was not the vote of confidence he wanted, but he’d take it. Steve shook it twice then backed off. “Do you want to take your things to your room now or would you like something to drink or eat.”

She looked around, her eyes widening at the kitchen as if she was just now taking it in. “It’s big.”

Considering she lived in a cabin with Hopper and maybe only ever saw Wheeler’s house inside, he guessed it would seem big to her. Sometimes, on long, dark nights or days when he had to clean everything, it seemed that way to him but mostly it was just home to him.

“Let’s take your stuff upstairs.” He picked up both suitcases and led the way. The guest room was not large by any means but still had a Queen sized bed and a full dresser set, like anyone was planning to stay that long. It also had its own bathroom. The curtains and bedding were a matching pastel sea of abstract horror to Steve - blues, pinks, peaches and greens fought for dominance and left splattered stains across a white battlefield. The remaining furniture was bleached blond and a fake floral arrangement dominated the mirror on the largest dresser. Two nightstands held matching glass lamps and one also held a glass water carafe hand-painted with painted daisies.

He sat one suitcase on the luggage rack he had pulled out of the closet earlier. “If you want, you can unpack into the dressers or use the closet.” He walked towards the bathroom and waved towards it. “I put clean towels out for you. I wasn’t sure what kind of soap or shampoo you used so
I just put my mom’s in there. Hopefully that’s ok?” When she didn’t respond, he added, “Why don’t I let you settle in. You can come downstairs when you’re ready and I’ll make some hot chocolate and something for you to eat if you’re hungry.”

Eleven looked around, seeming a little lost. “This...is mine?”

“Uhm, yeah? For as long as you’re here.”

“Pretty.”

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He had debating about starting a fire in the den but it was getting late so he opted to skip it. Instead, he sat in the kitchen and worked on his homework until Eleven came downstairs.

“You ready for some hot chocolate, Eleven?”

“El.”

“Oh, sorry. El it is then. I like that.” He smiled at her. He got up and started putting the water on for hot chocolate. Sometimes, when he was feeling ambitious, he would make it the old fashioned way, but for tonight Swiss Miss instant with marshmallows would have to suffice.

“Are you hungry? Did you have dinner?”

“Hopper made dinner.”

“Ok. You want some cookies then? I just picked some up.” The Big Buy bakery wasn’t the best but, like pizza, even bad chocolate chip cookies were good chocolate chip cookies. At least they were better than Chips Ahoy. And who the hell named something with Ahoy in it? Were they pirate cookies?

“Ok.”

El was looking at Steve’s homework when he brought everything over.

“What is this?”

“Homework.” He pushed it to the side. He was almost done anyways.

“Home...work? What is homework?”

Steve remembered she had never gone to school. He assumed Hopper had done something about educating her over the last year though. He wondered what the long term plan for her was. Hopper couldn’t just hide her for forever. She was clearly already chomping at the bit to get to see the world.

“It’s extra work that you do after school Your teacher assigns it. You know what school is, right?”

“Yes. I’m not stupid,” she glared at him.

He held his hands up. He realized he stepped in a hornets nest. She must feel sensitive about knowing so little of the world but it wasn’t her fault. He crossed his fingers that he answered this right. “No, of course not. No one who’s been able to do what you’ve done could be stupid. You
just...haven’t had a chance to experience the same things most of the rest of us have so you may be uninformed but you’re certainly not stupid.”

She squinted at him as if to see if she could tell if he was lying. For all he knew, she could. No one had ever given him more than the briefest run down of the girl in front of him. He knew she was from the lab and had the power to move things with her mind. That’s how she had killed the demo dogs that had been bent on attacking the house and how she had closed the gate. From Nancy he had known that she and Mike were close which is why he’d been so mopey all year. Steve hadn’t know Mike that well before everything so he didn’t really know if he was usually like that or not but Nancy had told him she thought he was depressed. Now Steve realized that Nancy had been too but hadn’t ever really understood what that meant.

And that was about it other than she had been hiding with Hopper for the last year and Hopper had told no one. Steve wasn’t sure that had been the right decision but what did he know? He was tits over ass in this and sometimes had no idea what was going on. He just sort of tagged along at the last moment, did whatever he did and then left again.

She settled for looking more closely at his book. “But what is this? I don’t understand it.”

“It’s French. I have to read about Bastille Day - it’s a holiday in France. I have to read about it in French and then answer questions about it, also in French.” He wasn’t sure how much she knew about the world but also didn’t want to insult her. “It’s another language.”

“Another language?” She took a bite of her cookie.

“They speak it in France...and I guess - Canada? So, like this passage in English says “Bastille Day or what the French call La Fête Nationale was officially recognized as a national holiday on July 6, 1880. In French it sounds like ‘La Fête Nationale est officiellement reconnue fête nationale le 6 juillet 1880.’”

“Pretty. I heard someone speak something other than English once but it didn’t sound anything like that. It sounded rough.” She sipped her hot chocolate.

“Oh...well there are a lot of languages in the world. Many countries have their own language. In school you can choose to learn something other than English. Maybe you heard German? They teach that at school, too. I chose French although I could have taken Spanish as well. My mother speaks both.” He decided he’d rather understand his mother when she was waxing poetic about music or art sober than drunk screaming about his dad in Spanish.

“You have a mother?” El asked, looking around.

“Yes. She’s not here, though so don’t be nervous.”

El sat her drink down and looked at him with wide, sad eyes. “She’s gone? She left?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. I thought my mom was gone too...but I found her. The bad men hurt her. I wanted to stay but had to come back.”

Steve didn’t know what to make of that. He had gathered that El had run off somewhere at some point. Maybe it was to find her. He felt like he was three steps behind everyone on the full story. Next time he saw Dustin, he was going to ask him for all the details.

“Well, I know we are all glad you did. And maybe you’ll get to see her again soon.” And actually,
Steve thought that might be a good idea. He wondered where she was. She couldn’t be too far or El would have never gotten there but it was also clear she wasn’t in Hawkins. He knew Hopper wanted her to stay inside to be safe, but maybe the better idea was to get her out of town altogether. At least for the weekend. He’d swing by the station for a quick chat after school the next day. Or maybe he should call? Which way was most likely to draw unwanted attention? Maybe he shouldn’t say anything at all. They could just go and he could leave a note? Eh...he really wished he knew Morse code now. Except government agents would know that as well, right. Damn this was hard.

“Soon.” She said flatly, looking cross with him.

“Yeah...ok. Anyways. How are the cookies? Good.”

“Yes. I like them.”

They finished eating in silence until he looked at the clock. It was going on 9:15.

“Do you have a bedtime? Or do you want to watch some tv?” Steve picked up the empty dishes to rinse them off and put them in the dishwasher. He had no idea if kids her age had bedtimes. He never did. As long as he was quiet and never missed school because he stayed up too late, his parents never cared when he was younger and they aren’t around much to know now.

“You have a tv?” She asked, looking happy for the first time since she got there.

“Sure. It’s downstairs. You want a soda to take down with you?”

“Ok.” El was now giving him a shy smile as he pulled out a can of 7-UP for her. He grabbed one for himself along with his homework. He could finish it while watching whatever El chose to watch.

They ended up settling for Riptide. Typical detective, mystery show that Steve enjoyed when he saw it but could tune out easily enough. El had been impressed with how large and clear the tv was. She hadn’t seen the show before, saying the cabin’s tv didn’t get great reception and only about two channels. Steve sort of thought maybe she had never seen it because Hopper wouldn’t either let her stay up late to watch it or didn’t think it was appropriate for her but as he left Steve with no guidance, he left her watch it. At some point he’d probably show her MTV but since he had to do his homework, he didn’t want it on. Music was sometimes too distracting as he found himself analyzing it - even popular songs. Mindless tv drama was the best background noise for his homework. It was followed by Remington Steele so Steve was more than happy to allow El to keep watching. That was a show he enjoyed.

At 11:00 though he decided they probably should go to bed. El didn’t argue and she seemed fairly content with being there now that she knew there was a big screen tv. Which was good since she’d be stuck in the house while Steve was at school.

He put fresh water in the carafe for her while she was in her bathroom changing into her pajamas and brushing her teeth. She was already in bed when he came back from the kitchen with it.

“Ok. My room is just across the hall if you need anything. I’ll leave the door slightly open so you know which one it is.”

“Ok...um...”

“Did you need anything else?” he asked as he stood by the door.
“Hopper reads to me. Before sleeping.”

Oh. Steve guessed he could do that. “Did you bring a book?”

“No.”

“Hmmnn...I’ll have to go find something. Can you give me a minute?” He sounded calm but inside he was panicking. He had no idea what a regular thirteen year old girl would read let alone someone like El. Plus, it’s not like Steve was a big reader. He assumed the romance novels that his mother hid in her nightstand were not appropriate. His father’s study probably had a bunch of classic literature which had the potential to bore El to sleep. Certainly The Old Man and The Sea always did that for him. He could pull out his own Wuthering Heights from class - but that seemed like cruel and unusual punishment for himself. He suddenly remembered he had several books tucked away from when his mother was trying to encourage him to read more as a young boy. He didn’t love them, but they didn’t suck too bad on a rainy afternoon. He had to think where they were boxed up at.

It took a few minutes to dig the box out from the basement storage closet but soon El was being introduced to the adventures of Frank and Joe Hardy and a Mysterious Caravan.

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**BILLY’S POV**

Billy was feeling restless. He was driving around town aimlessly after dropping Max off at the house and eating a less than happy meal at home. But he counted the fact that there were no new bruises to show as a win. If he noticed the number of times he had driven passed a large house with a heated pool in the backyard, he didn’t admit it to himself. If his heart raced just a little faster when a certain BMW finally appeared on said driveway, he also didn’t admit it to himself. He was just restless. It’s why he also found himself driving past the Byers place and, what he learned was the Wheelers abode when he saw Mike Wheeler arguing with his dad in their garage, several times. And why he was now parked outside of a large building that he now knew was called by a small group of people “The Lab.”

He was far enough away to not be seen by the large number of people that seem to be moving around inside and the trucks parked just outside the dock entrances. It was also dark enough that he couldn’t be seen by someone that was clearly also watching the lab. The slight figure was crouched by a tree. He made sure to turn the radio down in order to not be caught observing. Metallica was hurting his head anyways. He wanted to see who it was hiding there and what was going on. Hawkins was proving to be a far more interesting place than he ever suspected it was going to be.

He looked at his watch. It was now going on 9:00. As long as he was home by 10:00 on a school night, his dad wouldn’t pitch a fit. His nerves were lit up even stronger now. There was a thrum of energy pulsing through him. He slowly crept up behind the figure who was so intent on watching the lab, she never heard him.

It was definitely a she. Nancy Wheeler - former nerd turned Queen of Hawkins High when she roped Harrington into her circle then kept the crown as she usurped his throne. He was impressed. Not many people could do that. Plus, she was badass to boot the way she held a rifle and took charge of things. Yes - if Billy actually like women, she would be an interesting diversion. He could see why Steve liked her.
“Watcha lookin’ at?” He had whispered it close to her ear and, as expected, she jumped and let out a small shriek. Lucky for them the noise of one of the trucks kept them from being heard.

“What?!” She looked startled and a little lost. Her eyebrows furrowed in what seemed to be confusion, eyes wide looking at Billy. “Uh...Billy?”

He grinned at her. “That’s right. Good to see you haven’t forgotten me.”

She looked around nervously. “What’s going on?”

“That’s what I was wondering.” He looked up at the lab and the commotion going on. “Assuming this is the same place as you guys had your little showdown, I’m guessing there’s a big clean-up going on.”

She turned to look at the lab and then started muttering. “No...no, they can’t do this. They can’t just DO THIS! They’re just going to get away…” She started marching towards the building.

Billy ran up and grabbed her arm. “What are you going to do? Going in there and just start throwing some punches with your little fists? Or kick them in your…” and he realized as he looked down that she had no shoes on. “Where are your shoes?” He was dumbstruck. Normally he wouldn’t care but suddenly he was feeling odd about why he was out here. “How did you get here? Where’s your little boy toy?”

She looked down at the hand holding her arm and then looked coolly at him. Her eyes seemed a little darker than usual, but it was hard to tell in the dark. She was studying his face. “Why? You jealous.”

“Yeah...no, you’re not exactly my type brainiac.” And she wasn’t. Too thin, too sharp and too...female.

“I don’t mean of him. I mean of me. You want him, don’t you? And I’ve had him. You’re jealous. I like that feeling.”

Billy dropped her arm like it was on fire. “I ain’t no queer! What the hell? What the hell do you see in him, anyways? Byers is a skinny, awkward freak.”

“Wasn’t talking about Jonathan. You want Steve.”

Billy backed up further, grateful the darkness hid the blush coloring his face. But she followed him. Stepped into his space. Her eyes were black.

“Yes, I’ve had him. This body has felt him and he made it feel good. So good. So...talented. His hands. His fingers. He’s made others feel good - so very good.” She started sliding her hands across her chest. “It tingled and thrummed and shook. The memory is nothing like anything else I’ve had. I want more. Don’t you? Don’t you want to feel how he can make you feel?”

Billy was frozen. He’d never been called out like that but he couldn’t deny the desire he felt. Not to himself at least but he sure as hell was going to deny it to anyone else. “What the fuck you going on about, bitch?”

“We could have him. Together. He loves this body. We can make him make us feel good. And we could make him pay for what he did to us. We hate him but we want him. We can make him ours and make him suffer.” Her voice sounded husky, deeper and Billy couldn’t deny the appeal of making at least a portion of the dreams he’d been having come true but he was sensing she wanted all of it. The pleasure along with the pain she inflicted on Harrington in his dreams.
He was feeling a bit freaked out. “I, uh...you’re crazy. What did he do to you? You left him remember. You hurt him. Why are you so bent out of shape. He’s so pussy-whipped he’d probably take you back just for the asking. And why would you want me there? This a little kink you got going on? Jonathan refuse your idea of a threesome?”

She blinked at him in confusion for a second. “Jonathan?” she asked weakly and looked around again. “Where am I? How did I...I was doing homework on my bed. How did I end up here?”

Now she’s really lost it. The bitch lost her mind. Billy wasn’t sure what the hell was going on but he knew she was about to get hypothermia in this could in only her sock feet and no coat. He wasn’t sure why that registered now, but he was also getting cold even if he felt no need to get out of it quite yet. It actually felt pretty good. Still he needed to get away from crazy pants.

“I think I should take you home,” Billy said, unaccustomed to being helpful.

“Billy?”

“Yes, sweetheart. It’s Billy and it’s time to go.” It sounded sweeter than Billy had intended it. He led her towards the car.

She looked back at the lab and just said, “Damn it. They’re going to cover this up again, aren’t they? Just pretend like Barb isn’t dead. Like they didn’t kill her.”

“Again?” Billy asked. “Who’s Barb?”

She glanced at him, looking somewhere between sad, guilty and furious. “Nevermind. I’ll get them later.”

He didn’t doubt it. If nothing else, her crazy seemed to scream revenge about something. “OK. Yes, let’s get them later. For now get in the car. And for the record, I think you need a shrink or something.”

“No.” She was very stern. Her eyes glazed over again. “No doctors.”

“Ok. No doctors.” Billy rolled his eyes.

“And forget this conversation. We’re not ready yet. Not strong enough.”

“Are you sure about no doctors?” Billy huffed because he knew she needed one. For a little thing, she was starting to scare him. She was straight up bonkers, but as he was his own kind of crazy, it wasn’t his business. He just didn’t her to freeze to death. Mostly because he didn’t want to risk being accused of anything. With the way his luck had been running lately, someone saw the Camaro pull in here and, if her frozen corpse was found nearby, he’d be blamed even though it was clear she had walked out here on her own.

She grabbed him and before Billy knew it, Nancy Wheeler’s tongue was in his mouth and she was kissing him as if she was sucking his soul out. And all he could think of was how he wished it was Steve instead creating the curl of intense energy that passed between them. Images, memories of her felt like they were flooding into him. It was a rush of anger, despair, need, desire and arousal grew within him. At the same time, his own memories of cornering Steve on the court, in the locker room, in the showers - at the Byers flashed forward into his mind. His knees buckled as he started to collapse. He heard her voice in a low pitch say, ‘Yes, we want have him and he will give us what we want. Everything we want. But we are not ready yet.”

When he woke the next morning, he felt like he had a hangover. He wasn’t sure he didn’t. He
couldn’t quite remember what happened the night before. He vaguely remembered driving around for a while. Maybe he ended up drinking at the quarry. He only remembered some more unsettling dreams about Harrington and Wheeler. And his stomach felt like they were filled with butterflies on cocaine.

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*STEVE’S POV*

Steve was in the kitchen getting breakfast together for El and getting some fresh food for Penny when El walked in, still in flannel pajamas and wiping the sleep from her eyes.

“You sleep ok?”

“Yes. The bed is very soft.” She jumped up on one of the chairs at the kitchen island instead of at the table. Steve was ok with that. He normally ate there when he was alone as well.

“You want cereal, eggs...or let me guess - Eggos?” Steve asked with a smile. He was already dressed for school, wanting to not run late in case El needed anything extra before he left.

“Cereal?” She looked at the box he was holding.

“Steve laughed. “No...not this. This is cat food.”

‘Why are you eating cat food?’ El asked, seriously.

Steve laughed harder. “It’s not for me. It’s for Penny. My cat.”

“You have a cat?”

Steve couldn’t translate the look on her face. She seemed concerned. “Yeah. She’s around here somewhere. She doesn’t like strangers so don’t be surprised if you don’t see her much.” He looked around but sure enough she hadn’t come out, even with the sound of Meow Mix being poured. “She’ll probably hide under my bed most of the day.”

“Oh...”

“Do you not like cats? Or are you allergic?” Steve should have thought to mention it to Hopper.

“I’ve never really...known any,” she replied. Something about the way she said it made Steve think that wasn't entirely true.

He should have guessed. “Well, mine is white and fluffy and I call her Penny, although my mom named her Penelope Fluffykins - but don’t tell anyone. It embarrasses her. The cat, not my mom,” he whispered conspiratorially.

El finally giggled. “That is a silly name.”

“Yes. Yes it is.” Steve felt like El was finally getting comfortable with him.

He ended up making her Eggos and left things out for peanut butter sandwiches for her lunch.

“Help yourself to anything in the fridge. You know how to work the tv. I’ll try to be home no later than 3:00. As a senior, he left out earlier than the other students but usually stayed because of
athletics. Today there was nothing on the schedule. Basketball practice was Mondays and Thursdays and nothing else was going on at the moment. And he had no kids to pick up or drop off for a change.

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School went by faster than usual. Mostly by avoiding people he didn’t feel like talking to. Which was hard because every time he turned around it seemed as if Nancy, Billy or Jonathan were thinking about approaching him. He kept his head down and avoided eye contact, spending his lunch in the library where no one would think to look for him.

Then he took advantage of his early out since those three were juniors and stuck for their last period and heading over to the station on some pretext that he lost his receipt for the fine and asked Flo for another copy for his dad. He was disappointed that Hopper wasn’t there. He made small talk for a bit with Flo and then Callahan, who he knew through his youngest brother, Brett, who had been two years ahead of Steve and was a varsity baseball player when Steve joined the junior squad. Brett had been a nice teammate and been the first person to invite Steve to a “seniors” party where Steve attempted his first keg stand.

Catching up only took a few minutes though and Steve didn’t know how to wait for Hopper without looking suspicious so he thought maybe he’d try a pay phone and call the cabin later. He left with a request for Callahan to tell his brother to call him over the Thanksgiving holiday since he was coming home from college for the break. It might be nice to talk to someone else his age for a change...someone who had no real idea what had been happening with Steve in the last two years and probably wouldn’t care about high school politics anymore.

As luck would have it, Hopper happened to be parking as he headed out. Steve was grateful because now he could just pass it off as a friendly conversation in the parking lot.

“Everything ok, Harrington?” Hopper asked, looking concerned as he got out of the truck.

“Yeah - everything’s good. Just had a quick question.” Steve looked around and didn’t see anyone watching, but pulled out a cigarette and asked Hop for a light. Hopper joined him.

“I was thinking of going out of town this weekend to visit some distant relatives. It’s been like 11 months since I’ve seen my Aunt Becky. Wondering if you could check the house while I’m gone. Just be sure no one breaks in or anything?”

“Smooth, Harrington.” Hopper took a deep inhale and seemed to be debating with himself.

Steve knew he was very protective of El. He couldn’t understand how she hadn’t gone crazy locked up in the cabin that whole time. It was almost as if she traded one prison for another, just with nicer accommodations and guard. Who was he to judge, though?

Finally Hopper let out a long breath. “… but it’s not a bad idea actually.” He paused for a moment and then added, “Having me check the house and all, I mean. I hope you have a good trip. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Hopper eyed him carefully and Steve understood the gravitas of what he was allowing them to do. If El had so much as a scratch, he was going to catch literal Hell.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. It’ll just be good to get out of the house for awhile. I’ll leave Friday after school and hopefully be back Sunday night if Becky is ok with that.”

“Yeah, 11 months is a long time to not see your loved ones,” Hopper agreed and Steve left feeling
like he was doing a good job. He just hoped everything went smoothly.

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**JONATHAN’S POV**

Jonathan had wanted to check on Steve all day to thank him again about the sink. His mom had been ecstatic about it and then wanted to know if Steve knew anything about toilets. Theirs had started randomly running at times. Jonathan thought maybe he could just go to the Ace store and ask. Maybe it would be simple? He hated to ask Steve for any other favors, but Will had overheard and was sure Steve would be happy to help. His excitement over the possibility of Steve coming over again was a little unnerving.

Will had been so disappointed the night before when Steve had asked him to not stop by for a few days because his parents were in town. He had asked Jonathan if his parents were like Lonnie. Jonathan couldn’t answer because he didn’t know but somehow he knew Will was getting the idea that somehow Steve’s parents were bad people that kept Steve from seeing his friends and either neglected him or worse. Jonathan had managed to talk him down by saying he would be sure to check on Steve at school to be sure he was ok.

Sure enough, it was the first thing Will asked when he got in the car after school with Mike. Nancy was already in the passenger seat. She looked rougher today than she had the day before but all she said was she was not sleeping well. She’d been having nightmares about Barb and the lab getting away with everything. He hoped now that he told her that Hopper had talked with his mom last night about the story coming out soon, she’d be able to get some sleep. At least it had put a satisfied expression on her face when they had gotten coffee that morning. That was soon going to become a bad habit if she didn’t start getting more sleep.

They made plans to talk to the Hollands as soon as the story hit the papers. Nancy had felt bad leaving her hanging with that weird phone call so she was going to at least tell them they had been told by the government to not talk about the lab leak but that Nancy had, in fact, known about Barb dying. He hoped that was the right thing to do. But that was a concern for another day. Right now he needed to focus on his brother’s return to school.

“Hey, how was your first day back?” Jonathan asked Will as he waved at Dustin and Lucas getting into Mrs. Sinclair’s car. He assumed Billy had already taken off with Max and felt sorry for the girl. Billy had to be hard to live with. He had also looked like hell today.

“Good,” Will said unconvincingly. “So, did you see Steve? Is he coming over?”

Nancy turned. “What? Why would he be coming over again?” Mike was asking much the same thing at the same time.

“No, buddy. I didn’t get a chance to talk to him,” Jonathan said as he turned the car on, the stereo louder than he remembered leaving it. He turned it down. Nancy reached after it and turned it off. “Sorry. A bit of a headache,” she whispered at him.

“What? Wasn’t he in school? Maybe we should check on him?” Will said, leaning forward between the seats, a little panic in his voice.

“He’s fine. He was just busy today, I think. Seemed to be focused on school for a change.”

“That would be a first,” Mike said, sarcastically. Jonathan could hear him fussing with the seatbelt
that never latched quite right. He wondered how long Mike would try before giving it up.

“Is that true?” Will asked, looking at Nancy. Since when did Will not believe Jonathan. For that matter, when did he actually talk directly to Nancy? Sure Will seemed to like her but he was shy around her, as with most people he didn’t know well. This sudden “comfortableness” with Steve was more than a little unusual for Will.

Nancy glanced at Jonathan before looking at Will. “Yes. I saw him today. He seemed...preoccupied with something.” She paused for a moment before turning to look at Jonathan. “But maybe we should go to his house to check on him.”

“Well...no. His parents are home. He asked us to not stop by for a few days,” Jonathan said, confused by why she now wanted to check in on Steve when she had been avoiding him.

Nancy closed her eyes and nodded. “Right. His parents. I...remember them.”

That was an odd way of saying that but clearly things at the Harrington household weren’t quite as happy as Jonathan had always believed if Nancy’s reaction was any indication. It didn’t matter anyways. Jonathan didn’t have time. He had to start his shift soon. He just needed to drop them off at Nancy’s house. Will and Mike were going to work on homework together while Nancy kept an eye on them. His mom didn’t want Will alone for his first afternoon back at school.

“Are they assholes or something?” Mike asked.

Nancy sighed. “Or something.” She didn’t elaborate but Jonathan thought she felt like it wasn’t their business. And it probably wasn’t but he’d ask her later in private. He decided to change the subject.

“So...I’ve been asked to be the photographer at the SnowBall,” he said. “Is that ok with you, Will? I wouldn’t want to cramp your style.” He pulled out of the parking lot and headed into traffic. He noticed a black sedan with tinted windows still sitting in the school lot, much like the one in the Holland’s driveway the day before.

“I don’t think I’m going,” Will said. “It seems kinda lame.”

“What do you mean you’re not going? You have to! We all are!” Mike said sharply.

“Just because you might see El there...doesn’t mean I have to,” Will argued. Jonathan was surprised. Will rarely disagreed with Mike. He always did what Mike wanted him to. Sometimes that concerned him. Much like he recently suspected Will of having a tiny crush on Steve, he thought Will always had a thing for Mike. While Jonathan...loved? Nancy (Was that too soon to think), Mike was a force of nature and could easily roll right over Will and not realize it. And Will would let him. Jonathan knew that because he himself had the same issue - just with a different Wheeler.

“Please?! I don’t even know if El will be there. And it wouldn’t be any fun without you.”

They stopped at a red light and while they were waiting, Jonathan turned to Nancy. “They need chaperones. Maybe you’d like to join me?” He smiled at her while the boys in the back talked.

“No.NO. NO!! My sister CAN’T be a chaperone at MY dance. That WOULD be lame!” Mike yelled.

Nancy just grinned at Mike and looked back at Jonathan. “I’d love to. In fact, I could teach you to dance, Mike.” Jonathan enjoyed the teasing. It was the happiest he’d seen Nancy in a while.
“NOOOOO!” Mike shrieked. Jonathan wasn’t sure which part Mike was objecting to more but he looked like he already wanted to die of embarrassment. Jonathan couldn’t help but laugh. Things felt almost normal.

“Maybe we could ask Steve, too,” Will said softly. “He’d be a good chaperone.”

Jonathan stopped laughing and glanced back briefly, “Maybe,” he replied hesitantly. He doubted Steve would ever do that. He got along with the kids now, sure but that was asking a bit too much of the former King of Hawkins High. Jonathan wouldn’t be doing it if he didn’t want to add it to his portfolio and Nancy was only agreeing to do it to be with him or to piss Mike off - he wasn’t sure which one was more important to her.

“I’ll go then,” Will added.

Well, fuck.

Chapter End Notes

If you skipped Billy's POV - Billy found Nancy spying on the lab. She alternates between taunting Billy about his desire for Steve and not knowing where she's at. Clearly something is not right with her. Billy also knows he's feels drawn there but doesn't quite understand what's going on yet. Nancy kisses Billy after telling him they could work together to "have Steve". He suddenly gets an influx of her memories and also shares his own, but passes out and doesn't remember anything the next day. Nancy doesn't seem too either. Both are just extremely tired.

I hope you're enjoying this. Let me know if there are any egregious errors. I'm so excited for Season 3 (although clearly this will not be canon compliant whatsoever).
Chapter 7 - Your Song

Chapter Summary

Steve, El and Dustin Bonding and some other fun stuff.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your bookmarks, kudos and comments. I really appreciate them. Also - with this chapter, this is now officially my longest story and I believe we still have a long way to go!

As a reminder - ALWAYS read author's notes. They are there for a reason. For reasons you'll understand below (or as you read the story) - please note there is a potential for ANY of the teens to kiss or at most in this fic, do some heavy petting. This is your warning. Doesn't happen in this chapter but going forward it could (and probably will happen more). They will not be separately tagged for a reason.

I do want to take a moment to talk about a specific comment that led to this.

The comment was that I should tag this as Billy/Nancy. I didn't for a reason. After discussing with other authors, they concur with me. This is not a Billy/Nancy romance even if they may kiss - as you have noticed - it is not really Billy and Nancy as themselves. At best I could describe it as dubcon kissing? I guess I might add that as a tag since it will happen again. As someone pointed out, if I had marked it as a Billy/Nancy in the tags - they would have searched on the tag and expected a romance and been sorely disappointed. I did mark Billy & Nancy because they do have (and will have) meaningful interactions, just not romantic.

I did however clearly note Billy/Nancy in the beginning author's note and suggested if someone had an issue they could read end notes to skip it. This person clearly DID NOT read the author's note and then complained. I honestly don't have patience with that.

In general, i have an issue with tagging everything that happens in a story - it ruins the surprise. I get the big ones but I'm not doing everything, particularly in a story I haven't finished writing yet. I will add to the author's notes as I see fit.

One other note - a reminder that creators create for free and, while I don't depend on kudos and comments to continue writing, it is nice to see if someone enjoys a story so i do appreciate it. And if you feel the need to make a critical statement, it's usually nice to have it balanced with something positive. My rule of them when i leave comments is, "How would I feel if someone left that note for me?"

Sorry - long author's note is long. That said - this is a fairly light and fluffy chapter EXCEPT for mentions of Mews and El's history with cats and Dustin's and Els reactions to Penny which is a little sad and a deeper discussion of Will's asexuality.
Chapter 7 - Your Song

STEVE’S POV

Steve walked into the house, a little excited to be able to tell El they were going to make a trip that weekend to see her mother. He was aware that maybe they’d need to be aware of anyone that could be watching her aunt’s house but Steve had ideas. First, Steve planned to use his mother’s car for a change and second, he’d be vigilant about watching to see if anyone followed them or seemed to be watching their house before he’d let El approach it. He hoped they were home and that El could have a good visit. It would be a nice change of pace for Steve as well.

Penny greeted him by the door with a loud meow, but other than that, the first floor was silent. He walked into the kitchen to see evidence of El having eaten lunch: dirty knife and plate in the sink and the peanut butter jar and potato chip bag moved. He’d have to show her how to load the dishwasher. She may have seen him doing it the night before but odds were she didn’t know what it was. He doubted the cabin had one.

He checked on Penny’s food and water before getting a drink and heading downstairs from where he heard the faint sound of the tv drifting upstairs.

“Everything ok?”

“You’re here,” El said. “It’s only three-o-five. You said three-three-o.” She was sitting in one of the recliners. There was a Sports Illustrated sitting next to her, clearly unread as it was only open to the beginning. Maybe he should pick her up a couple of magazine she might like. What did teen girls read?

“Uh, yeah. I said I’d be no later than 3:30. That also means I could be earlier. What are you watching?” He flopped on the couch.

“*General Hospital.*”

“Oh...ok. You like soap operas?” He sort of knew what it was. He remembered Lauren had been a big fan of the whole Luke and Laura storyline and often talked his ear off about it. One of the many reasons he didn’t stay with her.

“Soap...Operas?” El asked.

“That’s what these daytime shows are called. Sort of overly dramatic shows. Not sure why they’re called that though. I mean - I guess some of the night time ones are like that too - *Dallas*, *Dynasty*...that kind of thing. Not really something I watch too much of. Not a big fan of drama.” At this point he felt he had too much drama in his real life to want to watch fictional ones. He waved his can around in a general motion towards the tv.

“What do you like to watch?” El asked, seemingly interested.

“I liked the shows we watched last night so I guess I like cop or detective shows. Some sitcoms. I like *Family Ties*. I watch a lot of sports. Football, baseball, hockey...whatever’s in season.”

She looked down at the *Sports Illustrated*. 
“Yeah - like in that magazine.”

“I...didn’t understand it,” she said, seeming to feel embarrassed about it. “Sometimes Hopper watches...I think it’s football? But he yells at the tv and I don’t understand so I go to my room.”

“Well, I guess I’m assuming you never had much of a chance to see that kind of thing back at the…” Steve couldn’t even bring himself to say Lab. It suddenly struck him how terrible things must have been for her and how much she missed being there. She probably wasn’t even quite aware of it yet. And he guessed Hopper yelling might be unnerving.

“No...I never did.”

“Well, if you’d like maybe I can show you a few games and explain it to you. Then maybe you could watch it with him?”

“Ok. When?” El asked.

“It’s football season now. Games are usually on the weekend or Monday nights.” He knew there was a Colts game that weekend so he could record it for when they got back.

“So, we could watch some this weekend?”

“Actually no. We are going to take a trip this weekend.” It was hard for Steve to stay calm, knowing how much it would probably mean for her. He wanted to draw out the surprise but he just couldn’t.

Her eyes widened. “You mean? You...talked to Hopper?”

“Yep. I talked to Hopper. We’re going on a road trip. That ok with you?” He grinned at her.

Suddenly he had a lapful of El hugging him. “Thank you! Thank You!”

“We’re going to have to be very careful about it though. You can’t tell anyone and you’ll need to wear a bit of a disguise. We’ll have to be under cover. Like those cop shows sometimes.”

She was nodding her head very excitedly. “Under cover.”

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WILL’S POV

Will was frustrated and slightly on edge. He and Mike were doing homework in Mike’s basement but Nancy kept interrupting them.

“Do you need anything?”

“How about some cookies?”

“You feeling ok?”

“Are you comfortable?”

“What did you do at Steve’s?”
Mike and he finally went to Mike’s room and locked the door on her.

“I don’t know what’s with her today. Whenever she’s babysat me, she never paid any attention to anything I was doing,” Mike said.

“Maybe she’s afraid I’ll go missing on her or something,” Will said a little bitterly. Everyone around him seemed to hover so much now. Logically he knew why but it was so irritating.

Mike must have picked up on his annoyance because he grinned at Will. “Maybe she’s trying to impress you with her babysitting skills so you’ll brag to Jonathan about her as much as you did about Steve.” Mike chuckled.

And yeah, Will now knew that he had been embarrassingly gushy about Steve to both Jonathan and Mike and they must have said something to Nancy. He was afraid Mike might either tease him about it or be mad but instead he seemed to think it was funny.

Mike snickered louder as he said, “Maybe she wants to make sure Jonathan doesn’t pick Steve to be the mother of his child.” Now Mike was laughing hard and rolling on the bed. “Can you just picture it? Steve Harrington - proud mama of three kids with another one on the way greeting your brother after a long hard day at work at the door with a peck on the cheek and a baby on his apron-covered hip and towel-covered shoulder. We should get him a Best Mom mug for Christmas!”

Will just stared at him wondering why Mike thought that was funny. It actually made his stomach feel a little funny at the thought that Steve could pick Jonathan. That...could mean Steve would have reason to stay around. Maybe spend more time with Will. But...that wasn’t a real thing right? Although, at least Will would have a better shot of being near Steve if he dated Jonathan than if Nancy had stayed with Steve. But if Jonathan stayed with Nancy, then he would never consider Steve. But...Steve liked Nancy? Could he like boys, too? He didn’t understand what or why he was thinking about this.

He also wasn’t quite sure what that could mean but he’d heard of that. His own dad had said it about him. He’d overheard him saying it to his mom who then freaked out at Lonnie being a shithead and that it didn’t matter if either or both of her boys were gay, they were still her sons - their sons and Lonnie needed to shut up. Will still hadn’t understood exactly what it meant at the time but he at least understood that whatever it was, it was not considered normal. He’d heard Jonathan being teased about being queer but Jonathan always said he wasn’t but that he didn’t personally think there was anything wrong with two boys being in love. Troy and his friends however had made disgusting comments about what “those freaks like to do.”

It confused Will, because he didn’t understand why two boys would want to do the things Troy described - but he also didn’t see the appeal about girls either and he’d heard even more details about that from boys giggling in the locker room. He just had no interest in what he had heard about kissing and...the other stuff they said. It kind of nauseated him. He just wanted to maybe hug or hold their hand, but the idea of actually kissing anyone just sounded boring or even borderline gross. He had seen his mom and Bob kiss, Jonathan and Nancy, and even Mike and El and none of it seemed like something he would ever want to do. He just didn’t really like being touched outside the thought of cuddling and holding hands with someone like Mike...or Steve. He liked the idea of sitting next to Steve with his long arm around Will’s shoulder protectively as they watched a movie together, maybe ruffling his hair but the idea of touching lips - no, he’ll pass on that thank you very much. Mostly he just wanted to watch Steve play piano again. He liked how he felt listening and watching him play.

He was going around in circles. All he really knew was he liked being with Steve and felt like he needed to figure out a way to spend more time with him. Maybe he could ask for piano lessons?
Steve would have to play then.

“Can we put the radio on?” Will asked to change the subject. He kept trying to find music that he liked as much as he liked what Steve had played that night, but none of it was the same. He’d even found NPR on the radio but all they did was talk when he tried to listen.

Mike stopped laughing and turned the radio on. It was some pop station. Will liked it but it also wasn’t the same. Wasn’t giving him the same feeling as when Steve had played for him. He thought about asking if Mike knew about NPR and maybe try it again, but he realized Mike would then ask why and then he’d have to explain about Steve. He didn’t want to break his promise to Steve about not telling anyone about his piano playing. Nor did he want to. It was like it was something special just between them (and Dustin, not that that mattered).

Instead, they went back to their biology homework and quizzed each other in preparation for a test they were having the next day. Will felt a little distracted - like he kept thinking about Nancy and Steve and for some odd reason, Max’s brother kept popping into his head. He didn’t even really know the guy but he just kept wondering how he could have treated Steve so badly.

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BILLY’s POV

It was cold in the garage, but that suited Billy. Kept him awake and alert as he worked on his car after school. No one was home so he felt no shame when he realized Metallica was giving him a headache and he switched to the radio. When even the station he usually listened to gave him a headache, he changed the dial trying to find something tolerable.

He paused when he heard the familiar sounds of ‘Moonlight Sonata’. Wasn’t his usual preference, but his mom used to occasionally listen to NPR when he was younger. His dad was not overly fond of it so she only played when he and her were alone. It seemed soothing, and since no one was around to make fun of him, he left it on as he swapped spark plugs, changed the oil and put a new battery in. This Hawkins cold was killing his engine.

He found himself humming along as he worked. A pleasant thrum sung in his veins and he found himself smiling for the first time in a while. But the longer he listened, it felt like there could be more and he wasn’t quite getting it. Like when you’re jerking off and you feel like you want to come but it’s just not tipping over into an orgasm. It’s pleasant at first, but then when it doesn’t happen, you just become irritated and frustrated.

He was about to turn it off after about an hour, but jumped about three feet when a soft voice startled him.

“This is nice, Billy. I didn’t know you liked classical music,” Susan said as she was putting some groceries in the extra freezer in the garage.

He glared at her, irritated that she had interrupted him. He hadn’t heard her pull up from her errands. He didn’t dislike her necessarily but he sure didn’t like her either. She was a non-entity to him. Sometimes he wondered if she disappeared tomorrow would anyone but Max even notice? His dad sure wouldn’t. He’d probably have her replaced in six months like he did with Billy’s mother. As long as it was female, submissive and made a half-decent meatloaf, his dad would marry it.

“Yeah, well Susan, you don’t really know shit about me, do you?” Billy spat out as he closed the
hood. He was finished anyways. He unplugged the radio and went in to take a shower to get the grease off his hands. If he managed to actually jerk off in there with images of Harrington in his head, well - she didn’t need to know that either.

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STEVE’S POV

The doorbell rang and startled Steve from his homework. He had left an excited El to her soap operas and had worked in the kitchen while he minded the chicken roasting in the oven. He rarely made it but only because it was only him and then he’d have leftovers for days. He felt the need to give El a proper meal.

He got up and looked out only to see Dustin standing there.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” Steve asked. Dustin just smiled and said, “We never got to watch that movie so I thought I’d come before you had to take it back. Wait...what is that smell? Are you making dinner? Do you have a date coming over or something. I can totally be your wingman.” His voice sped up as he spoke.

Steve raised an eyebrow.

“Or leave...because you totally don’t need a wingman if she came over already...and I’ll just go...” Dustin was now talking a mile a minute and backing away.

Steve grabbed his arm before he got too far. “Come in, Dustin. I don’t have a date...but I do have a guest.” Steve bent down and whispered, “And you cannot tell anyone she’s here. If you can’t do that, then you need to go home.”

Dustin just nodded and Steve left him in.

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DUSTIN’S POV

To say Dustin was surprised to see El was an understatement. One, she’d only met Steve once, the night of the “incident” as they were all calling it and; two - El wasn’t supposed to leave the cabin. Like at all. Yet, here she was standing in Steve’s kitchen, in front of the refrigerator like she lived there.

“Hey, I have dinner in the oven so don’t ruin your appetite,” Steve said to her, like he wasn’t as surprised as Dustin was that she was there.

“Thirsty.” El grabbed a soda and waggled it at him.

“Hey, El. What are you doing here?” Dustin asked.

“Dustin.” El greeted with a smile. She handed him a soda without him asking. He took it.

Steve refused the one she offered him. “Hop asked me to let her stay for a few days. Seems like Nancy’s work is going to pay off and Hawkins is about to hit the news. He wants El to lay low for a few days.” Steve answered for her before adding, “And you cannot tell anyone! Not Lucas, not
Max, not Will - and especially not Mike. He’d come over and never leave if he knew.”

“Wow. Not even Mike? Are you ok with that El?” Dustin asked with a raised brow. He couldn’t imagine El not running to Mike the first chance she got.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Ok. We’re going to see Mama.”

“What?”

Steve shook his head at her. “Again, please don’t say anything but I’m taking her out of town this weekend. I realized it would be easier to hide her if she wasn’t actually in Hawkins. I am trusting you on this so don’t screw it up. If anyone asks, either plead ignorance, or…” Steve paused, “tell them my parents and I went to visit my cousin in Indianapolis.”

“Do you even have a cousin in Indianapolis?” Dustin asked, although he was pretty sure no one, except his mother would probably inquire about Steve’s whereabouts unless they needed a ride somewhere. Maybe Will now, but the others hadn’t really mentioned Steve at all except in passing.

“Actually, I do. He’s a second cousin and we don’t actually get along that well, but no one needs to know that. His name is Chris. If they get nosy, tell them we’re going to the Colts game with him. That should bore them enough from asking anything else.” Dustin agreed. None of the boys, except Lucas, had any interest in football. And Lucas was a Steelers fan but only because his father was from Pittsburg. He doubted Max was a fan either.

“Ok, but what if they show up here, like Will did the other day?”

“Will was here?” El asked. She took a sip of her drink and sat at the counter.

Steve decided to check something in the oven while they were standing around. “Yeah, he was taking a walk in the woods and wandered over here.” Steve answered El as he pulled a roaster out and opened the lid. The smell of roasting chicken filled the kitchen and made Dustin’s mouth water. He watched as Steve used a meat thermometer to check the internal temperature of the chicken.

“Yeah, we had a good time, too.” Dustin replied to El then walked towards Steve. “Wow, that really smells good,” Dustin said, peering around Steve’s shoulder. “So, like, when will it be ready?”

“Is that your subtle way of asking if you can stay for dinner?” Steve asked, hip checking Dustin a bit.

Dustin grinned, “Well, since you asked, how can I say no?” He knew Steve wouldn’t and his mom wasn’t planning anything big for dinner anyways. Wednesdays was their “anything” night to give his mom a break. That was why he was really at Steve’s in the first place. He figured, if nothing else, they could order a pizza and watch their movie that they’d skip the other night and then maybe rehearse a little. Dustin had really enjoyed singing with Steve. Hopefully El would want to do both.

Steve closed the oven door and turned. “I don’t remember actually asking. Did I ask him, El?”

El grinned at the two of them.

Of course Dustin planned on staying. One of the surprising things he’d learned about Steve was he was a decent cook.
“Maybe I should make crescent rolls?” Steve asked. “Otherwise, I’m not sure they’ll be enough food for you and me once Dustin gets his hands on it.”

Now El laughed as Dustin smacked his arm. “I do not eat that much! And yes - we need crescent rolls!” Dustin loved crescent rolls, lathered with melted butter fresh out of the oven.

“That’s ok, Dustin. You’re a growing boy. Crescent rolls it is.” Steve pulled the can out of the fridge as well as the making for salad. “You guys can help put the salad together.”

Steve handed El a couple of tomatoes. “Can you slice these?” El nodded. Then he pulled some cucumbers out and gave them to Dustin, along with a second knife. Steve pulled out a salad bowl and set it on the counter before getting the head of lettuce out which he then chopped up.

“So, why am I allowed to know that El’s here and not the others?” Dustin asked, suddenly wondering why Steve hadn’t just turned him away.

“Because it’s normal for you to come over and Hopper wanted things to look normal. He trusts that you can keep a secret. Let’s make sure we don’t disappoint him.” Steve replied as tossed their chopped vegetables into the bowl and pulled out some carrots to shred into it. “Why don’t you guys set the table awhile.”

“It’s normal for you to come over’ echoed in Dustin’s head and made him feel ridiculously pleased by it.

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Over dinner they talked about school. El had a million questions about what they studied, how it worked and was sorely disappointed to learn the boys and Max didn’t have every class together. Dustin was glad to have an audience to discuss some of his latest experiments the party was considering for the science fair even if Steve and El didn’t understand it. The group was still trying to decide. Dustin had offered one based partially on their experience with El and the saline water they had used for her “float tank.” He admitted the other guys didn’t want to do it but was happy that El seemed particularly eager to learn more.

“Is this about how things float in saltwater?” El asked.

“No..no - well kind of? I mean we already did that so I don’t need to do that again since science is all about new things - but it got me thinking about how salt water affects other things. In Av club we’ve been discussing radio waves and how sound is distributed so I wondered if that was something that could be affected by salt.”

Steve frowned “What like if you have a big pile of salt versus something else? I mean wouldn’t just the physical presence of it affect it like anything else? Egg crate foam for example?”

If Dustin was surprised at Steve’s question, he didn’t notice it. He was too busy thinking about his experiment.

“Not in the air per se...but in the water. Sound has frequencies and the way those waves travel through different substances - but in this case water.” He looked at El and continued, “Like how maybe you heard things that we couldn’t when you were under water. Anyways, it got me thinking about your saline pool and I wondered if it affected sound the way it affected physical objects. Like - the more salt you add, the more the egg floats. Does water with more saline also affect how sound travels?”
“So - like maybe noise heard in fresh water sounds different than in the ocean?” Steve asked. “And the others don’t want to do that experiment?”

“No Lucas wants to do something on echolocation,” Dustin said. And he couldn’t blame it. It was an interesting subject.

“Echo...location?” El asked.

Dustin had taken a bite of his chicken before answering. “Yeah - it’s a thing about how animals can “see” without eyes or in the dark. He thought it might be more...helpful in the future.”

Dustin didn’t want to say it, but Lucas may be right. He was about to explain more, expecting that neither Steve nor El would understand what he was talking about but he took another bite and his mouth was full.

“He thinks that’s how the demo dogs could find us? Right?” Steve asked, filling the momentary silence.

And sometimes Steve really surprised him.

“Uh, yeah, actually. How did you…”

“They didn’t have eyes. Or a nose or ears that I could see. They had to be able to find us somehow,” Steve replied, finishing off his carrots.

Steve grabbed another roll and buttered it while Dustin and El stared at him. Steve looked up and must have noticed the surprise on both of their faces. “Uh, I may have seen a documentary on bats while I was stuck at home. It struck me that might have been how those things found us. It’s the only thing that made sense.”

Dustin blinked at him. “You were watching a documentary on bats?” That struck Dustin as odd.

Steve never seemed like the kind of guy that was interested in science. Then he noticed Steve turning a bit red. “You thought it was something about baseball bats, didn’t you?” Dustin grinned.

“Maybe...but in my defense I was half asleep and on painkillers. By the time I realized what they were actually discussing, I was too tired to change the channel so I left it on. It was actually kind of interesting.”

El laughed and Dustin joined her until Steve also laughed.

Dustin liked that Steve admitted dumb stuff like that. Made him feel more real. Like he wasn’t all for show the way everyone had talked about him in the past. Sometimes Dustin wondered if Steve had really changed or if no one had actually ever known him. “Okay...well. Bats aren’t the only animal that uses it. In fact, whales and dolphins do use it and in fact the military was starting to train them to find mines and objects in the oceans as far back as the sixties.”

El looked horrified.

“Anyways - it got me thinking about how the sounds they use is affected by how much saline is in the water. And would it affect their communication if - say that salinity changed. Of course, I can’t do anything about using real animals - but I thought I could test the actual frequencies used in the water. Like does it travel faster or slower? I was thinking of using 4 hertz at 1,000,000 cycles per seconds at various salinities. Of course I somehow have to find an oscilloscope, signal generator and some transducers.”
And now Dustin could tell he lost them. He knew he had a tendency to over explain enthusiastically and easily lost the interest of the people he was talking, too. He stopped.

“What’s four hertz? Why would someone be hurt?” El asked.

Yeah - and that right there was the problem. El didn’t have the basic understanding of what he was talking about and he doubted Steve did.

“Uh - not hurt, El. Hertz - with a z at the end. Simply put - it’s a term about how sound is measured. Sound is carried on the air like a wave.”

“Like an ocean wave?”

“No.”

“Actually - yes - that’s a good analogy,” Steve interrupted and Dustin stared at him. “Listen - so I’m guessing you’ve seen tv shows that show the ocean, right?”

El nodded.

“So, you’ve seen that sometimes the waves are big and roll in slowly and sometimes it’s short waves, but they come in fast?”

“Yes.”

“Picture those waves as if they’re a sound. A slow moving wave might sound like a low rumble. A short, choppy wave might sound like high, tinny bells chiming. Does that make sense?”

“I think I understand. Sometimes...the...men at the lab would talk about hertz but I didn’t understand. I thought it meant...something else.” She sounded hesitant and it saddened Dustin to think of how bad El’s life really was before she joined them. “So the hertz is how big those sound waves are?”

Steve nodded.

Dustin stared incredulously at Steve. It wasn’t exactly right - but it wasn’t really wrong either. “It’s not...ok well it’s not perfect but I guess it kind of works.”

“Don’t look so surprised, Dustin. I have layers.” Steve paused a moment with a snicker on his lips.

Dustin sputtered for a second until Steve continued. “Music deals with hertz and frequencies if you have to keep an instrument in tune.” Steve raised his eyebrows at Dustin and Dustin got it. Steve had to tune his piano so he would definitely have some understanding about this subject. He realized that’s why Steve was actually decent at math as well. Music and math actually had some similarities. He really needed to stop being surprised when Steve didn’t live up to his reputation.

“I like music,” El said, seemingly. “Hopper plays records. And sometimes I see the Lawrence Welk show when Hopper isn’t home. He doesn’t like it but sometimes I think it’s pretty.”

Dustin almost cringed but how would she know any different? He doubted there was a lot of variety. His grandmother watched that show and he thought his ears would bleed when she had it on. Seeing the look on Steve’s face, he agreed.

“Uh - so you like that, huh? What other kind of music do you like?” Steve asked.

“On the radio - sometimes there’s music I like to jump around to. The signal’s not always good and
sometimes cuts out. Hopper plays Jim Croce and SuperTramp a lot. We dance sometimes.”

Steve chuckled. “That I would pay to see. Anyways- Dustin - I think both of those ideas are interesting. I wonder if there’s a way to combine it? Like - if demo dogs use echo location to find things and those frequencies could be affected that might confuse them? I don’t know - like a defense of some sort? Although, I guess it would be hard to find a demo dog to test on for an experiment so maybe just yours would be easier to do. I’m just babbling aren’t I? Anyone want dessert?” He got up to get a pie off the counter, the box clearly labelling it cherry. “Ice cream with their pie, anyone?” Steve asked.

Both Dustin and El nodded.

While Steve set about getting dessert for them, Dustin considered his experiment. He sure didn’t want to think about the demo dog. There was a reason he didn’t want to do that experiment but he wasn’t going to admit to Lucas that it made him think of Mews too much. “Oh hey, since you have to tune the piano, do you have any of that equipment?” Dustin asked Steve.

Steve shook his head. “Sorry, we’re old fashioned that way. We use tuning forks in this house.”

Dustin looked over to see El frowning at her utensils. “Not that kind of fork, El.”

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Dustin was stuffed. Dinner had been delicious. Even El had been enthusiastic about it, noting that the only time she’d have had a meal remotely like that was if it was take out, but it was usually soggy and lukewarm by the time Hopper got it home. He could fry up a decent breakfast but anything except dinner from a frozen meal or cans was beyond him. He could see she was quickly warming up to Steve. Like Will had. Dustin had to suppress another shudder of jealousy that somehow she would usurp him with Steve, much the same way she had with Mike even if he knew logically that wasn’t going to happen. He just had to make sure of it.

“I thought we could watch the ‘Last Starfighter’. You probably have to take it back soon,” Dustin suggested again.

“Yeah, El and I had talked about it. That ok with you, El?” She nodded.

He helped Steve clean up the kitchen like he did with his mom and was oddly charmed by watching Steve show El how to load the dishwasher. Sometimes he forgot how much El didn’t know. It’s not like he had a lot of one-on-one time with her. But he had an opportunity now so he wanted to take advantage of it. And he wouldn’t be jealous of her getting Steve’s attention. Like Will, she deserved it, too.

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**STEVE’S POV**

They had settled in to watch the movie, Dustin surprisingly forgoing the popcorn as he was still full from dinner. El had taken the recliner again, seemingly having claimed it for herself so Dustin and he shared the couch.

The movie wasn’t bad but Penny managed to disrupt the proceedings. When Alex Rogan said,
“Terrific. I’m about to be killed a million miles from nowhere with a gung-ho iguana that tells me to relax,” El asked what an iguana was. Dustin was giving a detail spiel about reptiles and iguanas so much that Steve finally paused the movie for a minute. Dustin suddenly stopped as Penny jumped in Steve’s lap. He had started petting her automatically without noticing the look on Dustin’s face.

Steve was surprised she had come out with company but maybe she was sick of hiding. Dustin had stopped mid-sentence and Steve looked up to see both El and Dustin staring at the cat sat in his lap.

“When did you get a cat?” Dustin asked, high-pitched and a little wobbly. El just looked like someone slapped her.

“What...oh...this is Penny. We’ve been together a few years, haven’t we, Penny?” He pulled her up and snuggled her face like an idiot. He’d never done that in front of anyone before. Honestly, he was getting too comfortable having Dustin and, now, El, around. He wasn’t even embarrassed but clearly Penny was by the was she was trying to pull away from him. “Actually, she probably wants brushed.” He reached over to the end table where he kept a brush in the drawer to use on her while he watched tv.

He started to brush her and she mewed at him as she paced back and forth during her brushing.

“She’s….pretty,” El finally said.

Steve looked up and they were both still eyeing her warily. And he felt like an idiot. Dustin had just been discussing iguanas and other reptiles and he was sure Dustin had a thought about Dart...which would then lead to him thinking about Mews. He could kick himself for never mentioning Penny before now. It had just never occurred to him.

“Dustin...I’m...” He wasn’t exactly sure what he was going to say but it was cut off when Dustin sprung up and headed upstairs.

“I need to use the bathroom,” Dustin said. Steve could hear the tears that threatened to fall. Penny jerked when Dustin left, but just turned around and settled down again.

He looked to El who was still staring - but now between Dustin and Penny. He wasn’t sure if it was his place to explain but he thought he should say something. “Dustin had a cat. But she’s…”

“Gone. I know,” El said.

Steve didn’t know how she knew and he wasn’t going to ask. He thought he should go check on Dustin. He’d give it a minute or two and just brushed Penny as he waited. El walked over slowly and looked at the cat. Penny’s tail went up but she wasn’t hissing, yet.

“Be careful. She is shy of strangers although I can’t believe she’s actually out.” El reached out a hand but Penny took off. Steve then heard the water running. “I’m going to go check on him.”

El nodded and sat on the couch where Dustin had been.

Steve found Dustin looking out the sliding glass doors. “You ok?”

“Yeah, yeah...” He muttered, wiping his eyes.

“Dustin, I am sorry about Mews. That must be hard. I should have thought about it but it’s not your fault,” Steve said.
“Except that it is. If I hadn’t taken that stupid...if I hadn’t kept Dart, she’d be ok. She’d still be here and my mom wouldn’t be crying all the time. I was just so sure it was special. That having it made me...Special.”

“You are special, Dustin. And yeah - Dart was maybe a questionable decision but think about it. What if you hadn’t taken him in and fed him nougat? He may not have eaten Mews but would he have let us pass in the tunnels? Would we still be here? And who’s to say something else wouldn’t have happened to her while she was out? There were other demo dogs. I know for a fact several pets went missing,” Dustin widened his eyes at Steve and Steve explained, ‘Hopper told me. We just never mentioned it but those demo dogs were all over the place and that wasn’t your fault.”

“It was mine,” El said from the steps. “I should have...done something sooner.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying at all, El. The only thing at fault is the Mindflamer,” he was trying to sound reassuring. It was not really in his wheelhouse but he needed them to not blame themselves.

“Flayer...”

“OK - yes, Flayer and his pets. Other than that we can’t second guess ourselves. We all did the best we could and you all came through in the end - better than anyone could have expected.”

“I’ve hurt cats before. Papa...made me. I didn’t want to. I tried to stop it,” El hiccupped as tears started.

Steve and Dustin both ran to her and hugged her, Dustin still crying and Steve on the verge - but more from anger than anything else. He tried to soothe both of them. He wasn’t really cut out for it but he ran his hands down their backs and let them cry it out. They broke apart as Steve felt Penny weaving between all of them and he just whispered, “I guess she forgives all of us.”

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“Hey, can you play some music for us?” Dustin asked quietly when El left to use the bathroom. “I didn’t want to ask in front of her since you didn’t want anyone to know but since she’s staying here, can we?”

Steve could see that Dustin really wanted to distract himself and probably didn’t want to go back downstairs for now. “Sure, buddy.”

El seemed overwhelmed when she saw the piano for the first time. Steve decided ‘Moonlight Sonata” was a good starting point again. While he couldn’t see her as he played, he felt her heat standing behind him and watching him intensely. Dustin was going through the sheet music once again.

“Wow...,” El whispered. “Can I?”

Steve shuffled over and let El sit next to him. She gingerly touched a key and startled back when it made a sound. She tentatively hit a few others until Steve pointed out how to play ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ with one finger and had her copy him one octave him.

She repeated it until she did it without him and looked so happy when she had done it right.
“Good job, El,” Steve praised her.

“But you use more fingers - And BOTH hands! I want to do that,” she said to him.

“Well, that will take some time - but here. Let me show you something.” He played scales while repeating the notes for the A, A Sharp, B, B sharp, etc... First he did it with one hand, then with both. She eventually joined him. It was slow but she seemed to concentrate on it.

“Hands are tired,” El finally said, flexing her fingers.

“Yes. You have to work up to it, like any exercise,” Steve said.

“Play something else,” El asked.

Steve considered what he should play but then remembered Dustin’s request for his mom. “Dustin, do you want to rehearse?”

Dustin shook his head. “Um...not tonight. Maybe you could play this?” Steve laughed as he saw Dustin handing him the sheet music for Do-Re-Mi from the Sound of Music.

“Well, I guess that’s a good way to teach El about music as any,” Steve said and began to play. He didn’t really need the sheet music for it so he left Dustin share it with El. He and Dustin sang together several times and eventually El joined in - very tentatively but she did.

“Yes - that was great, El!” Dustin cheered when they finished.

“That was fun,” she smiled broadly. “Play some more, please? But like the first one.”

“Ok.” Steve played ‘Fur Elise’, hoping Dustin wasn’t too bored hearing it again and then followed with Bach’s ‘Well-Tempered Clavier’ and a few pieces from Schumann’s ‘Kinderszenen’ Scenes from Childhood, including ‘Traumerei’

He decided to end on a pop note and sang Elton John’s ‘Your Song’ for them before it was time to take Dustin home. It was getting late and he didn’t want Dustin walking home in the dark alone. He trusted El could watch herself for a few minutes while he was gone.

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**BILLY’S POV**

Again, Billy found himself driving around town, restless. He kept finding himself circling Loch Nora until he finally admitted he was looking for one place - or person in particular. Maybe this would be the night they could have a rematch. Billy was feeling agitated and worked up and wanted to hit something. He parked the car in the street across from Harrington’s house. He thought maybe he should move further but he could see all the curtains were drawn. Unless Harrington looked out, he’d never know Billy was there.

He wasn’t sure why he was there. He felt drawn to the house and could see a few shadows through the curtains. Probably babysitting a couple of the nerds again. He knew it wasn’t Max because she was at home forcing herself to enjoy some mother/daughter bonding shit while his dad was working late. Probably the curly-haired one that seemed to latch himself onto Steve like a parasite.

At first he wasn’t sure what he was hearing, but it sounded like a piano. Faint, but clearly being played live. He doubted it was a recording but why would it be playing...and who was it?
He found himself feeling a little off and a little sleepy at the same time an anxiety started pulsing through him. He stepped out of the car hoping to jolt himself awake. It was definitely someone playing the piano - and they were damned good. He was surprised he could hear so well but he seemed to focus so hard on the music, everything else fell away.

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**NANCY’S POV**

Nancy was washing up the dishes, her assigned chores for the week, and humming to herself. She’d been having that kind of evening, music echoing in her head regardless of what she was doing. Will had just left with Jonathan which was just as well. She had found herself distracted and having a hard time having a conversation with Jonathan. She would have rather continued kissing him with the soundtrack going on in her head but knowing their brothers were downstairs and her parents were in the family room, they opted to keep things very PG.

Now Mike was getting ready for bed and Holly had been tucked in much earlier. Her dad, as usual, sound asleep on the recliner and her mom had gone up to take a bath. She was left alone in the kitchen cleaning up which she didn’t mind so much. She much preferred cleaning to cooking - it was sort of therapeutic. Her mind was wandering from random place to random place: from how sweet Jonathan’s smile was when she took his hand, to the way a gun felt in her hand, to random facts her teacher had given them about the invasion of Normandy to remembering Barb’s favorite cupcake recipe to the unexpected surge of affection Nancy had felt about Steve when she had heard how he had protected the kids.

She had almost wished there were more to clean as she reminisced but why ‘*Your Song*’ was going through her head now was beyond her. She didn’t even like Elton John that much.

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**BILLY’S POV**

“What are you doing here?” A voice broke through his reverie.

“What?”

“Have you been drinking? Hargrove, is it?”

A uniformed officer was standing in front of him and suddenly Billy was brought into the present. He tried to focus on the voice but was distracted by singing coming from further away. Was he actually hearing Harrington singing an Elton John song in the distance? The officer snapped his fingers in front of Billy’s face. “No, sir, Officer, sir,” Billy said, trying not to let his distaste for authority bleed out all over officer Callahan’s uniform according to the name badge. “Just needed a smoke.”

“Uh, huh? For 40 minutes? We had a complaint about you loitering,” he said.

“Loitering, huh.” Billy looked around and sure enough, there was an older woman in the house next to Harrington’s peering out at them. Fucking nosy neighbors.

“Yeah. So, if you’d like to not have me escort you home to your father, I suggest you find
somewhere else to go,” the policeman said with just enough of a hint that he already knew the situation at the Hargrove’s house. He assumed the noise complaints from their own neighbors of raised voices and arguing were creating a reputation already for the newest family in Hawkins. His dad would be thrilled to know that if Billy ever had the balls to tell him that sound carried further in the quiet suburbs of Hicksville, USA than in the city, particularly at night. Reputation was everything to Neil and it would probably devastate and humiliate him if he thought people knew he was less than an ideal parent.

Billy also knew that Susan hadn’t yet told Neil of the times the cops had actually come to the house to ask about noise from the night before. Probably because she wasn’t sure who exactly would catch the brunt of that response. She would just tell the officers she apologized for her teenage son who liked to scream at the tv. Seems hicksville police stations weren’t fully staffed 24 hours a day and didn’t bother to follow-up on lame incidents like screaming matches at 2:00 am until daylight broke out. And they bought any lame story that kept them from having to look closer.

Officer Callahan stared at him clearly waiting for a response.

“Sure. I’ll head out.” Billy started to get into his car when Callahan added, “Don’t let me catch you loitering at the Harrington place again.” Of course, King Steve even has the local police on his side - but given his connection to the Chief he guessed he shouldn’t be surprised.

Billy noticed Harrington’s garage door start opening. He wanted to high tail it out of there before anyone else noticed him and and the cop car sitting there.

“No, sir,” he gritted his teeth and sped down the road, trying not to give in to the urge to give all of them the finger.

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EL’S POV

El watched as Steve and Dustin pulled out of the driveway, feeling pleased. It had been a nice evening, but when she glanced down the street and saw the cop car, she also realized she missed Hopper. She wondered if Billy had been speeding. Hopper had complained about Billy’s apparently bad driving habits but had avoided ticketing him up to now as consideration for his previous help. She was tempted to “take a look” but Hopper had been teaching to never do that unless there was a good reason. And she couldn’t even ask anyone in the party unless she saw Dustin again before the weekend.

Well, she promised she’d get ready for bed while Steve was gone and he promised he’d read her more of that Hardy Boys book when he got back. She decided she’d try to read the first chapter aloud herself as practice.

She was reminded of Dustin’s experiment when she read, “Now he heard the surf, felt it filling his ears, nose and mouth with bitter saltiness.”

She heard Steve return and the garage door close as she read, “It’s some kind of a mask,” and stopped to wait for Steve to come up to tell her what Frank and Joe and the others had found in Chapter 2.
So yeah - Season 3 is almost here! That also means I'll be taking a couple of weeks off from writing this as I bury myself in new goodies. I promise I will be back. And a reminder that this will be in no way canon for season 3.

I hope you all enjoyed this and that you will enjoy the new season this week. WHOOOO! I'm a little excited. See you on the other side of the Upside Down.
Chapter 8 - Lonely in Your Nightmare

Chapter Summary

Just another day for Steve as he gets ready to take El on a trip. And we get a glimpse of his parents. A few other odd and ends.

Chapter Notes

How about that season 3, huh? Amazing!

And this is now a story that is completely not canon (except for a little bit of how the mindflayer works - but at least I don't have gross exploding rats!)

There is one warning to mention. In the last section in Will's POV, he has a nightmare which is violent and involves not only a person but his dog. While this is just a nightmare, the imagery might be upsetting to some (although I don't go into great detail). See end notes for more detail if you feel the need to skip. Otherwise, no new warnings or pairings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 8 - Lonely in Your Nightmare

Hopper’s POV

Hopper was annoyed at how long Mayor Kline kept him waiting. He had been at Town Hall for an hour as Kline finished up some “very important phone calls” according to his assistant who had tried to keep him placated with coffee and donuts. The only good thing about it was that at least Flo wasn’t around to chide him about his diet. He got to enjoy two jelly donuts with no one nagging him.

Finally, Kline came out of his door looking like his usual well-polished self that sometimes had Hopper looking at his own clothes in distaste. Life as a police officer - at any rank - tended to lend itself to rumpled shirts, worn shoes and stains of many kinds. Not at all like the crisp navy suit the mayor sported.

“Jim, good to see you,” Kline said as he enthusiastically shook Hopper’s hand. “Come in, come in. I’m so sorry for the delay. Just finalizing some details for the Press Conference.”

Hopper closed his eyes and pinched his nose and followed him back to his desk. “So, you’re going ahead with it?” Hopper sat down across from Kline.

“Yes. As much as I’d not like to, my advisers tell me we need to be ahead of this. As you know, I had a call from the Chicago Sun Times yesterday. They asked me to comment on the rumors. Of
course, I told them it was the first I had heard about it but that I would look into it. I’ll be honest. This is going to be messy. Responding tomorrow night, even with few to no details to offer them or the public, will reassure our citizens that we will hold the government accountable should the rumors prove true. Not only Miss Holland’s death but for any environmental damage these experiments may have done to our idyllic town. It’s not perfect but it’s a start to rebuilding trust in our community. So we are going ahead on Friday at 5:00 pm. I called you here because we’ll need a security presence.”

Hopper took a deep breath. It’s not like he wasn’t expecting it. “That seems like an odd time. Why not wait until next week?” Hopper was annoyed at the rush. He knew that Kline already knew that the government were in fact responsible for all of it, even if he didn’t know the exact details. Owens had told Hopper what the cover story was going to be and that that is what they were going to tell everyone - including the Mayor’s office. As far as the Mayor knew - it was a chemical leak, but one the government tried to cover up. Hopper knew he had to be careful about not giving anyone any doubts as to the legitimacy of that claim.

Kline leaned back in his chair like he had this all in the bag, false confidence oozing from him. “Simple. It’ll keep the press that actually arrives limited for now and it will be too late for it to hit the papers until Saturday morning and tv coverage until Saturday night at best - and local tv at that. Less likely the story will have much in the way of traction. I don’t want people to panic if it’s not true but if the rumors spread before we have facts, that could be disastrous.”

For Kline’s reelection than for anything else, Hopper thought. “So, bury the lead and all that, right?” Hopper replied cynically.

Kline smiled at him. “Exactly. We need to make sure people know we’re doing something even if there’s nothing to be done at this point. Doing this tomorrow night limits the time additional press have to come in based on any rumors that might have spread if the anonymous tipster sent it to more media outlets - which both the Sun Times and I are assuming. I’ve talked with a military liaison and they will look into it and release an official response next week. In the meantime, I want to show the citizens that their local hometown heroes are on the job.” He leaned forward in his seat to look at Hopper earnestly. “I’ll want you to say a few words, too.”

Hopper frowned. At best the conference will only be to placate the masses and to stroke Kline’s ego. He couldn’t imagine what he could add to the situation.

“Do you have my speech planned out?” Hopper asked. “Or will I be asked to resign since I didn’t resolve the Holland case.”

Kline laughed. “Of course I won’t ask you to resign. Owens was very clear about how this lab had been a highly classified operation, and that, while he isn’t sure of the sequence of events yet, he felt those in charge would have been tasked to make sure local law would have been kept uninformed. In fact, the only reason we know about it at all is because he suspects an internal leak. Owens assures me that he has the security clearance to investigate and, if the rumors are true, the people responsible will be held accountable.”

“How very...thoughtful of him.” Hopper suspected though that some people would take issue with how Hopper had had to portray Barbara as someone who would just run away for no apparent reason. That had really been a difficult thing for him to do when he knew the truth. He had barely been able to look at her parents in the eye every time they demanded answers. He grimaced at the thought of her parents’ faces when they had learned the truth.

Kline nodded and handed Hopper a folder. “We have some developed some talking points about how thorough your investigation was based on the information that was available. I will be sure to
stress my trust in you in leading the investigation and follow-up along with the agents we’ll be working with. It should serve to bolster confidence in our fine police force. Just stick to the talking points and do your best to seem sincere when expressing your condolences.”

Hopper took a deep breath and pursed his lips at the thought that Kline believed he was in any way not affected by the girl’s case. On the other hand, he shouldn’t be surprised. Kline was probably only upset at the nuisance this entire thing was creating. Kline was always pleasant with him but Hopper distrusted him. There was something off-putting about the man. And not just because of his history with coke or his affairs. Hopper himself couldn’t judge too harshly on that given his own history.

Well, at least his job was secure for now and El should be relatively safe. He was grateful Harrington had the idea to take her out of town anyways. He only wished that maybe she could stay away another week but he knew Steve couldn’t afford to miss more school and he wasn’t sure leaving El in the care of Becky was a good idea right now. He trusted they’d be careful but the longer El was with them, the more likely something could go wrong. He hated not having her safe where he could keep an eye on her. He just needed to get this over with and get her back.

“Ok. Fine. I’ll make sure we have all the resources you need.”

“Great, Jim. I knew I could count on you.” Kline stood up to escort him out. “Just...uh do us a favor and iron the uniform tomorrow.”

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**STEVE’S POV**

Thursday flew by with another day of him buried in trying to get as much homework done at school so he didn’t have to worry about it at night or while he was gone over the weekend. He kept his fingers crossed he wouldn’t have lot of homework assigned on Friday.

He stopped at the store to find some magazines for El. He half-thought about buying a new book but she seemed to be enjoying the one he had already. The clerk gave him a side-eye from across the aisle when he saw a stack of *Seventeen*, *Teen Beat*, *Cosmo* and a slightly outdated October *Good Housekeeping* in Steve’s hands. Steve had no idea if she would like it but there was actually an article on home security and another on electronics that Steve wanted to read. Couldn’t hurt at least. He didn’t know the clerk but he added a *Field & Stream* to offset any questions about his choices. Maybe he’d give it to Lucas. Sinclair seemed like a kid that might like fishing.

“Didn’t know you liked to hunt, Harrington. Or are you just trying to learn more about bears?” Of course, Billy happened to have snuck up on him. Serves him right for trying to go to a store he didn’t usually visit. He’d managed to avoid Billy all day except at basketball practice. The coach had them running drills that afternoon though and they had been put in separate groups so he had avoided anything except the barest of interactions with the guy. It had been fairly pleasant practice, even if he was still feeling a bit tired.

“Very funny, Hargrove.”

Billy grabbed one of the magazines and looked at it with a smirk. “Ooh... *Teen Beat*. I just knew you had to be a Duran Duran fan with that John Taylor hair. Oh...and *Cosmo* and a *Good*
Housekeeping. Hmmnn…” Now he pulled the Cosmo out of Steve’s hands and read the cover. “The Pat, Kiss, Hug, Cuddle Handbook”? Aw...do you want to reach out and touch someone, Stevie? You really will make someone a lovely wife someday,” Billy snickered.

Steve smiled as he grabbed the magazines back. “They’re for my mother, asshole. And look who’s talking. You knew who John Taylor was.” He put the Field & Stream back on the shelf.

Billy waggled his tongue. “And so do you. Your secret is out, but…” Billy tilted his head and looked like he was about to ask something but was interrupted when someone yelled, ‘Hargrove, Susan’ through the store. “At least your mother only needs some gardening, a pin-up of Simon Le Bon and some cuddling to keep her happy. My stepmonster needs to sleep with Prince Valium to avoid sleeping with my dad,” Billy quipped as he headed up front to the Pharmacy desk with a two finger salute to Steve.

Steve watched him go up to the pick-up counter in the back of the store to get his order, thinking that brief conversation had been probably the most pleasant exchange he’d ever had with Billy. If Billy only knew his mom had the same thing in common. And he chuckled because Billy also knew who Simon Le Bon was. And then he made a face as he realized what Billy had just told him. He did not want to know anything like that about Billy’s parents. He hoped he never met them.

It was weird though, seeing Billy outside of his usual context. Other than the night of the incident, he’d only really seen Billy in school. Almost as odd as running into a teacher - like somehow they only existed inside those walls.

He picked up some Twizzlers and a large bag of peanut M&Ms for the road trip and headed to the checkout counter at the front. The clerk didn’t say anything when he checked out, but Steve assumed he was distracted by Lacy Collins who had just walked in. She was two years Steve’s senior and Prom Queen when she had attended Hawkins High. Steve had known her, but only as the girlfriend of someone on the basketball team that occasionally went to the same parties.

“Hi, Steve,” Lacy greeted him as she walked up with a pleasant smile. “Haven’t seen you in a while. Graduated yet?”

“Senior year,” he said, pulling his wallet out and waited for the clerk to stop staring and tell him what he owed him. “Can’t wait.”

“I’ll bet. How’s - what was his name you hung out with? Timmy? Jimmy?” She smacked her gum which was a habit that annoyed him. Carol used to do that. Probably still did.

The clerk got over himself and muttered the total while still gaping at Lacy. She was a looker, Steve gave her that. Steve handed him a twenty and took the change while answering. “Tommy. I, uh, don’t hang out with him much anymore. You still seeing Paul?” Paul and she had been the Tommy and Carol of their year - on again, off again...but everyone thought they would probably get married eventually. He stepped away from the counter to allow the person behind him to check out.

“Nah...he went out of state to college. We tried the long distance thing but it just didn’t work. Too bad about you and Tommy but that happens sometimes. You planning on going to college? Paul is really enjoying Purdue.” Steve thought she sounded too affectionate about it to necessarily think they were completely over.

“I’ve, uh applied to a few. Haven’t heard back yet.” He, at least, had done something useful on his time off, even if the essays were probably terrible. He didn’t really expect anything except maybe...
University of Indiana which took just about anyone. But to keep his parents happy, he had at least applied to some of the ones they wanted him to, including Purdue. He was sure that was not going to happen.

“Cool,” she replied.

“What are you doing now?” he asked politely.

“I’m working at Megan’s Hair Salon. I’m...uh looking for clients.” She reached up and touched his hair. “I could trim this up for you. You always had the nicest hair.” She smiled sweetly. Steve wasn’t sure if she was flirting as she had always been a touchy-feely kind of girl, but he could feel himself almost blushing. Had it really been that long since he’d been that awkward with a girl.

The moment was broken when Billy interrupted them. Lacy pulled her hand back and turned to look at Billy. “New girlfriend, Harrington? Why don’t you introduce me to this lovely lady?”

Billy stepped in between them. “Nevermind. I’ll do it myself. Billy Hargrove. And you are?” He held out a hand.

Lacy almost giggled and Steve could see she was already falling for his charm. Ugh.

She smiled broadly. “Lacy Collins. Steve and I are just old friends. Are you in school with him? I don’t remember you and I think I would remember someone like you,” she said as she took his hand and Billy covered it with his other one.

Steve wanted to vomit.

“I’m flattered. I’m new in Hawkins. Moved here from California. Still...trying to find my way around. Maybe you could recommend some good restaurants?”

“Sure...”

Steve decided it was time to leave. Billy flirting was not a show he wanted to watch. “Well, I’ll leave you two kids to get acquainted. I have other errands to run.”

“Leaving so soon, Harrington? Too bad.” Billy grinned at him like he had just stolen the last cookie at Christmas right from under his nose. If Steve had been interested in Lacy, he’d have been utterly irritated at how easily it had happened.

“Good seeing you, Steve. Don’t forget to make an appointment!” Lacy waved at him.

Once Steve was back in his car, he could see Lacy touching Billy’s hair much the same way as she had his. Billy smiled at her - all white teeth and charm. Then he saw Billy’s eyes shift to him and he grinned more widely and licked his teeth. Jesus, that guy was annoying and sometimes creepy. That tongue thing made him look feral and gross. Clearly, Lacy didn’t seem to agree with that assessment. Steve gave him the finger as he pulled out. Billy just laughed and waved.

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Once Steve got home, he forgot about Billy in the midst of catching up with El and giving her the magazines.

“Who is Duran Duran?” she asked, looking at the cover.
“Who is…” Steve laughed. She must not have found MTV yet. “We have got to get you newer music than what Hop probably has.” He went to his stereo and started looking for the albums. Sue him - he really was a Duran Duran fan. Billy wasn’t wrong about John Taylor’s hair being an inspiration to him, even if Steve would never admit it! He decided the live Arena album wasn’t the right one, so he pulled out their first album, ‘Duran Duran’, ‘Rio’ and ‘Seven and the Ragged Tiger’ and handed them to her to look at. He opted to play ‘Rio’ first. He thought she’d really enjoy some of the songs.

At first, she made a face at the opening but by the time they got into the chorus and Steve was singing and dancing, she got up to join him jumping around the room. They were both laughing and continued through the first side. Steve showed her how to use the stereo in case she wanted to listen to it the next day but then took her downstairs to introduce her to MTV’s “Top 20 Video Countdown”.

She was entranced and happily left him leave to go work on homework and get things packed for the weekend, including the cassette versions of the Duran Duran albums he copied. It would be some good music for the drive. He grabbed a couple of others as well that he thought she might like: ‘Sports’ by Huey Lewis & the News, ‘Born in the USA’, and Van Halen’s ‘1984’.

He also spied a Pat Benetar cassette that Carol had left behind and Steve had just never returned it. Sue him. He ended up liking it. He looked at the label and chuckled at the irony of one of the songs - ‘Wuthering Heights’. He couldn’t get away from the damned novel. Maybe it would give him inspiration for his paper. El might also like hearing a girl rock out, right? He took them to the car in the garage and decided he should do a basic check check for oil and air pressure before they took off. He hadn’t driven her car for awhile. At least she wouldn’t double check the mileage for excessive use. He couldn’t stop humming ‘Hungry Like the Wolf’. As he loaded the car, he realized he was actually looking forward to the trip. He hadn’t gone anywhere fun for so long, he was beginning to think he’d forgotten how.

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**JONATHAN’S POV**

It was a slow night at the Hawk theater. Normally Thursdays could be busy - but it depended on the films. The owner, Mr. Dawson, didn’t mind if Jonathan let Will and a friend or two in for free since he was aware of the Byers’ financial situation. Unfortunately, most of the town knew that and it was embarrassing. Jonathan hated it. He hated thinking that at some point Nancy might get bored of cheap, home-cooked meals or late nights at the lake or movies at home. He really wanted to be able to take her somewhere nice but between trying to save for college and helping out with bills as his mom accepted (which she only reluctantly took in emergencies), he wasn’t exactly flush for cash.

Obviously Nancy and he were still new to dating, but he just knew at some point it would be an issue. She had dated Steve for a year. She herself had parents that could afford to give her a fairly generous allowance, which she had mostly been saving for school as well. Having Steve as a boyfriend meant she had never had to pay for nights out.

He was only thinking about this because Will was sitting with him behind the ticket counter eating Malted Milk Balls that had recently expired. Mr. Dawson was letting Jonathan take whatever he wanted home rather then throw them out. Jonathan hated them - they were like chocolate covered sand paper, but it was something Will’s friends could snack on during their game nights at the Byers. It wasn’t like they could really go bad, right?
“I don’t want to go to the Snow Ball,” Will said. “It seems so lame.” That was what started Jonathan’s train of thought. Because while he would be working the Middle School dance, he’d have to think about the high school prom soon. Tickets would go on sale soon. Nancy would expect to go, right? He knew Steve had taken her to the junior prom the year before. He’d seen the photos tacked up on Nancy’s memory board. She had looked beautiful.

But he knew going to prom was expensive. Between tickets and a corsage and probably the expected dinner beforehand, it could easily be a couple of hundred dollars. And that’s without buying or renting a new suit and driving his own car. He was aware that some of the kids rented cars or limos to go or even got a hotel room for the night, but that was not an option. At least Nancy wouldn’t expect the last two things - but a new suit? She might. It probably wasn’t okay for him to wear the same suit he wore for the ‘funeral’ they had held for Will - a funeral that put a real dent in their household budget for no reason.

“Well, it probably is but all of your friends will be there so you can make a night of it with them,” Jonathan said.

“Did you go to yours? I don’t remember,” Will said taking a big sip of his soda.

“No,” Jonathan said flatly. He thought Will would use that as a reason not to go. He suspected maybe the real reason Will didn’t want to go was Mike and the possibility that El could show up. They had overheard Joyce asking Hopper about it. Even if Will was currently nursing a little crush on Steve, Jonathan was well aware that Will was very fond of Mike - and maybe not just in a friend way and it could be hard for Will to see Mike and El. Up until now - it had all been fairly remote for Will.

Logically Will knew Mike and El were together except they really weren’t. When El was first here, Will had been missing. Then he came back and Mike mourned El for a year. And technically she was back, but not allowed to see Mike so it must not seem real to Will.

Jonathan strongly felt that Will should go. He couldn’t avoid Mike and El as a couple forever. Couldn’t avoid learning how to be in social situations like that, not like Jonathan had tried. “But then again, I didn’t have the friends you do. I would have gone if I did.”

Jonathan was distracted by a few customers coming in for the 7:15 showing of “Oh God, You Devil” which was lame. He had tried to tell Mr. Dawson that they could sell more tickets for “Nightmare on Elm Street” if they had it, but he wanted to offer more wholesome family fare. Jonathan chuckled at that thought since their other movie which would run later that night was “Terminator” which wasn’t really family fare either. With one screen, they were limited as to what they could offer. Jonathan knew the new theater being built out at what was to be the new mall was concerning to Mr. Dawson, but Jonathan had no idea what he thought of it but avoiding playing movies people actually wanted to see wasn’t going to help.

On one hand, that would house something like five screens so the number of movie options would substantially increase which ignited a hope in him that maybe Hawkins could get more independent movies. On the other hand, it could mean Jonathan would lose his job if the Hawk didn’t survive. He had tried to suggest late night showings of the “Rocky Horror Picture Show” but was immediately shut down about the immorality of it. Jonathan hadn’t seen it himself, but he’d heard about it and it sounded like it was quite a trip.

After he completed the sales and served up the requisite popcorn, extra butter and drinks, Will asked, “You said you have friends, but why do I never see them? I’ve never even heard you talk about them. Other than Nancy and Steve, who do you hang out with?”
That was a good question, actually. He didn’t really have friends. He had some school acquaintances and two of his co-workers he got along with, but they never did anything outside of school or work. Between school, work, Nancy and taking care of things at home, he just didn’t have much time for friends, even if he’d been able to make them. And honestly, after the year before and the rumors that spread between what happened with Will and the incident with the photos he had taken of Nancy, he had been generally ignored. It was only the fact that it had actually been Nancy and her then boyfriend, Steve being friendly towards him publicly that he hadn’t been downright shunned and shamed. A year of that kind of acceptance had led him to be ‘allowed’ at parties even if not exactly invited and he well knew it.

If Jonathan was another kind of person, it might bother him more but he knew his high school peers and their perception of him was not important in the long run. He had his priorities and was satisfied with them. His only concern was how his own reputation might affect Will.

“Will, it’s not the number of friends you have. It’s how good they are. I have work and school friends but they aren’t as important as you or Nancy and that’s where I want to focus my energy on.”

“And Steve?” Will asked. “He’s your friend, too? Right?”

“Sure. And Steve,” Jonathan agreed, honestly. Because after everything, he thought he could at least count on Steve to be there if he was needed. And if Steve needed him, he thought he would be there for him as well. That’s what friends did for each other. So, yes, even if Steve didn’t want to hang out with him, Jonathan would still consider him a friend.

Will nodded and then looked hesitant for a second before asking, “I’m not sure what to do at a dance. Like I know I have to dance...but I don’t really know how. And do I have to ask a girl?”

There was some stuff loaded in that sentence but Jonathan kept it simple. “You can fast dance with your friends, just like we do at home. And you don’t have to dance with any girls if you don’t want. Just avoid the slow dances. That’s always a good time to run to the bathroom, get a drink, take a breather,” Jonathan suggested.

“What if I wanted to slow dance, but I don’t know how?” Will asked. “Could you teach me?”

“Not well. It’s not like I’ve exactly danced with a lot of girls,” he admitted. “but um, Mom could probably teach you.”

“I wonder if Steve could teach me,” Will murmured and then realized what he said. Blushing, Will spat out an explanation, “I just mean - he must be a good dancer, right? He’s dated a lot. And boys are supposed to lead - so Mom couldn’t really teach me that.”

Jonathan bit his lip. “I uh...don’t know if he knows how but I’m not sure he would dance with another boy - even to teach him.” Jonathan thought back to some of the things Steve had said in the past. Sure, he knew Steve was nicer now and he doubted Steve would ever say anything mean to Will, but would he accidentally break Will’s heart inadvertently by implying something was wrong with boys dancing with boys?

“Would you? Dance with another boy?” Will asked. “Like if Dustin or Mike asked you to teach them, would you?” Will asked quietly.

Jonathan wondered if this was a way for Will to start talking to him and he wanted to be sure Will knew Jonathan wouldn’t reject him if what he suspected was true. “I guess. Sure,” Jonathan answered. “If they needed it, of course I would. If I knew how of course,” he said with a laugh.
“I think Steve would, too,” Will said. “He’s nice now. I even think he would dance with you if you asked him to teach you. You know - in case you want to ask Nancy to dance.”

Will waggled his eyebrows and Jonathan was trying to figure out what he had just walked into. He may not have admitted to dating Nancy yet but it had to be obvious to Will that something was going on.

He was saved by answering when their Mom came in after her shift to take Will home while Jonathan finished out his own shift.

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STEVE’S POV

It was as if Steve’s lie about his parents coming home made it happen. After finishing in the garage, it occurred to him he should call them before leaving the next day just so they didn’t call over the weekend and get angry he wasn’t answering.

It was 8:00 pm. Steve checked their schedule. There was nothing listed so he assumed he could get them at the hotel in New York.

“Steve, darling. How are you?” His mother answered. She sounded a tad tipsy. He guessed it was ‘wine o’clock’ there.

“Just fine. Hey, I just wanted to let you know I’m going out of town this weekend with Tommy. His dad got tickets for the Colts game and they invited me to tag along.” He bit his thumb hoping they’d buy the lie. Fortunately for him, they weren’t around enough to know he and Tommy no longer hung out. His dad had never liked Tommy so they didn’t know his parents.

“Well, honey that’s a good idea.” She sounded oddly relieved. “It sounds like fun. I hope you enjoy yourself. Do you have enough money?” Yeah, she was at least a half bottle in. She got more generous with money the drunker she got.

“Yes. Thank you, though. And how are you guys?” Steve asked to be polite.

‘We’re just...fine, just fine, dear. I’m glad you called, though. I know we said we were planning to stay in New York for the holiday but we’ve changed our minds. We’re coming home next week for a few days before the holiday shows start.’

Oh...uh that could be an issue with El here.

“Uh...that’s great...that’s just...great, Mom. When are you coming?” He asked, wind taken out of his sails.

“Well, as unfortunate as it is, we can’t actually fly until Wednesday night so I was hoping you could do the shopping for me. Do you have a pen and paper?”

Steve grabbed a tablet and wrote everything she listed, including the request for seasonal floral arrangements and seasonal pies to be picked up Wednesday that she had already phoned in.

“You still have some the signed checks I left you?” After he acknowledged he did, she added, “Write one out for $500 and that should take care of everything we’ll need for the next week. Do you want to invite that lovely Darcy over? She’s such a pretty girl.”
“Nancy. Her name is Nancy and, uh, she already had plans to spend Thanksgiving at her grandparent’s house - out of town.” He wasn’t ready to tell her they had broken up. That could be something to eat up time while his parents were home.

“That’s too bad, dear.”

“Is that Steven,” he heard his dad ask in the background. Sounded like other voices were there as well. Maybe they had the tv on? Seemed unlikely for them but who knew what they did to kill time in between shows and rehearsals.

“Yes. Did you want to say hello?” She asked, voice away from the phone.

“No - just ask him if the furnace man has been there yet for the maintenance and if the fireplace is ready for winter. Wood will be delivered on Tuesday.”

Of course, his dad didn’t want to talk. Just wanted to give him chores.

“Steve, your father said…”

“ I heard it. Yes, the furnace guy has been here. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“And, I assume the house is ok?” she asked a little more quietly. She knew how his father got if the house was a wreck. And Steve certainly knew that too from experience.

“Yes.” He gritted his teeth. Fortunately, it really was. He’d had some extra time during recovery to get some extra cleaning in along with completely some college applications.

“Wonderful. You’re such a good, son. It would also be lovely if some of the decorations were put up as a surprise as well. It would be so welcoming.”

“Of course.” He’d have to pull down the Thanksgiving boxes and the formal holiday china. That was a major pain in the ass. He’d have to hand-wash it all. Also, he probably needed to buy new taper candles for the mantlepiece candlesticks.

He had been twirling the phone cord in his hand, tighter and tighter as the conversation rolled on. When he realized it, he began to untangle it and turned around to see El standing there, listening.

“Well, if that’s all, Mom, I should go. I hope you have a nice trip. I’ll see you soon.”

“No - just ask him if the furnace man has been there yet for the maintenance and if the fireplace is ready for winter. Wood will be delivered on Tuesday.”

“Of course.” He’d have to pull down the Thanksgiving boxes and the formal holiday china. That was a major pain in the ass. He’d have to hand-wash it all. Also, he probably needed to buy new taper candles for the mantlepiece candlesticks.

He had been twirling the phone cord in his hand, tighter and tighter as the conversation rolled on. When he realized it, he began to untangle it and turned around to see El standing there, listening.

“Well, if that’s all, Mom, I should go. I hope you have a nice trip. I’ll see you soon.”

“Of course. Love you,” she replied is a sickeningly sweet tone. He wondered who she was performing for. Maybe it wasn’t the tv, maybe they had company in the room.

“Your mama?” El asked as he hung up. “Coming home?”

“Yes...but not until Wednesday night.”

“So we are still going to see my mama, tomorrow?” She looked worried.

“Absolutely. I can get everything done for Thanksgiving next week before they get home.” He rubbed his eyes, tired at the thought.

Now El looked relieved. “I’ll help you. I’m good at cleaning now.” She smiled at him and looked proud of herself.

He was touched by the offer. “I’d really appreciate it,” he replied. “But let’s not worry about it tonight. You want to watch tv?”
El frowned for a second and then asked. “Do you have any games or puzzles? I’ve been watching
TV all day. I’m bored.”

“Uh, sure. I think so.”

He hadn’t played anything in a long time, but they had a cabinet in the basement of old games. Uno
wasn’t a good choice for two people and Scrabble seemed like it might be too hard for El (and
himself if he was honest), Monopoly and Risk were too boring but he found Battleship buried in
there so they spent some time yelling, “You sunk my battleship!” at each other before deciding to
turn in early.

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Steve was just about to go to sleep when the walkie talkie flared to life.

“Steve...STEVE are you there? Over!”

“Dustin, is that you?”

“Yeah...I need help. And say “Over” when you’re over. Over!”

Steve’s heart started racing. What could be wrong? Did he need his bat? He started looking
around, glad he hadn’t change out of his clothes yet.

“Where are you? Are you ok? ...OVER!” He hated trying to remember that.

“At home. It’s just - it’s a mess! I keep trying to fix it and it’s horrible! Over.”


“What? No! OVER!”

“Then what? You’re freaking me out!” Steve was running down the stairs looking for his keys.
He noticed El following him down.

“You forgot ‘over’ again! And it’s my hair. It’s a mess. I tried what you said. Four pumps - but I
don’t know. It’s just sticking up everywhere! Over.”

Steve stopped and let it sink in. He looked at El in disbelief. “Your hair. You called me on the
walkie talkie at 10:00 at night because of your hair? I thought it was an emergency. I thought you
were dying or something.” He paused and then added while rolling his eyes, “Over.”

“I didn’t say it was a Code Red. I would have said “Code Red” if it was an emergency. I just need
you to tell me how to fix it.”

“Jesus Christ...man, just wash it tonight. I’ll show you how to do it later if it’s important. Over.”

“Of course it’s important! It’s for the Snow Ball! I need to look good. Over.”

“Sure, sure. Look, the SnowBall is still a few weeks away. We’ll do it after Thanksgiving, ok?
Over.”

“Cool. Thanks. And, uh...could you also teach me to dance?” Dustin sounded unsure, as if he
didn’t want to ask. He didn’t even say ‘over’.

Steve shook his head and at this point El was laughing. “Sure. Why not?” Why waste those Fred
Astair lessons his mom forced on him at 9? Someone ought to benefit from it.

“Thanks, Steve.” He sounded relieved. “Have a good trip... with your parents... tomorrow. Over.”

Steve realized maybe that was why Dustin really called. He just wanted to check in before they left. It kept him from snapping at Dustin to only call this late in an emergency. He was aware that Dustin was feeling a little proprietary over Steve. Having El take up Steve’s time was probably making Dustin feel a little left out - and Steve knew that was something Dustin was sensitive about. But he did laugh at Dustin referencing his cover story about his parents just in case anyone was spying on them. He’d have to make sure to pick up a souvenir of some type for him.

“Thanks. Good night, Dustin. Over.”

“Good night, Steve. Over.”

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WILL’S POV

Will had his walkie talkie on and smiled at overhearing Dustin and Steve’s conversation. He sometimes kept it on just in case one of the party wanted to talk...or sometimes just so he didn’t feel alone, even if his mom was home and watching tv. But Will had been right and Jonathan was wrong. Steve would teach a boy to dance. He made him happy to know that.

He decided to turn off the walkie talkie and turn on the radio instead. He’d found the NPR station and they were playing some classical music. It was pleasant. Not the same kind of tingly pleasant as when Steve played but it would have to do until Steve’s parents left town again.

He dreamt for the first time in a while that night. At first it was pleasant. He was learning to dance...first with Jonathan, then Mike, then Steve and it was nice. Then his old dog, Chester, that had passed away in the summer had shown up and began dancing around them and he was happy to see him.

It was nice until Chester began nipping at Steve, but Steve kept trying to dance. Chester kept getting more vicious and Will kept trying to keep Chester away from Steve until Steve kicked Chester. Will turned around and saw Steve with the bat in his hands. He was black and blue and bloody, swinging the bat at Chester. Will now stepped between them to protect Chester and yelled at Steve. Steve wouldn’t listen. Chester jumped on Steve and Will watched as Steve’s stomach was ripped out, but not before he had pulled his lighter out and set Chester on fire. Will screamed, not knowing how to save either one of them or even knowing if he wanted to as Chester’s burning body transformed into a burning demodog and Steve’s eyes glazed over as black smoke poured into his body through his mouth, nose, ears - everywhere. And Will was angry and horrified and, oddly satisfied.

Will woke up screaming, still angry and crying, not realizing his mom was already hugging him.

“Whoa there...you were having a nightmare. You’re ok. You’re ok.” She clung onto him until his heart slowed down and she made him some hot chocolate which tasted too ashy and was way too hot.

Chapter End Notes
OK - Will's nightmare has Steve and Will's dog fighting - similar to a demo dog. The essential thing is the dog and Steve kill each other in the dream. Chester becomes a demo dog, Steve becomes engulfed with smoke like Will had been in season 2. Will is disturbed and horrified but also slightly satisfied by the dream and it confuses him.

Also note - again there could be a delay on this story since I've finished Season 3 and have other plot/story ideas. Those ideas are much shorter so I may take a break to write them - but I doubt it would be more than two weeks before I update this again. I don't want to get too distracted on other stories - even if I have a ton of ideas. It's too bad I can't just write fan fiction 24/7.

As always - thanks for reading and hope you enjoy!
Chapter 9 - Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

More soft bonding between Steve and El as they get to see her mom and Aunt Becky. And some news about Barb is being released so Nancy and Jonathan finally get to see their desire for justice come to fruition.

Chapter Notes

No new additional warnings. We do get to see Terry and Becky Ives - plus the first time we see a little of Robin! While this story will in no way be related to Season 3, there are elements that I will still keep and Robin is one of them even if she might not be in this story a great deal, I wanted to give her a little cameo. I really like her character. Plus, we can see one way Nancy and Jonathan get those internships!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 9 - Calm Before the Storm

Jonathan’s POV

One last day of school until the weekend. Until the news of Barb’s death would hit the paper the next day. He could almost see Nancy breaking out of her skin with anxiety as she sat next to him in the car. They’d already dropped Will off but were sitting in the car trying to stay warm by drinking coffee, and waited for the bell. Or at least Jonathan was. Nancy was drinking a Tab.

“Can you go with me? You’re not working, right” she asked as she bit her thumb.

“To the press conference? Don’t we need some kind of press credentials?” Jonathan asked.

“Hopper said he’d get me in.”

“When did you ask him about that?”

“I called him last night. Said that since I worked for the school newsletter and Barb had been a student, I should be able to go so I could write an appropriate memorial for her.”

“And he bought that?” Jonathan was incredulous.

“No. Actually he laughed and said I had guts but then he said he understood. He said he thought the Mayor might actually buy that. I figured you could take pictures.”

“Are you actually going to write something for the Hawkins High Chronicles even if it’s a lie?” he asked.
“Well, sure. If I didn’t, it would seem suspicious. Plus, I think I really need to do it. I need to be the one writing about her.”

Jonathan nodded. Because he worked the previous night, he wasn’t working tonight. He had Saturday night and Sunday afternoon shifts this weekend. “Sure, I can go. We’ll need to drop Will off somewhere first. Mom’s working until 7:00 again.”

“Maybe he and Mike can go to the arcade or something? Or we could ask Steve to drive them?” Nancy said.

“We can’t keep asking Steve to watch our brothers, Nancy. It’s not really his responsibility.” Jonathan bristled. It really wasn’t and he was beginning to feel like maybe they were taking advantage of him which was a weird place for Jonathan to be. Feeling guilty about how they were treating Steve - like he was the designated babysitter and had nothing better to do.

“He won’t mind. He seems to enjoy their company,” Nancy said. They heard the first warning bell sound and got out of the car. It was nippy. Snow was clearly expected.

As they walked to their lockers, Jonathan said, “Well, it doesn’t matter if he does or doesn’t or did you forget his parents are in town this weekend?”

“Maybe, he’ll want a break from it?”

“Uh, no. According to Will this morning, he overheard Dustin saying Steve was going out of town with his parents.”

Nancy frowned but then nodded. “Okay, then I guess it’s no trouble to take them before we go.” They gathered up their books and headed in different directions to their first class.

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ROBIN’S POV

“I cannot figure out what is going on with them. I mean, Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers? Are they dating now? Isn’t she still seeing Steve? Wow - he just deserves so much better. I mean, he gets mauled by a bear and she just dumps him? Or is she cheating on him? I can’t seem to get a straight answer. What is going on? I tried to talk to him yesterday, but he just said hello and said he was in a hurry. He barely looked at me. What does she have that I don’t?” Tammy Thompson asked, plaintively.

‘Nothing. She has nothing that you don’t. You’re so much better than that priss - and why do you still care about Harrington? It’s been a fucking year and he NEVER looks at you. Not like I do,’ Robin thought and wanted to scream at the top of her lungs. How could Tammy ever think that douche was worthy of her?

“What do you think, Robin? What should I do to get his attention?” Tammy asked.

“I don’t know - but what I do know is we’re going to be late for class if we don’t move now,” Robin said, urging to move Tammy in the right direction.

As she sat in algebra class, all Robin could think was why couldn’t Tammy look at her the way she looked at Steve. Logically she knew the likelihood that Tammy would be as interested in girls as she clearly was in boys was slim to none - but a girl could dream. She guessed that’s what Tammy was doing as well. But really? Steve ‘The Hair’ Harrington? He was cute and all if you liked that kind of thing - but he was such a dick. At least he was the prior year.
As much as Robin had studied him in Click’s class and determined he was an ass, he also seems to have changed in the year since but Robin couldn’t put her finger on it. Without having class with him nor being interested in watching any of the sports he played, with the rare exception of going with Tammy to see the matches, she didn’t have much time or energy to observe him anymore. It certainly seemed as if he’d fallen out of favor with Tommy and his gang, and the new guy didn’t like him much, but that guy had some issues and couldn’t be trusted on character judgements. So, it seems as if he wasn’t as popular but he also hadn’t seemed to care about it. As far as Robin could see, he and Nancy had been going strong until just around Halloween so she had attributed it to that, even if she didn’t see the appeal of Wheeler herself. She might prefer girls, but that didn’t mean all girls. Almost was giddy about Harrington getting his comeuppance, but something about him and everything around him wasn’t sitting right with her.

Maybe she’d have to keep a closer eye on him once again, if for no other reason to make sure he didn’t finally notice Tammy. She sure didn’t want to be Nancy’s Barb to Tammy and third wheeling while they dated. That had been awkward to watch from a distance. Maybe that’s why Barb had left. Robin had often wondered about her. No one except Nancy seemed to care that Barb had just up and left. No one had asked why. Robin had her suspicions about Nancy and Barb and wondered whether Barb had the same issues about Steve and Nancy as Robin did about the possibility of Steve and Tammy. Or if Barb’s parents were even harsher about their suspected judgements as Robin’s parents were with their concern that she never seemed to date anyone. It might be a reason to run. For Robin, it might still be. She just had another year and a half of high school, then she could go away to college, hopefully somewhere that might be more accepting of her...differences.

If only Barb and her had actually known each other, maybe...just maybe things might have been different.

Maybe she should get a job and start saving money.

“Buckley? Did you hear me? The answer for number 7. I want you to work the problem on the board.”

Robin took a deep breath and headed up front to the chalkboard to solve the answer for the greatest integer of x if 5<2x<9. At least it was a simple question. Simpler at least than the question of what was going on with Harrington.

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**STEVE’S POV**

The day dragged. All Steve wanted to do was get done so he and El could get on the road. He saw the weather report, but he wasn’t letting little snow stop them from going. At best it would be two - three inches. If they hit the road by 4:00, they’d at least be on the highway before dark.

Between 6 and 7th period, Jonathan stopped him in the hallway.

“Hey, just wanted to give you a heads up that um…” Jonathan looked around nervously before continuing in a whisper, “there’s something about Barb being released today. Will said you were going out of town but I wanted you to know about it. Hopper told my mom they’re going with chemical leak.”

Steve just stared at him, surprised that Jonathan thought to tell him about it. “Thanks, man.
Yeah...actually I knew. He uh, told me when I had to go pay some fines.”

Jonathan’s looked amused and he chuckled. “Caught speeding again?”

Steve chuckled. “Not this time. Parking. Out by the junkyard...you know,” he waggled his eyebrows. “That night.”

“Hey, stop flirting with your boyfriend, Harrington! It’s gross!” Tommy yelled down the hallway, catching everyone’s attention.

Steve saw Jonathan’s shoulders hunch and his face flush a bit. Thinking of all the times that he maybe said something - or rather stood by while Tommy said shit and never stood up for him, Steve felt compelled to reply. “Why, you jealous?! I’d be lucky if he’d have me. You, on the other hand, can kiss my pretty little...” he gave him the finger as the students lingering in the halls laughed at them.

“HEY, hey now - don’t go making offers you don’t mean, Princess,” Billy sidled up beside them, glaring down the hall at Tommy.

Steve turned to Billy. “What makes you think I don’t mean that?”

“You are feeling sassy today, aren’t you?” Billy grinned. “Byers, whatever did you do to get him in the mood?” He smacked Steve’s ass and walked away. “Tommy, close your mouth and let’s go. You look like a fish standing there with your mouth gaping open like that.”

Steve and Jonathan just looked at each other as everyone else walked away. “What the hell just happened?” Jonathan asked.

“No idea,” Steve said, perplexed. Billy was like a different species sometimes.

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Other than the odd run-in with Jonathan, Billy and Tommy, nothing else happened. Steve got his things and booked it out as soon as he could. The snow was still holding off which he was grateful for.

El was anxiously waiting for him, her bags packed next to her. After taking care of a few last minute things, including making sure he put a key by the back door for Dustin to double check on Penny over the weekend, he finished loading the car. That included having El hide in the backseat under a blanket until they got out of town. No need for anyone in town to see a young girl in the car with him.

He was glad he took that precaution as he saw Billy’s Camaro pass him. He wasn’t entirely sure if Billy noticed it was him driving since he was in his Mom’s car, but no need to take chances. He hoped the knit hat he wore sort of hid his iconic hair and he had sunglasses on so hopefully no one would recognize him.

Once they were on the highway, El climbed over the seat to get into the passenger side.

“I could have pulled over,” Steve said.

“It’s ok,” El said. She looked out the window at the snow just starting to fall.

In the now dwindling light, it was making hard for Steve to see so he concentrated and didn’t say much, instead just listening to Duran Duran.
After awhile El said, “Reminds me of last year. The first time I saw snow.”

Steve wasn’t sure where to go with that. Had she been really so isolated she never saw snow? “I’ll bet that was weird,” he said, feeling stupidly at a loss for words.

“It was. It was cold. I didn’t have these,” she said, looking down at the gloves, that were too big that Steve had given her. They were sat in her lap. She had brought them up front with her even if she wasn’t wearing them.

“So - did you just never see snow or…”

“Never saw the outside until I escaped,” she admitted. “It was scary.”

Steve couldn’t imagine. How could anyone do this to a child. And how was she so...normal? Steve felt like his own issues were nothing in comparison.

“Can I ask you some questions?” Steve asked. “And you can say no if you want to.”

“Sure,” El said.

“How did you survive? I mean, I never heard the whole story. I mean - I know you escaped the lab. I know the rundown of what happened when you met the kids - but after that? How did you meet Hopper? How did you survive until you did?”

“It was ...hard. I couldn’t go to Mike’s. Too many people. So I hid. Before it got too cold, I found some places to hide, watched some people shoot animals and build fires and found food. Sometimes…ate them until I found the waffles that Hopper left.”

“You were out there during hunting season, then? That’s at least late November. How long were you out there?”

“I don’t know. Until a few snow falls. I was able to get warmer clothes but it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t going to be enough. I knew it was going to get worse. I saw Hopper and he was leaving the food so...I thought he might be...safe.”

“Wow. I just can’t imagine. You are really incredible, you know that?” Steve said, in awe.

“I know. My powers,” she sounded sad.

“No, I don’t mean that. I mean you. Most experienced campers would have never survived what you did. Just the strength and determination of that alone makes you admirable...but the courage to approach Hopper for help when you needed it? After what all those other people did to you? I find that just amazing. You’re just amazing. I...would never be able to do that.”

The exit was coming up and he glanced to be sure the road was clear before he pulled over. He saw El smiling at him. “You’re afraid. You help us but you’re afraid to ask for help. Afraid no one will want to help you,” she said, as if this was something to be impressed by.

He felt her hand touch his knee and squeeze.

“I will always help you,” she said. “Friends help each other.”

And Steve wondered why he never understood when he was younger that was exactly what friends were supposed to do. He’d never had friends who actually had. He briefly had Nancy and Jonathan - and it was true they helped each other, but only in life threatening circumstances. The
way El was talking, she meant always.

It was nice.

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*NANCY’S POV*

She was nervous but felt more like herself than she had in a while. Maybe because this was finally it. She was finally going to get justice for Barb. It may not be the exact truth, but it was something. Maybe the weirdness she’d been feeling the last few days would finally settle.

It helped that Jonathan was beside her. As Hopper had promised, there was a set of press credentials left for her. Sure, it was a cheaply typed name badge shoved in a plastic cover on an even cheaper string to wear around her neck, but it had the official City of Hawkins logo on it with Mayor Larry Kline’s name underneath it, but it still said “Nancy Wheeler, Journalist, Hawkins High Post.” There was also a matching one for Jonathan with ‘Journalist’ swapped out for ‘Photographer.’

She’d have to remember to take them in to the school’s newspaper advisor as proof she’d attended. She’d even managed to score an extra credit bonus with her English teacher if the article was good, just for ‘going above and beyond.’

Jonathan was quiet beside her but she almost hear his head thinking a mile a minute. Under normal circumstances this would be thrilling. A chance to officially represent any type of media while still a junior was quite a feat. She hated the selfish thought that crept in that it would look good on her college transcripts, but she knew that wasn’t the major driving reason why she was here. Truthfully, it had never occurred to her before now to try to attend something like this, which in hindsight, seems absurdly dumb of her. She was sure Jonathan was thinking the same.

She noticed Hopper talking to a few people just as he turned towards her. It looks as though he was looking for a quick exit out of that conversation as he nodded towards them and left the person standing there.

“Nancy, Jonathan...I see you got your credentials.” Hopper greeted them politely. Certainly no one had any assumption that Nancy knew Chief Hopper at all, but most of the locals wouldn’t be surprised by the Chief talking with Jonathan.

“Thank you. I...I mean...we really appreciate it.” Nancy stood for a second feeling awkward.

He nodded. “So...just to be clear, Jonathan will stand with the other photographers at the side or the back. You may take a seat, but not too close. I’ve told the Mayor you were coming and, as I expected, he’s happy to have a local representation outside of the Post.” He handed her a slip of paper. “He’ll call on you, but he’d like you to ask this question.”

Nancy frowned as she looked down at it. This wasn’t how most press conferences went, did it? Like reporters could ask whatever they wanted to, couldn’t they? Not that she planned to do anything about the actual truth. She knew the stakes. But still, for the Mayor, who didn’t know the truth and didn’t know that Nancy actually knew the truth, to seed questions seemed disingenuous at best.

“Yes, yes...I can already tell by the look on your face this isn’t how you’d like it to be - but
remember - we’re still on…” he quieted his voice a bit “lockdown as you could see it. Plus, it’s probably something you’d want to know anyways and it makes him look good.”

She grimaced at him as Jonathan took the paper from her hand to read it. He wasn’t wrong. It would be something she would like to know and might be a good thing. It just stuck in her craw a bit.

“Welcome to the weird world of local politics and local press,” Hopper said as he looked around. The room was now filling with not only the Hawkins Post and Channel 4 represented, but several other various local Indiana media. The biggest newspaper represented looked like the Chicago Sun Times. Nancy wondered if she should go introduce herself.

“Don’t,” Jonathan’s voice broke her concentration.

She looked at him quizzically. “I know what you’re thinking, but remember we’re not supposed to know why we’re here exactly and they don’t exactly look happy to be here. I doubt they’ll want to chat with a couple of high school kids who know nothing.”

He had a point. She deflated. It’s not like there was time anyways. People were being asked to take their seats.

Jonathan went to the aisle and stood in the same row she sat in. After the requisite introductions, the Mayor walked out.

“Good afternoon, everyone. I know it’s late on a Friday and you’re all anxious to get home to your family after a long week. I will keep this brief. A press release will be sent across the AP at the conclusion of this meeting and you will be given copies. For now, let me reassure all the citizens in Hawkins that this administration is doing everything it can to resolve this situation.

In brief, many of you will remember the disappearance of one of Hawkins’s young ladies, Barbara Holland, last fall. This briefing is an update on that investigation.”

Mayor Kline took a second to look at the large photo of Barb and her parents that was being brought out as he spoke. Earnest sincerity oozed from his voice and Nancy hated it. Seeing the photo was unexpected and sent a weird nauseous wave through her.

“I know, I…and all of us had hoped for a better outcome and that this young woman would be returned safely to us. That is sadly not the case. We have been informed that she was in fact accidentally killed in a chemical spill that happened near the Hawkins Power and Electric. While we have not done a thorough investigation as yet, we are demanding all the records to be released to bring closure to this family. The EPA will be investigating the circumstances of the spill and assess any additional dangers it could pose - but be reassured we have confirmed the drinking water is safe.”

Well, now that is what the citizens would probably really be worried about. None of them card about Barb. The whole town had looked for Will but everyone just assumed that Barb had run away. That whole year after that, knowing what she did and never being able to tell anyone had been hell. She knew there were students that blamed her or thought she knew something about where she had gone. The way Tommy and Carol had carried on hadn’t helped. Barb had been Nancy’s best friend - how could she not know anything.

The only thing that stopped those rumors had been the return of Will that had overshadowed everything, the fact that Barb was even less popular than she had been before dating Steve and Steve himself. She knew he had shielded her from some of the worst things.
She almost lost what was going on in the conference, getting sidetracked into her own memories. Suddenly she heard the Mayor calling on Tom Holloway from the Post.

“Will the results of the EPA tests be released for us to print?” he asked.

The Mayor turned to look at another man. She didn’t recognize him but he was identified as a representative of the EPA. He didn’t say much but he agreed that once all the tests were complete, the records would be available.

The reporter from the Sun Times stood and asked some questions about the facility and what kind of tests were being done that could have created the accident.

“That’s what we’re investigating. It will be thorough, I promise you.”

Another person shouted, “As thorough as the investigation into Barb’s disappearance or what happened to Will Byers.” Nancy didn’t recognize them and was too far to see the badge they wore. Instead, Nancy spun and looked at Jonathan, who had paled and lowered his camera at the person. Suddenly everyone was looking at him. Nancy almost wanted to go to him but kept her seat.

It almost seemed as if pandemonium was going to break out, but Mayor Kline seemed to have the charisma to soothe all ruffled feathers. “Please, let us stay on topic. The Byers case had a happy ending and is closed and not related to this case. This administration has complete faith that the investigation was as thorough as could be given the circumstances. And I can tell you that Chief Hopper has been instrumental in seeing both investigations done correctly. Jim...” Kline stepped aside, indicating Hopper should speak. Nancy felt horrible for him.

“Thank you, Mayor Kline. As you’ve mentioned, the investigation is ongoing but we are working with the related agencies to understand what happened and, if for any reason, wrongdoing i found, they will be held accountable. As the Mayor previously said, we all wish there had been a better outcome. My and entire department’s condolences are with her family.” He stepped back, clearly not available for questions.

The Mayor stepped back up and looked towards Nancy without looking like he was looking at her. She took that as her cue and raised her hand.

“Yes...Miss?”

“Nancy Wheeler, Hawkins High Chronicle,” she said as clearly as she could. There was a tittering of chuckles when they realized she was a high school student, but she wasn’t going to allow her nerves to get the best of her. She would ask what he wanted her to, but she could improvise as well.

“Barbara Holland was a friend of mine. In fact she was my best friend. I know as a reporter, I need to keep an emotional distance but I’m here to make sure she, and any other victim of this ‘accident’ aren’t forgotten. What will you do to make sure something like this never happens again? And how will you make sure Barbara is not forgotten.”

She knew she had the other reporters attention. This was a personal thing. She noticed a few flashes going off in her direction.

“Miss Wheeler, first may I say how very brave you are to be here and that I’m so sorry for your loss. You are right that one of our bright stars should not be forgotten. First, as a small recompense to her family, this administration will be taking care of all the memorial costs. Her family has suffered enough and should not ever have been put through this. We are currently working with
them to be sure it is everything it should be. Second, I think it’s appropriate that we will fund a Barbara Holland Scholarship for future bright stars from our very own Hawkins High. Perhaps, you might even be the first recipient, Miss Wheeler. We will work on the details on that and get back to you.”

He looked downright smug, as if a memorial and a scholarship was all that was needed for justice. That this was just a way to make him look good. Nancy reminded herself that it was still better than nothing.

The rest of the conference was slight on details but full of reassurances. Without any promised information about the type of leak or potential dangers, several reporters came to her afterwards to ask her about Barb. She found herself giving quotes, rather than taking them.

Most people were leaving as Jonathan caught up to her. “You ok?”

“Yes.”

“Tom Holloway, editor of the Hawkins Post. That was a brave thing you did. You’re on the newspaper staff at Hawkins High?”

“Yes. And this is Jonathan Byers. He’s one of the staff photographers.” They shook hands.

“You two must know my daughter, Heather,” he said.

“Not well, but we share a few classes,” Nancy replied.

“I have to say - this is the first time I’ve seen the Mayor’s office offer press passes to any high school reporters so I’m impressed.”

“Thank you?”

“And that was a good question you asked. Are you thinking of studying journalism?” he looked at both of them.

“I am. We are. I mean - I am wanting to be a reporter. Jonathan wants to do photojournalism.”

“Boyfriend?”

They both shook their heads no - vigorously. This was not the place to announce they were dating. “Just friends...we’re just friends and project partners,” they both stumbled in answering.

He didn’t look convinced but still he smiled. “Well, the Hawkins Post offers internships throughout the year. Usually it’s for college students or those who have just graduated. You should apply this summer if you’re interested.”

“Uh, we’re both juniors.”

“I might just make an exception for you. But I’ll want to see the article and some photos first.” He pulled a couple of business cards out of his jacket breast pocket and handed it to them. Call my secretary in early May and have some samples ready for review.”
“Tom! TOM! The Mayor’s ready for you!” A woman yelled out across the room.

“Well, duty calls. Very nice meeting you both.”

Jonathan and Nancy watched him walked away. She wondered if he was as flabbergasted as she was at the offer.

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STEVE’S POV

It was dark by the time they got there, but it was still fairly early - about 7:15ish. Lights were on so that was a good sign. He parked two houses down and sat for a minute looking around. No other cars came or went during that time so he decided it was safe enough if he went.

“Wait here,” he said to El.

She nodded and slunk down in her seat.

The snow was deeper here and no one had cleared anything off yet since it was still snowing. He kicked his shoes against the step before approaching the door. A pleasant looking middle aged woman cracked the door open. Steve could see the door chain was still attached.

“Not buying anything,” she moved to close the door


She stopped and eyed him up and down. “What?”

“Jane...she’s in the car. She wanted to see you but...uh...Hopper didn’t want to use the phone to call ahead.” He called her Jane because he knew that’s how Becky Ives knew her.

She slid from the door to the window and he saw her peering outside and then at him. He leaned forward to speak through the crack. “I parked down a few houses. Just wanted to be sure it was ok first.”

“Why?” she asked when she stepped back.

“Why what? Why I wanted her to be safe or…” He was confused. Why wouldn’t he want her to be safe?

“Why did she want to come? She ran away before?”

“Oh...I think you’ll have to ask her that, but she said she owed you and wanted to say she was sorry.”

The woman thought a second, stepped away and came back. She then handed a key through the door. “Pull in the alley. I have a garage out there and there’s room for a second car. Park in there and come up the back walk.”

After about ten minutes, Steve found himself walking a visibly nervous El to the back door. He was carrying her old leather bag that used to be Hopper’s and his own Nike duffel. The house looked worn down, even in the dark. The back porch sagged and the lawn looked unkempt beneath the piling snow, and now the sleet that was starting to mix in. He was grateful they made it there.
before it had really started. Becky opened the back door and be could see she was almost as nervous of El.

“Come in, come in. It’s starting to get a little wet out there.”

He walked into a kitchen piled high with papers at the table and dishes in the sink and general disorder.

“I’m so sorry about the mess. I wasn’t expecting anyone and it’s getting ready to be year-end so I’m knee-deep in paperwork.”

“I’m sorry if we caught you at a bad time.”

“No, no. It’s probably good for me to take a break. I’ve been crunching numbers for awhile. Would you like some tea or coffee...or maybe Hot chocolate, Jane?”

Becky moved anxiously around the kitchen, getting cups down.

“Could I see Mama?” EL asked.

Beckly paused and then turned around. “Oh...oh of course. You came to see her, didn’t you?” Her voice sounded like she had deflated and Steve felt for her. He knew what it was like to be excited to see someone and have them not be excited in return.

“El, why don’t we talk with your Aunt for a bit first, then you can see your mom,” Steve said as he sat the bags down on the floor. “I really appreciate you letting us barge in on you like this.” He smiled widely at her hoping it might alleviate some of the tension. He realized she looked older than he originally thought. Even in the dim lights, there were crows feet forming and some grey sprinkling her dark hair.

El looked at him with wide eyes and then back at her aunt. “Yes. Thank you. I…,” she hesitated and looked at him as if she needed help. Steve realized suddenly how little El understood about etiquette. When had she ever needed it? He was surprised she said thank you as much as she did now that he thought about it.

“I think you said you wanted to say something to her about your last visit? Go ahead. I’m sure it’ll be ok.” He patted her shoulder in support.

She glanced at Becky and then at her feet. “I’m sorry I left...and that I...took money.” She looked to Steve once again and he nodded at her to continue. “I was scared...you called Hopper and we had fought. Thought he might send me away - back to them.”

That shocked Steve. He remembered the tenseness when she had returned and surmised there had been some kind of argument, but he never heard the details. He had also never heard about the fact that he had ever thought there was a chance she would be voluntarily returned to the lab. Hopper would never have done that. That must have been a huge misunderstanding.

“It’s ok,” Becky said, wringing her hands. “I’m just glad you’re ok.” Finally she opened her arms and knelt down. There was a split second where El hesitated before she ran into them. Both of them were crying and Steve felt a little awkward but didn’t want to interrupt the moment so he just looked around and tried not to hear their conversation.

“Well, Jane…” Becky stood up, “guess we should see about getting you warmed up and settled in. Have you eaten?” She looked to both of them.
“Stopped for burgers. Drove through it,” El said.

El had been surprised when Steve placed an order through the microphone and even more so that people would just hand food to them through a window. Steve thought she really needed to get out in the world more. Apparently none of the shows she had seen had ever shown a drive-up window before. He’d half-thought to get her a happy meal but the Astroniks toys they were offering were a little too “demogorgonish” for him. She seemed happy with the cheeseburger, fries and chocolate milkshake he got for her instead.

“Ok. Maybe just some tea and cookies? Then we can take your bags upstairs and then see your mom.”

El nodded.

Steve freshened up in the downstairs bathroom while Becky got the tea steeping. He was surprised there was a full walk-in shower with a bath seat but looked like it had added on. He realized that must be where El’s Mom was bathed. He knew a bit about her condition even if it wasn’t much. By the time he was out, El and she were talking about Hopper and the games and puzzles they liked to play.

She led them upstairs to a room that was clearly decorated as a nursery except for a twin bed.

“You changed the room,” El said, as Steve sat her bag down by the nightstand.

“Well, I got rid of the crib and put the bed in. You’re a little big for a crib now,” Becky replied.

El sat on the bed and stared wide-eyed at her aunt. “You...did this for me?” She ran her hands over the light pink, floral quilt and the what was obviously a new, large stuffed bunny sitting on the bed.

“I hoped you would come back,” Becky said with a hitch to her voice. “I just hoped you were ok. I haven’t had time to do anything else.”

El looked like she was going to cry. “It’s...perfect.”

Becky gave her a watery smile and then turned it to Steve. “I’m sorry - I don’t have another room.”

“The couch is fine with me if that’s ok. It’s only two nights.” Steve would feel better sleeping downstairs anyways...just in case anyone unexpected came in. He was really beginning to wonder where this sense of protectiveness was coming from.

The lights blinked and a rush of adrenaline went through Steve. The girls just left. “Guessing your mother knows you’re here,” Becky said and led them downstairs. Steve didn’t know what to think of that or when El blindfolded herself and turned the tv to static and took her mother’s hand. The woman looked frail and catatonic. He hovered in the doorway watching when Becky came out. “We can leave them for a few moments.”

“How...I mean I know she has some ability but...I’m confused,” Steve admitted as they sat down in the kitchen again.

"So Hopper didn’t tell you everything?"

“No...but I’m guessing he didn’t tell you everything either.”

While El visited with her Mom in what was clearly a converted dining room. She must stay...
downstairs full-time but that made sense. Steve and Becky caught each other up on all the details the other knew. Steve had decided the signed non-disclosure agreement really didn’t apply here.

It was going on 9:30 by the time El came back in the kitchen.

“You have a nice visit?” Steve asked. He knew now what El was trying to do. Just make a connection even if her mom was never going to recover.

“Yes. Mama’s will never get better but she’s ok. Happy to see me.”

“And how are you?” he asked.

“Tired.”

“Guess it’s not too early if you want to turn in. Maybe relax in that new bed of yours.”

“Can I take a bath?” El asked.

“Of course, feel free to turn in early. You can use the bath upstairs. I need to get Terry ready for bed anyways. It usually takes awhile,” Becky said.

Steve realized that it must take some doing to take care of someone like that. He had a new admiration for this woman who took on this burden. “Do you want some help?”

She looked surprised but pleased at the offer. “No, but thank you. I’m kind of used to it by now.”

“Well, at least let me clean up here then,” Steve suggested.

Becky nodded.

Steve lost himself in washing the dishes and straightening up a stranger’s kitchen as best as he could. He could hear both the bathtub upstairs running and Becky coaxing Terry into the downstairs bathroom. She clearly could easily be led around physically which would explain why Becky could care for her, He didn’t mean to pry into any paperwork at the table but he noticed some bills from an at-home nursing facility which implied Becky got some help along the way. Someone must watch her while Becky worked. During their earlier discussion, she had explained that she was an accountant and could mostly work at home.

“Will you read to me?” El asked, startling Steve. She had the Hardy Boys book in her hand. Steve hadn’t realized she had packed it.

Just then Becky came around the corner. “Maybe your Aunt Becky would like to read to you for a change,” Steve suggested.

“I would love to, if that’s ok?” Becky said.

El handed the book to her and nodded. “Goodnight, Steve.” She smiled at him and gave a small wave.

“Goodnight, El. Goodnight, Miss Ives,” Steve said back as he leaned back against the counter.

“Please, it’s Becky. And good night, Steve. Thank you for bringing her.”

Watching them head upstairs made Steve feel warm and satisfied in a way he hadn’t believed he’d ever felt.
Chapter End Notes

Hopefully that was enjoyable. Nothing too dramatic or anything that moves the plot forward really (the mindflayer is taking a chapter off). Still getting to and passed the funeral and SnowBall. I know - this is taking a long while to get there but I hope you are enjoying the slow build. I'm enjoying writing this.
Chapter 10 - Larghetto and Other Tempos

Chapter Summary

Steve and El are having a quiet, pleasant morning. The folks back in Hawkins? Not so much.

Chapter Notes

Finally - the news about Barb is out and we'll see how a number of people react to it. Meanwhile, Steve and El are having a perfectly nice day outside of Hawkins.

A couple of minor warnings are in the end notes. Please check them out before reading if you need to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 10 - Larghetto and Other Tempos

STEVE’S POV

Snow covered the ground. It wasn’t deep but it made for a pretty landscape as the sun came up. He wanted to go have a cigarette on the porch but he didn’t want to wake the quiet household, plus he really was trying to quit. He had thought about just going back to sleep but he realized it had been some time since he had just enjoyed the sunrise. He retrieved his Walkman out of his duffel and decided he’d listen to some music as the day began. As he hadn’t thought to bring any of the cassettes from the car, he opted for what he had been listening to - Chopin. He knew his father would be planning on competing again next year at the International Chopin Piano Competition. He hadn’t won in 1980 and no American had taken first since 1970 and he knew his dad wanted to win it in 1985. He figured if he refreshed his own memory of Chopin’s pieces, maybe it would give them something to discuss when he was home the following week. It’s not like his dad would talk sports with him. For all his flaws, it was his dad and he still had the occasional hope they could get along. Or at least, keep the peace.

In 1980, his dad had done the Larghetto from Piano Concerto No. in E minor so he doubted he would do that again. Maybe he’d do one of the ballades or the scherzos. To start the day, he didn’t want anything as moody as the nocturne though, so he found Etude in E major and started with that. It was a bit more uplifting. He sat on the side chair and watched the snow fall as he listened. He subconsciously found himself fingering the air along with the piece. He’d never played it but he had listened to it a number of times. Maybe he’d take some time to learn it. He thought maybe he’d enjoy it now that he was doing it only for himself - and maybe a small audience of Will, Dustin and El.

He’d been there for an hour, just relaxing and listening to when he saw Becky come down the stairs out of the corner of his eye. He waved at her and she mouthed ‘coffee?’ to him. He turned off his walkman and got up.
“I didn’t mean to disturb you moving around upstairs,” Becky said quietly as he joined her in the kitchen. She was already dressed. Steve felt like maybe he should have gotten dressed too, but he was still in the sweatpants and tee he had slept in. “I always get up early. Have to be dressed and ready before Terry wakes up.” She made herself busy getting coffee ready.

He realized she thought she had woken him up by showering and getting ready. “You didn’t. I’ve been up for awhile. Looks like we had about four inches of snow. I can dig it out for you if you need to go anywhere.”

Terrr looked out the window and then back at him. “Truthfully, I need to go to the grocery store, but that can wait until later.” She looked into her refrigerator and then said “Or maybe sooner. I wasn’t expecting company. I don’t have much for breakfast other than toast or oatmeal. I only have a couple of eggs left. I don’t even have syrup for pancakes or waffles.”

Steve thought for a moment. He felt bad about barging in. “I could run to the store...or…” he spied some ripening bananas on the counter...”what kind of oatmeal do you have?”

She pulled out the old Quaker Oats quick cooking oats box and waved it at him. He wondered if he could remember how to make it without the recipe. He’d done it enough over the years he thought he could. “By any chance do you have pecans or walnuts?”

She looked at him questioningly but then peered into a pantry and pulled out half a bag of pecan pieces. “My cousin lives in Texas and sends pecans every year.”

He asked about several other ingredients and upon learning she had them, he volunteered to make breakfast and crossed his fingers he remembered how to make Banana Pecan Baked oatmeal by heart. It was a staple for him since he hated instant and thought the regular oatmeal was too slimy and left him hungry two hours after eating it. He’d remembered a baked version he had while on a trip with his parents when he was younger and found a recipe in one of the many cookbooks his mother collected but never used. He found it was easy to make a big batch and then store individual portions in the freezer for quick hearty breakfasts on school days.

The batch was baking in the oven when El came downstairs.

“Smells good,” she said, stretching and yawning.

“Good morning,” both Steve and Becky greeted her.

“Did you sleep ok?” Steve asked.

“Yes. No dreams. Peaceful.”

“Help me set the table,” Becky asked El. The two of them got busy setting the table while Steve finished cleaning up his mess. Everything looked ok and it was smelling good so he thought he did ok. He always confused baking soda and baking powder so he hoped he got that one right.

But he remembered the red tin, not the yellow box so he thought he was right.

And he was. He was happy with the results as it seemed El and Becky were too.

“This is delicious,” Becky said. “Your mom must be a great cook. She must love having your help in the kitchen.”

Steve knew she didn’t mean anything by that. Becky could have no idea that Steve’s mom wasn’t around enough to have him help her much. Sure, when she was home she expected it, but it wasn’t
often enough for it to count. Steve had enough burn marks and failed recipes to show for it. He chuckled thinking back to some of his glorious failures, as terrible as they were, he still ate them.

“I wouldn’t say that. As you can see, I’m not a neat cook,” he said, waving around to the kitchen it had taken him the entire baking time to clean.

“You cleaned up after yourself,” she reminded him.

“And you never want to try my salmon loaf. That was a disaster and smelled up the house for days.” He didn’t mention he had been 15 at the time and his parents had come home a day earlier than expected. That was a hard lesson in learning not to cook smelly food too close to their return.

Becky laughed along with Steve but he noticed El watching him cautiously. He wondered how much she knew or suspected about his parents.

After breakfast, Becky and El offered to finish up cleaning the dishes and take care of Terry while Steve went out to shovel the sidewalks and driveway. It was just as well Steve hadn’t dressed first since his clothes got soaked. It was late morning before he was showered, but it had been a really nice, pleasant morning.

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**NANCY’S POV**

It was a hard morning. Nancy had gotten up early to get the paper, but her dad was already up and reading it. Instead, she helped her mom in the kitchen, anxiously waiting to read it.

“Can you believe this? There was some kind of chemical leak at the power plant last year and they’re just now telling us about this.”

“What is that, dear?” her mom asked from the kitchen where she was getting breakfast ready. “Why don’t you come in. Breakfast is ready.” She began scooping up eggs onto a platter as Nancy put the slightly burnt toast down. “Go call your brother,” her mom requested.

Nancy had almost left the room when her dad sat the paper down and wandered into the kitchen. “The power plant. Guess they were experimenting with something and it leaked. Killed someone. Of course, she probably shouldn’t have gone onto private property like that,” her dad replied taking a slice of bacon off the plate and biting into it, clearly having no memory of who Nancy’s best friend had been. It infuriated her.

She ran upstairs just as Mike was coming out of his room.

“What’s wrong?”

“Dad’s such….he’s so…he’s…” she couldn’t get it out. Tears were choking her.

“He’s what? An idiot? Lazy? A doofus? We knew that.” Mike was trying to get her to smile but she couldn’t.

“He’s an asshole. He doesn’t even remember her. She was my best friend and he doesn’t even remember her. He blames her.”
“Whoa?!  What? What is this about?” Mike asked in a slightly demanding tone.

“The paper...they finally...printed…” she was hiccupping.  “ I haven’t even gotten to see it and he just…”

“Kids - breakfast is ready!”

“COMING!” Mike yelled.  “You want me to tell them you’re not feeling well?  I’ll bring the paper up to you,” he said softly.

She nodded and headed to her room.  Before she shut the door, he said, “Nancy, I’m sorry.”

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JONATHAN’S POV

Jonathan had gotten up early and gone out to buy a paper.  He actually bought several along with breakfast for Will, his mom and himself.  He couldn’t really afford it but felt like for once they deserved it. Plus, the Egg McMuffins were 2 for $1 so he bought four off them plus hash browns.

He was surprised when he saw Billy’s car on the road that early.  Billy always struck him as a night owl and suspected he slept until noon on weekends.  He wondered where he was going.

He arrived home to a grateful brother and sleepy mom.  He had read the article in the car quickly as he waited at the drive through.  He’d spend more time on it later and then call Nancy to check on her, but he wanted to just see it as soon as possible.  He handed it to his mom as she stood in the kitchen, drinking coffee. She read it with watery eyes and just nodded at him, acknowledging the importance of it.  He put the food on the table and Will dug in, not paying any attention to either Jonathan or Joyce. As thin as the boy was, he could put away food when he wanted to, Jonathan thought.

At least someone seemed ok.

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BILLY’S POV

It was another shitty morning.  His dad was yelling at him about something stupid and it took everything in him not to just punch the guy.  Susan just sat there staring into her stupid cup of tea as if it really held the future in its leaves. Billy didn’t need tea leaves.  He knew her future. It was to become a soggy piece of uninteresting bread left out in the rain. She was so boring and weak, she made Rice Krispies seem fascinating. How she ever produced Max was beyond him. Sure, she was a little shit but at least she was interesting at times. Max had already gotten bored of the yelling and went in to watch cartoons.

Billy just left before he did something he regretted.  At least no one would chase him down in this weather. The snow was deeper than the Camaro could really handle, but he didn’t care. If he got stuck in a snow drift, at least it would be cold. He found he was liking the cold of Hawkins more than he ever thought he would.

He once again found himself in Loch Nora, and almost drawn to the Harrington place. He
wouldn’t be able to stay long just in case the neighbors got nosy - although he had a brief thought of how to handle her but he wasn’t prepared to murder anyone just yet.

His heart raced a bit when he saw the Harrington door open, but deflated when he saw it was just Henderson. He watched as the curly-haired kid locked the door and slid the key in a small stone frog that had been placed behind a bush beside the front stoop. Honestly, could there be anymore obvious hiding place for a key? In California, all of their stuff would have been stolen by now.

He watched as Henderson looked around before scampering away. He suddenly remembered something about Steve leaving for the weekend with his parents. The Harringtons weren’t in town and Billy now knew where the key was. If that wasn’t an invitation, he didn’t know what was.

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DUSTIN’S POV

Dustin had finished feeding the cat. It was way early in the morning but he had wanted to get out of the house. It was cleaning day and if he was there, his mom would put him to work. He had found her hiding under Steve’s bed. He hadn’t hadn’t expected her to come out, but when he opened some wet food, she cautiously came out and ate, keeping an eye on him. Taking care of Penny was a legitimate reason for him to not to be able to help waxing the floors.

He sat on Steve’s floor and watched Penny for a few minutes, trying not to cry about Mews. He wondered how or if he should get his mom another cat. And could he live with it himself. Steve had tried to make him feel better but it stuck with him.

He was surprised after a few minutes when Penny sauntered up to him and allowed him to pet her. In fact, he was shocked when she crawled into his lap and headbutted his chin. He sat there for awhile taking comfort until the phone rang and startled him and Penny who took off.

He decided he had lingered enough. He heard the answering machine go off, “You have reached the Harringtons. We are not available to take your call now so please leave a message.”

“Steve? Steve...have you seen the paper? It’s about Barb...they finally printed about...shit. It’s in today’s paper. I need to call her parents...Steve, are you there?” Dustin recognized Nancy’s voice and wondered:

1. What about Barb? And
2. Why was she calling Steve about it?

He knew they had broken up, and he pretty much suspected that Nancy and Jonathan were dating, so why would she call him? It seemed awkward at best.

“Oh, shit - I forgot. You’re not there. Sorry...I’m so sorry for calling but I thought you should know. I just...well no one else was there...and you were and I just - I know you tried, ok? And I’m so sorry I called you bullshit...and I don’t know who to talk to. Jonathan just can’t understand. He got Will back and I didn’t. Crap - I know you don’t want to talk about him. Just - I hope we can talk? I thought maybe you’d like to go to her parents with me? They know you and I...thought we should go together? Uh...I don’t know. I’m so sorry. Just forget this.”

The line went dead and Dustin stared at it wide-eyed. Was she drunk? At, he looked at his watch, 9:30 in the morning? On a Saturday. She was certainly crying. He had never heard her like that.
Or anyone - except his mom over Mews.

He decided to go home, read the paper and figure out what was going on and maybe check in with Mike. Maybe he’d even help his mom clean.

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**ROBIN’S POV**

Shit. Barb was dead? Like dead? For real - dead? Not just run away because of some bullshit that happened in her life...but because of some accident? Not even an accident - but some major industrial accident. And then government covered it up? Well, that part didn’t surprise her. She didn’t really trust the government. Even if her parents liked Reagan, she did not. Not that she was a political junkie but she was aware of what was going on in the world and didn’t trust that people in power actually did things for the good of the people rather than themselves.

She had heard her mom and dad talking about the news article and they asked her if she had known Barb. She guessed they didn’t remember her telling them she knew of her, but that was it when they asked her about Barb the previous year. They had been nervous about both the Byers kid and Barb going missing in the same week. She hadn’t been allowed to leave the house for a month after that without clear supervision.

She didn’t know what to do with herself with the information. She knew everyone would talk about it at school on Monday. She could picture what some of the assholes like Tommy would say and it turned her stomach. She wondered if Harrington who she knew had been questioned in her disappearance would act since his house was the last place she had been seen. She wondered how Nancy Wheeler was handling the news. She put on her headphones and lost herself to her thoughts while listening to Stevie Nicks Bella Donna album and cried as she listened to ‘Edge of Seventeen’. Barb would never get to be that age.

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**LUCAS’ POV**

He was out early playing in the snow. Erica was pelting him with snowballs and they were laughing. It didn’t happen often, but every now and then he and his sister enjoyed each others company. Of course, it might have been because his mom kicked them out of the house for fighting and told them to take it outside. At first worked on shovelling the driveway for his dad but then Erica starting throwing snowballs at him. Then he retaliated and here they were: cold, wet, driveway half-shovelled and laughing.

He barely registered the car that pulled into the Holland’s driveway a few houses down. He only noticed at all because the neighborhood was so quiet.

“Why don’t you two come in now?” his dad said from the door.

“Aw, Dad, I was just winning!” Erica exclaimed, newly formed snowball in hand.

Lucas looked to her and then the driveway and then back at him. “Sorry, dad. I didn’t finish shovelling. We got distracted.”
“That’s ok, son. I’ll get it later,” he replied, looking up at the Holland’s house.

Wow. That was a first. His dad never let him stop until he was finished with his chores.

“It’s good to see you two have some fun,” his dad said as they walked into the house. It smelled like his mom was cooking something but they’d already eaten breakfast so Lucas didn’t know why his mom would be doing that so early.

“Mom, what are you making?” he asked as he took off his wet clothes.

“Just...something for the Hollands,” she paused and looked at them. Her eyes were a bit watery. “Hey, hang your clothes on the line to dry off and go get some dry clothes on. Then I’ll make you some hot chocolate.” Erica seemed pleased and marched upstairs after she had taken off her coat, boots, hat and gloves.

The Hollands? Had something happened? He knew what had actually happened of course, but there was a car in their driveway and now his mom, who didn’t socialize with them that much was making something for them.

“Hey nerd, one of your nerd friends is calling!” she yelled downstairs.

He ran upstairs hoping to not hear “Code red!” as was relieved when he just heard Mike calling for him over the walkie talkie, “Lucas, Will, Dustin...are any of you there?”

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**KAREN WHEELER’S POV**

At first, Karen hadn’t realized what Ted had been babbling about until Mike had stormed downstairs, bypassed the kitchen after demanding to know where the paper was and then came back in after a minute and glared at his father.

“Dad, sometimes you’re….I can’t even say it without being grounded for a week.” He turned to Karen, face flushed red. “Mom, Nancy’s not coming back down. To be honest I’d prefer not to be here either.” He grabbed a pile of buttered toast and a glass of juice and tore out of the kitchen to go back up the stairs. The paper was tucked under his arm.

“Michael Theodore Wheeler! Where do you think you are going? What’s wrong with Nancy. You come back here and explain yourself!” Karen found herself yelling at no one. A second later, Michael poked his head back into the kitchen.

“It’s like neither of you ever pay any attention to what’s going on. Ugh...why can’t you be more like Mrs. Byers?” That hurt. Karen always wanted to be there for her kids. She always offered to talk to them but they never wanted to talk to her. She liked Joyce and all but she didn’t really think she was a great mom so it hurt that her kid did. “At least she cares about what’s going on in her kids’ lives. It’s like you have no clue. And Dad...learn some tact.”

That was rich. As much as Karen loved her son, tact was not something he had in abundance. He ran off. And she was left with a wide-eyed Holly and a husband shoving another mouthful of eggs into his mouth. “What did I say,” he muttered. “Kids are damned ungrateful these days. He’s lucky I don’t take a belt to him like my dad did. Who do they think pays for all this bacon?”

“Mom!” Holly piped up. “When we go to the food store, mom gives them money.” Karen
laughed at the certainty in Holly’s voice. She wasn’t wrong of course but that wasn’t what Ted meant.

“That’s right dear,” Karen said and sat down at the table, even if she lost her appetite. She was going to have to do something about the lack of respect both Mike and Nancy had been showing for some time. And she really didn’t want Ted decided the old school methods were the way to go. They had both decided when Nancy was first born that they’d never punish their kids the way they had been raised but Karen wondered if they had been too lenient. If she had spoken to either of her parents that way, she’d have had a mouthful of soap rather than toast.

“Can I have more juice?” Holly asked and Karen decided to wait until after they had eaten and then go address the issue. She poured more juice for Holly and refilled Ted’s coffee.

“Pass the pepper,” Ted asked.

She handed it over without looking, still mulling over the past few weeks and realizing how out of hand things were getting. Mike and Nancy disappeared at all hours with no phone calls, Mike’s mouth was getting worse, Nancy seemed to alternate between anxious and angry. She wondered if she had broken up with Steve, which would explain it. She hadn’t seen him in awhile (although she had heard about the bear attack, poor kid) but Nancy never spoke about him anymore. Once, Karen had suggested Nancy take a get well basket to him and she had said his parents didn’t want her disturbing his recovery. Karen had tried to call, but they never answered. They lived up to the aloof, snooty Harrington reputation but Steve hadn’t. She found she liked the young man once she had gotten to know him. Shame if they broke up. Maybe that’s why Nancy wasn’t hungry. Boy troubles could do that. Plus, she wondered about the Byers boy. He had been coming around but Nancy insisted they had school projects together.

“Not even sure why she would be upset over the chemical leak anyways. They said it was safe - I mean except for that girl,” Ted said and Karen realized he had been talking and she hadn’t been listening.

“I’m sorry. What did you just say? What girl?” Karen asked.

“The one that went missing. Apparently she died because of that chemical leak but they say it’s safe now so I don’t know why Nancy is worried.”

Karen’s heart sunk. She knew. But she had to ask.

“Do you mean Barb Holland?” Karen asked, hesitantly.

“Yeah, that’s her name. Hey, pass the sugar, will you?”

She gaped at him, and yet not really surprised. No wonder Mike was upset. Ted really had no idea that his daughter’s best friend was just officially declared dead. She knew he had been less than an involved father, but this was beyond the pale.

She put the sugar bowl down hard and just spit out, “Enjoy your coffee. If you could manage it, watch our youngest daughter for a bit while I go talk to Nancy.”

He just looked up at her confused. In a quiet, angry tone she whispered, “Barbara Holland was Nancy’s best friend in case it slipped your mind.”

She stormed upstairs to see Nancy’s door was closed. She walked up to it. Just as she was about to knock, she heard Mike’s voice saying, “I’ll go with you if you want. Just say it.” Her daughter was sobbing. She almost turned away but instead steeled herself. She turned the knob quietly to see
them hugging on Nancy’s bed.

Without further delay, she joined them and wrapped her arms around both of them. “Nance, I’m so sorry. I just heard...I’m so sorry.”

She didn’t know what else to say but didn’t have to when Holly’s voice broke in “Yeah...group hug!” and she crawled in the middle of all of them. It was good to hear Nancy chuckle a little at it. After a few minutes, Nancy asked to have a little time to herself. She wanted to make some phone calls.
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**BILLY’S POV**

He waited a few minutes and moved his car over a block and parked. No one was out on this snowy morning so he was sure no one saw him go up to the door. After finding the key, he took one last look around before opening it.

He whistled looking around in the foyer. It was some rich, fancy stuff. The foyer was narrow and the door to the right was locked. Probably a study or office of some kind. There was probably booze in there, but he just knew there had to be some alcohol somewhere else in the house. Free booze - that’s what he was looking for. Sure.

Dining room looked fancy and set out for formal dinners he doubted rarely took place. Kitchen looked a bit more used, but it was spotless. Harrington either never cooked or he really liked a clean kitchen. Damn, the floors almost shone. A peek into the powder room had your typical Gaudy pink and gold floral paper and stinky potpourri. He took a piss in the toilet because he could.

Stepping out of the powder room, he noticed the answering machine and the blinking light. Why the hell not. There were three messages. He pressed play. The first was a message for blah, blah blah to pick up some blah blah blahs on Monday - apparently for some holiday get together. The second was a sales call wanting to know if they wanted to add Cinemax to their cable line-up. The third was little Miss Wheeler sounding like a crying drunk going on and on about some kind of tragedy or another and wanting to know if Steve would go with her. This sounded interesting...or at least more interesting than most things in this town.

As he stood there listening to her, he noticed the sliding glass doors that led to an in-ground pool. Damn, this is how the rich folks live? He vaguely remembered rumors about the pool - something about it being heated? Wow, must be nice to be able to waste money. He blinked for a minute and got a sudden image of someone sitting by the pool, someone he didn’t recognize but she was dressed for cold weather even if she was kicking her feet in the water - but it was like he saw her from below. It was dark, he pulled on her and she screamed. He shook his head wondering why he was imagining shit like that. He must have stayed up too late reading The Shining once again. It was one of his favorites but now he was starting to see scary stuff when nothing was going on.

He saw a door that led downstairs. He almost decided not to look and then decided he was being a pussy and opted to follow it and it was clear this was where Harrington must spend most of his time. It was neat, but the sofa and recliners looked like they had been sat in frequently. A few blankets were draped along the back and the fireplace, while recently swept, looked used. Movies and records lined the built-in shelves, along with some games. He got nosy and started going
through them. There was a Duran Duran record on the turntable. Not his choice, but he put it one anyways. He lit a cigarette and listened to Hungry Like the Wolf as he continued snooping. He didn’t care if the smoke get into the curtains or not. Let Harrington explain that to his mommy and daddy.

There was a pool table towards the back wall. He racked himself up a set and played a round. He wasn’t bad but it had been awhile. He wondered if Steve was any good. Maybe he should make a bet with him.

He sat on the sofa and turned the tv on just to see what the last channel was he watched. Hmnnn, MTV was on. Well, that explained the Duran Duran shit.

He found the laundry room and some general storage. If he were a lesser man, he might have lingered and gotten nosier but he still had the upstairs to explore.

There were a few bedrooms. Mommy and Daddy’s was plain and boring. The guest room even more boring. Jesus, how did people live like this.

He finally found the one room he really wanted - Harrington’s. It was blue and green and full of plaid. But he had his own, full bathroom. What an entitled dick. He laughed himself silly seeing the Faberge Organics and Farah Fawcett hairspray. Still - he smelled the shampoo and sure enough, it smelled like Steve. As did the soap. The bar of soap that sat there looking innocent, like it hadn’t been against Steve’s skin, lathering up his legs and body.

And it was making Billy’s thoughts go in a direction he really didn’t want to go down. He knew he was a bit of a pervert, but he had his limits. He stopped himself from smelling Steve’s sheets after all.

Instead he went to his medicine cabinet and found the Colgate and floss that kept those pearly whites so white. And the shaving cream and after shave Steve used. It was a generally boring medicine cabinet. No pills to speak of or hidden lipsticks. He kind of liked the idea of Harrington wearing bright red lipstick.

Under the sink, he found an overly large first aid kit which he questioned and a roll of twenties hidden in it which left him with more questions. He considered taking some cash. Harrington could afford it - but, he may be a snoop, but he’s not a thief.

He decided to check out the closet and that proved even more interesting. Once he finished playing with some of his clothes - ‘Look at me? I’m a fancy, preppy asshole!’ he laughed to himself looking in the bathroom mirror trying on a too tight pink Polo shirt - he found a familiar baseball bat. So, it was Harrington’s. He wondered where Max had gotten it. It seemed more in line with someone like Byer’s serial killer facade would have but it seemed it belonged to unassuming Steve Harrington. Maybe if Harrington had thought to pick it up before confronting Billy, he’d have never gotten his pretty face beaten in.

And then there was a box full of photo albums, letters and certificates...mostly of him younger playing piano. So that was him playing then? He had no idea Harrington played piano. Clearly, a decent player if the awards pictured were anything to go by. He wondered why no one ever talked about it. It seemed kind of nerdy to him but given his own occasional forays into listening to classical music, it wasn’t a bad hobby. Not that he’d ever admit that out loud.

Then he saw a picture strip of Nancy and Steve - probably one of those Mall type photo booths. He gazed at it seeing the wide grins on both of their faces. If no one had known better, it would have seemed as if these two were the happiest people on the planet and deeply in love with each
other. Billy knew better. He wondered if she thought he was bullshit back when these photos were taken. Harrington was such a sucker. He was about to go through more stuff when a light reflected off something in the back. Reaching back he felt a familiar shape.

“Now, that is what I’m talking about!” He pulled out a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels that clearly Harrington had been nursing his broken heart with. Well, Billy was going to help him out. He took a big swig. Then several more, decided being in the closet anymore reading about Steve and Nancy’s ill-fated love affair and hanging out with a baseball bat covered in nails was bullshit and decided to back downstairs. He realized he’d missed a couple of rooms. One was a small sitting room, likely a reading room for the Mrs. based on the tacky decor and one, behind double doors was a beautifully elegant room with a grand piano.

He took another swig of the bottle as he wandered the room. He saw what must be his parents for the first time in a gallery of photos on the shelves. His dad must be a professional musician. It would explain his travels. Another tidbit from Tommy was how often the senior Harringtons were out of town, although he never mentioned why.

He turned to the piano and sat at the bench. He’d always wanted to learn an instrument but his dad wouldn’t hear of it. Just as well. If he liked it, his dad would have been sure to break it at some point.

He fingered the keys and a pleasant feeling went through him. Like someone gently stroking a light finger over your arm. He played around for a bit but since he couldn’t actually play, he got annoyed with himself after awhile. He was chasing an odd sensation that he had never felt before - similar to a light tickle but not quite. But like tickling, it just got annoying. He lost track of time when her heard a sudden, “Billy...BILLY-what the hell are you doing here?!”

And just like that Max had to kill the mood. Billy heard the echo of the last round of keys he had banged on, but didn’t remember playing.

“Max? What...why are you here?” He felt confused for a second and forgot where he was.

“Me? I was hoping Steve could drive me get my haircut since you seemed to have forgotten. But here you are. What are you doing here and where’s Steve?”

“He’s gone. Out of town with his parents.” He hit the keys one more time - and it felt nice again, but not enough with her standing there.

“Then - why are you here?” she asked with her arms crossed.

He picked up the bottle of Jack he had sat down on the bench next to him. He assumed maybe he lost track of time because he’d had a bit too much. He didn’t feel drunk but he also didn’t feel quite sober. “Needed a little pick me up. Knew he’d have something hidden here. Thought it would be some shitty Bartles & Jaymes wine coolers but who knew Harrington had actual taste?”

“You’re stealing booze?”

“Borrowing,” he quipped. “Because I just might throw it up.” He laughed at the idea of puking all over the white carpet and just leaving it there. He wasn’t going to but it was funny to think about.

“Gross. Are you sober enough to drive?” Max asked.

“Sure...hey, did you break in, too?”

“No. the door was open and I heard the piano. I just thought Steve was home and listening to
something shitty on the radio or something and not answering the door.”

“Uh. You know you probably shouldn’t just barge in on people like that. Like what if he had been doing something with someone. You might have caught them ‘in flagrante delicto’. He stood up and walked towards her to head out the door. He’d at least be nice enough to lock up behind him.

“One - I don’t speak French so I have no idea what that means, and Two - he said in an emergency I could always come here and I knew where the key was if it had been locked. I need to get my haircut.”

“Ok - One - I don’t know why you think it’s ok to just walk into some 18 year old dude’s house. It’s kinda pervy. Two - a haircut is NOT an emergency. Three - It means boning. You could have caught him boning someone - and it better never be you.”

“Again - gross. He would never...” Max spit as she followed him to his car down the street.

“And four - I know exactly where to take you for a haircut. You’ll like her. She’s real nice.”

“Ugh...she’s someone you’re ‘boning,’ right?” The look on Max’s face was of pure disgust. Billy wondered how much she really understood but then he realized he probably hadn’t hidden his magazines as well as he should have. He left them for his dad to find, in the hopes they would mitigate any doubts about Billy’s interests, but being as nosy as Max was, she’d probably found them at some point and gave herself an unexpected lesson. He should probably feel ashamed about that. He didn’t.

“Not yet, but today could be her lucky day,” he replied and howled when she muttered, “Gag me with a spoon.”

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STEVE’S POV

Steve went to the grocery store and stocked up for Becky while she stayed home and she and El hung out with Terry. Steve was relieved to have a task to do.

He stopped and picked up some Kentucky Fried Chicken for them for lunch and then, since the snow hadn’t melted and had just the right consistency, he taught El how to make a snowman. He had even picked up a cheap scarf and a bright orange hat to top it off with. He had spied a good sledding hill on the drive but he didn’t have a sled. He thought once they got back though, he’d dig his out of the garage and take El one day out to Poleman’s slope where he and Tommy used to sled when they were younger. Maybe all the kids would want to go.

Seeing El smile in the snow was fun. He put her up on his shoulders for her to put the hat on and he sang Frosty the Snowman while she did it.

“Say cheese!” He turned around with El still sitting on his shoulders. Becky stood on the porch with an old camera and snapped a shot.

“Why do I have to say cheese?” El asked. Her cheeks and nose were red, but she was very relaxed.

“It’s a phrase. It means ‘Smile,’ “ Steve replied.

“Just a few more! I’ll send you and Hopper copies.”
“Why not just say ‘Smile’?” she asked him as Becky snapped photos.

“No idea,” Steve answered as he swung her off his shoulder and then they posed beside their creation. “Come on, let’s get some picture of you and Becky together as well. You could start a photo album.”

“A photo album?” EL asked.

“A book with all your favorite pictures,” Becky said as they walked up the porch. Steve took the camera from her and had them pose.

“Hopper had a book like that. Had pictures of his girl. Hidden underneath the floor,” El said as she looked up at Becky.

Steve knew she didn’t mean it the way it sounded but Becky had an odd look on her face. “His daughter. She...passed away awhile ago. He must have hidden the pictures away.”

“Understood.” She turned to look at El. “You know, I have some photo albums of your mom and me as kids. Maybe you’d like to look at them?”

El’s face brightened up and she nodded vigorously. Steve busied himself building a fire in the fireplace, keeping his fingers crossed the flue wasn’t clogged while Becky and El looked photos and Becky told stories of their younger days.

Steve couldn’t keep the feeling of contentment from welling up in his chest. At least it overshadowed the aches in his body from overdoing on the shoveling and playing in the snow.

It had been a good day.

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Chapter End Notes

A few minor warnings: dealing with some grief, bad parenting, and Billy being generally nosy snooping around Steve's house and taking his alcohol. His pervy side shows but it's not extreme.

There is also reference to Max seeing (or at least probably knowing about Billy's Penthouse mags).

FYI...this is from experience. I found my brother's magazines at about 13/14 years old and boy - yeah it gave me an education. I'm actually fairly grateful because I really did learn some things from those mags even if my parents were really open and honest and willing to answer just about any questions I had. I certainly had a much better understanding of my own body which is a good thing. Not saying those mags can't be problematic and certainly are in some ways, just saying there was also some good in them for me personally.

Also - the baked oatmeal? I make it all the time. It's delicious so of course Steve also has to like it.
Chapter 11 - A House Is Not A Home

Chapter Summary

Sunday morning - a glimpse into some Hawkins homes and parents attempting to be parents (but not Steve's yet).

Chapter Notes

Warnings: There is a little kissing/make-up scene with Billy/OC (Lacy from a previous chapter). Skip the "flashback" section in Billy's POV if this is an issue. More grieving. Nothing too graphic.

Plus - Nancy's dream gets a little intense in terms of getting some of the mindflayer thoughts starting to gain some clarity (I'm guessing by now you have all figured that she and Billy are infected even if it's moving much slower than Season 3's version - plus it won't operate exactly the same way). Also mention of Neil's bad parenting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11 - A House Is Not A Home

HOPPER'S POV

If Hopper thought Saturday was bad enough, Sunday was worse. By then enough people had gotten the news and the phones at the police station were ringing off the hook to the point Flo was ready to quit. It had been a big ask to have her work all weekend but he promised to give her a few extra days off in exchange. Same thing with the Powell and Callahan who he'd asked to come in for a few extra hours in the event they were needed along with the usual skeleton weekend crew. He had offered extra security at the lab as well but Owens turned him down and said they had that covered.

As distasteful as he found talking to various reporters following up, it was easier if they found him there at the station than follow him home. Just to be extra safe, he took up in the trailer again. He wasn’t risking the disclosure of the cabin’s location for going home. He hoped it died down before El had to come back from Steve’s place. He was very glad they were out of town. He wished they could stay away another few days.

He considered going to the Hollands to extend his condolences but couldn’t handle the hypocrisy. It wasn’t that he didn’t feel bad, it was that it was a lie and that he’d known for a year that Barbara Holland was dead. He couldn’t face her parents. He did send one of the junior officers, Jake Wallings, to their house to be sure they weren’t too bothered by reporters. He knew a few had tried but a family friend had sent them away. He also knew Nancy had stopped by late the previous evening. The officer on duty had reported seeing her. Hopper hoped she was ok. Nancy was someone that continually surprised him...much like Joyce or Steve.
There seemed to be so much more going on under the surface than one expected. Hopper considered himself a decent judge of character but certainly those three had taught him that people are often much different than their reputations would lead you to believe. Steve wasn’t some shallow, egotistical jockhead, Nancy wasn’t a prissy, good girl too eager to be with a cute boy and Joyce was never crazy or a pushover. She was something he’d have never expected. They all were. Even those who were no longer with them. In talking about Barb, he’d also had to think about Bob. Bob who he had generally liked but could never understand what Joyce saw in him. Clearly, she was the better judge of character and Hopper still had a lot to learn.

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JOYCE’S POV

Joyce loved Sunday mornings. It was the one day she always had off because Melvad’s wasn’t open, so unless they were doing inventory which only happened once a year, she had off. When she could sleep, she slept in but the last few weeks she mostly knew insomnia. The nightmares were enough to keep her from wanting to sleep but her waking hours were worse. Bob was gone. Sure, they’d only been dating for about seven months but she was sure he was the one. He’d been so good for her and for the boys.

Even Jonathan had been coming around. She had been so tempted by his offer to move - even before everything happened. She said no mostly because of Will. She knew he needed his friends but now she was beginning to think that maybe Bob was right. Hawkins wasn’t safe. Sure the gate was closed now and everything was over, but they had thought that before. Plus, with the lab closed, there was no Dr. Owens to check on him so that gave Joyce some room to breathe because, like it or not, Will would probably need to be monitored by someone. Joyce wasn’t one to think doctors knew everything but after discussing PTSD with both him and Hopper, Joyce thought all of them might need help. Maybe not Jonathan as much since he had missed the more gruesome parts. A part of her envied him for that.

She was mulling over her thoughts and trying not to cry because the boys would be up soon. Jonathan had a late shift the night before and Will slept harder during his recovery.

She decided on pancakes and bacon for everyone. She turned on the radio to listen to some music as she puttered around the kitchen. She was so happy that 107.9 WPTI had launched earlier that year. It actually had some music she liked on it. Right now, Steve Perry’s ‘Oh, Sherrie’ was playing. She preferred him with Journey but she loved his voice. She sang along with it just fine until “Our love, holds on...” then she hiccupsed back some tears wishing she hadn’t put the radio on but she couldn’t change it as he hands were full of eggs as she broke them into the bowl. She was so damned tired of crying. She stirred harder.

If nothing else, she was going to keep the family tradition of Sunday morning breakfast together going. Lord knew, they needed something to stay the same.

“Morning, mom,” Will said, sleepily as he wandered into the kitchen.

“Hey. How are you? Did you sleep well?” Joyce asked, praying for a positive answer. She choked back her tears and kept a look out the window over the sink. She didn’t want him to know. Even if he slept deeply, he was still as prone to nightmares as she was but he was also ladened with a guilt she knew he didn’t deserve. She had to really hold back her grief about Bob in front of him.

“Yeah...actually I did sleep pretty well. Uh, can I change the station?”
“Please do. I can’t handle him this early in the morning,” she replied, hoping he’d take the crack in her voice as normal morning grogginess.

“Thank you. How can you stand him at anytime is beyond me,” Jonathan said, coming out behind Will and rustling his hair.

“Be quiet, Mr. ‘I’m too edgy for Journey,’ ” Joyce teased, feeling better already. “Why don’t you start on the bacon. Will can set the table.”

“Should we resume talks for arm control with Russia? Now that President Reagan has been elected for a second term, some political analysts say that the voters have given him the right to continue these talks moving forward. We’ll be discussing this topic on Weekend All Things Considered later on NPR. Now, back to the last movement of Richard Wagner ‘Das Rheingold’, the first drama of the ‘Der Ring des Nibelungen’.”

The calm voice of the radio surprised Joyce, but not more so than the fact that Will not only turned the station to it but left it there as he started to get silverware out.

“Uh Will, why are we listening to NPR?” Jonathan asked. He didn’t sound angry or annoyed, just curious. Joyce was as well. As far as she knew, neither boy liked much outside of whatever music Jonathan picked out for them. Will tried to emulate his brother a little too much at times. Joyce thought it was kind of cool if Will found something that was completely his alone - other than art or D&D.

Joyce turned to look at Will frowning at the radio. She thought he was unhappy with Jonathan’s question. “Jonathan, it’s ok. I mean, I haven’t really listened to a lot of opera but it might be nice for a change.” At least it would never remind her of Bob the way Kenny Rogers did.

“Is that what this is? I wanted classical - but not this. Why are they all singing? And what language is this? I mean, the music itself is ok...but why are they ruining it?”

“Uh...that’s what opera is, Will. It’s people singing over music usually in Italian or German.”

“I hate it.” He turned off the radio, clearly irritated.

“Ok?” Joyce said, looking at Jonathan to see if he knew what was going on. Jonathan shrugged his shoulders.

Jonathan finished putting the bacon in the pan and let it cook while Joyce started on the first set of pancakes. He stepped away from her to help Will with the juice. “You asked me about NPR the other day, too. Why are you interested?”

“It’s stupid,” Will said, and sat in a huff.

“Of course it’s not. I just...is it something you heard about at school?”

“I heard this music that was sooo good and I wanted to hear it again. And he...I mean... they said sometimes NPR played it.”

Joyce heard the sudden switch between ‘he’ and ‘they’ and wondered about it. It was definitely a him and Will’s embarrassed about it. She wondered again if maybe Will liked boys..or maybe one
in particular. It’s certainly been on her mind off and on over the past year. She wasn’t sure how or when she should say something to him. She didn’t have any particular issues with it but knew it would cause hardships in his life and she didn’t want any more of that for him.

Will continued on. “I thought maybe it might be on but every time I turn it on, they’re never playing it. It’s been news, or talk shows or bluegrass or jazz…but it’s never what I want.”

Joyce turned around with the first of the pancakes ready and a reassuring smile. “Well, honey, do you remember the name of it. Maybe we can buy a record of it.”

Will looked delighted. “Really? Can we afford that?”

She hated that both her boys were so concerned about their finances. She tried not to talk too much about it but also had to be realistic with them why they couldn’t have all the newest things like their friends. It killed her a little every time she had to say no and even more when they stopped asking for things.

“It’s just a record. They’re not too expensive,” Jonathan chimed in. Joyce smiled at him. Sometimes she knew her and Jonathan didn’t see eye-to-eye but they both wanted the best for Will. She acknowledged that she sometimes expected too much from Jonathan and hated to do that to him. She wished it was different but they did the best they could.

“He’s right. I’m sure we can get one record. So...what is this album you want so much?”

“‘Moonlight Sonata’. I..uh can’t remember who did it though.”

“Actually, that’s a fairly common piece. Pretty sure that’s Beethoven. I mean, I’m no classical music expert but even I know that one. The used record store might have a couple of versions. We’ll go later this week. Maybe they’d let us listen to them first,” Jonathan suggested. Joyce knew he knew the owner well. He’d applied for a job there but it was a fairly popular place and didn’t have the hours Jonathan needed so he opted for the theater instead.

“Good idea,” Joyce said and reached over to squeeze Jonathan’s hand in appreciation. She wasn’t sure what this sudden interest in classical music was but she was grateful for anything that helped her son begin to get over his trauma.

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NANCY’S POV

She was exhausted. Again. She’d cried her eyes out. Again. All night. But at least she’d been able to look at the Hollands in the eye and acknowledge Barb’s death finally. She and Barb’s Mom had hugged a long time while her own mom held Mr. Holland’s hand. She was so grateful to her mom for stepping in and offering to drive her over.

Nancy had initially thought to ask Steve since he’d been there every week with her but then after that embarrassing call (and god, she wished she could go in and erase that before he got home), she decided she couldn’t wait another day. Jonathan had been working. She knew they had discussed going over together but she decided it was too weird to have him there when he hadn’t been there the rest of the time. Plus, he had been called into work and she hadn’t wanted to wait.

Her mom, however, had been the right person, least of which was because Nancy wasn’t the best of drivers when everything was ok, but she didn’t think she could drive. She almost walked as it
wasn’t too far, but it had been cold and dark and something in Nancy felt like that was too much. She was already having too vivid dreams picturing Barb dead in the Upside Down - surrounded by darkness, lying in a ditch with her face trapped under a weird vine. She wasn’t sure why she could picture it so clearly but either El or Will must have described it to her at some point. The image was so vivid it was disconcerting - almost like it was a memory instead of her imagination running away with her.

So her Mom had driven and stayed with her. They both offered to help with services or the after service luncheon but the Hollands declined except to ask if Nancy would say a few words. Of course she agreed. She knew it would be hard but she had to. Just like she still had to actually write the article for the school paper.

“Nancy, are you up?” her mom’s voice and knock at the door was soft.

“Yeah, Mom. I am. Come in.”

Karen walked in, already dressed for the day. She sat down next to Nancy and took her hand.

“How are you?”

“Ok, I think. It’s just hard...you know.”

“I know. I’m so sorry about everything. Um...can I ask you something?” Her mom sounded hesitant.


“Well, it’s just what is going on with you and Steve? I haven’t seen him around and he should be...”

“We broke up,” Nancy interrupted her mom. She started crying again. She wasn’t sure why now.

“Oh, honey. Boys are so dumb. Do I need to do anything?” She felt her mom’s arms wrap around her.

Nancy couldn’t help but laugh a little. “No...no..he didn’t...I mean it’s not his fault. I left him.”

Karen pulled away from her and looked questioningly at her. “Did he do something or...”

“No. Really. This one is entirely on me. We just weren’t right for each other and I...well it wasn’t fair for me to continue to pretend.” She reached over and grabbed a kleenex and blew her nose. “Honestly, he probably deserves better than me.”

“No. He doesn’t. No one ‘deserves’ each other, Nancy. It’s a relationship, not a prize. If you didn’t love him and you thought you never would, then you did the right thing. It’s not right to pretend until it’s too late.” Karen held her hands tightly. “You wait for the right person, you hear me, Nancy. There is no need to rush into anything.”

“Too late, I think,” Nancy whispered, feeling a tad ashamed. Her mom was the first one she was going to tell and she hadn’t said anything to Jonathan about it. Maybe it was time. New Year’s was too far away and she knew she’d need him at Barb’s funeral.

“Is there someone else...wait..Jonathan? Is that why I’ve been seeing him so much?” She looked earnestly at Nancy but she saw no judgement there so she nodded. “Oh...well he seems like a nice boy but I mean it. Don’t rush any more. You can give yourself a breather if you need to.”
Nancy nodded. She thought about voicing her doubts. She really cared for Jonathan, but she didn’t know if she loved him. They had rushed through so much and it happened during everything - it seemed like maybe it was a heat of the moment thing. She thought she could definitely love him in the future. They seem to have similar goals, minds and interests which is where he differed from Steve.

She knew she still cared for Steve - but she was never in love with him, fair or not, and she never thought she could be from a logical perspective, but he was still dear to her. And he’s changed so much, she almost didn’t recognize him from his recent actions. The spark was still there certainly. She would never deny that he was the one that introduced her to sex and he did a good job of it. He always made sure she was satisfied as best as he could and never made her feel embarrassed or pressured. Jonathan was still a bit of work in progress but she couldn’t deny that he also made her feel good - and both cases made her feel guilty at times. What is she had just never dated Steve and noticed Jonathan before - would Barbara still be alive?

“I’M BACK!” her dad’s voice rang from downstairs.

Nancy looked at her mom.

Karen smiled like they were both in on a joke. “He ran out to pick up breakfast for us. He got you your favorite waffles from Trudy’s diner. I told him about seeing Barb’s parents last night and that you’ll have to write your article today so I think it’s his way of saying he’s sorry for being such an idiot yesterday.”

Nancy knew what she really meant was her mom reminded her dad who Barb was and made him feel like an ass about it. She was a little grateful but stared incredulously at her. “Dad? Apologizing?”

“Well, it doesn’t happen often and Lord knows he doesn’t know how to say it, but he can do it in his own way.”

She decided to join them for breakfast and hugged her dad when he handed her a plate with strawberry waffles just to see the surprise on his face. Maybe it wasn’t enough but it was something. Mike looked surprised to see her but Holly was ecstatic and yelling “Nancy, Nancy, Nancy.” It made Nancy realize that maybe she wasn’t seeing enough of her little sister.

Mike was shoving his omelet in his face enthusiastically and, of course, talking with his mouth full. “Hey, I’m going over to Dustin’s after breakfast. We’re going to work on our Science Fair project. We’ll probably be all day.”

“Ok, Mike. As long as you take the garbage out first. What are you planning on doing this year?” her mom asked. Nancy could see she was willing herself to be interested, but a glaze went over her eyes as Mike started babbling about the disagreement over their topics. Nancy had to agree with her. Lucas apparently wanted to do something about echolocation and Dustin was arguing about how water affects sound.

“Is Will going to be there?” Nancy asked. “What does he want to do?” She asked more out of politeness than anything. She only had a vague idea of what echolocation was and couldn’t see the use of studying sound underwater. She got good grades in science but it wasn’t a topic that interested her that much. Chemistry and biology were ok but physics bored her.

“Not sure. He hasn’t said much.”

“What do you want to do, Mike?” Her mom asked.
“Well, I guess I could see a reason for both. I think it’s kind of interesting how some animals don’t need eyes or ears to track prey. Could be useful.” He eyed Nancy knowingly.

“Useful? How, son? Unless you’re planning on studying or hunting bats, not sure how that could be useful?” his dad asked.

Nancy’s eyes widened as she realized the implication of what he was saying. He was talking about the demo dogs and how they hunt. He thought they might come back. Even if El closed the gate. Was that possible? She only ever saw the dead one and, of course, the demogorgon, but they were enough to give her nightmares. Still, something in her felt like it was wrong and sat uncomfortably in her.

She realized she blanked out for a moment when she looked up and everyone was staring at her.

“What did you say?” Mike asked with a squeak in his voice.

“What?” Mike asked with a squeak in his voice.

“Are you ok?” Her mom asked.

She looked around and had no idea what she had said. She thought maybe she panicked a bit about the thought of her and Mike having to ever face those things again. “I, uh said, I agree with dad. That echolocation stuff sounds pointless. How about something about health-related instead - something timely. Like uh...drug addiction or something?”

“WHAT?” Karen exclaimed. “Why would that be appropriate for a middle schooler?”

“I know about drugs, mom,” Mike rolled his eyes. “I’m almost 14, not 4.” He turned to look at Nancy in an accusatory way. “I just don’t get why you think I should do something like that.”

Except she knew he did, or thought he did. He thought she was still upset with him over the whole drugging Steve thing even though they had seemed to move passed it.

“Well, I don’t think it’s an appropriate subject for Mike,” her dad interjected. “Whatever happened to making exploding volcanoes?”

"Ugh...that’s so 5th grade,” Mike said.

“Ok, maybe not drugs - but the health-related thing could be interesting and useful. Maybe you could try making an artificial heart? That’s a fairly recent development. It could be something really interesting and I’ll bet almost no one has done it at a Hawkins Science Fair before.” Karen suggested. Everyone looked at her. “What? I keep up with the news.” She smiled and sipped her coffee.

Sometimes her mom surprised her.

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**DUSTIN’S POV**

Dustin was tidying his room. Everyone was coming over later so they could talk about the science
Lucas was the first to arrive with the news that Max wasn’t coming. Her and Billy were stuck at home because, in her words, “Billy’s a total reprobate who doesn’t know how to get them home in time for dinner because he was too busy necking with his new girlfriend” and she was caught up in being grounded because she talked back to Neil when she tried to at least say some of it was her fault because she insisted they stop at the store anyways to see if there was a dress she might like for the dance.

Mike arrived soon after and the three of them started arguing over the science fair project. Will came in last as Lucas was making a pitch about the echolocation project with Dustin yelling about “Well, where the hell are we getting a bat for this demonstration?”

“I don’t know. I mean you found a creepy slime thing from the upside down and kept it for a pet so I thought you might have a supplier for weird animals,” Lucas said sharply.

“Wow...that was...kind of mean, Lucas,” Will said quietly as he walked in.

“Don’t mind him. He’s just annoyed because MAX isn’t coming over today. Like the rest of us are able to see our girlfriend any time we want. I haven’t seen El since...well you know.” Mike looked irritated and put out.

“Dude, you two are the only ones who have girlfriends,” Dustin said, also irritated. “Some of us haven’t been so lucky, right Will?” Dustin looked to Will for reassurance.

Will looked uncomfortable but Dustin didn’t know why. It’s not like he was the only one without a girl.

“Uh...so anyways...I guess you were brainstorming about the science fair?” Will asked finally, breaking some of the tension.

Lucas and Dustin both explained what they were interested in. “Which do you think is better?”

Will looked to Mike as Dustin knew he would as seemed pleased because he was sure Mike would understand how interesting learning more about how El’s telepathic powers could work if they understood how the water was amplifying it was.

“I think Lucas idea is more practical. If we understood how the demodogs found us, we could be better prepared.”

Dustin was surprised, but he guessed not altogether shocked. He deflated a bit as he waited for Will to agree with Mike like he usually did. It may be a Party where all votes were equal - but 9 times out of 10 - how go Mike so went Will.

“No,” Will said flatly.


“I think Dustin’s water idea is...more interesting. I’d like to understand more about it.” Dustin beamed at him, relieved. Maybe Will was having nightmares like Dustin was about the demodogs.
The echolocation idea just made him think about them so much more and Dustin couldn’t handle it.

“See - I told you. This is a cool idea,” Dustin grinned.

“Well...better than my sister’s idea for a project on drugs at least,” Mike said, flatly annoyed.

“Fine, fine...party wins. I’ll just research on my own I guess,” Lucas said.

“What?” Will asked looking around.

Dustin though he looked confused but then he noticed Will looking down at the Morrow’s Project book. “Oh, that’s a new game I thought we could try.”

The party spent the rest of the afternoon learning about people cryogenically frozen in underground bunkers in Nevada and awake having to survive in a post-apocalyptic world filled with people who know nothing of the rapidly failing technology and mutated animals who haunt them.

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**BILLY’S POV**

It was stupid. He knew he should never be late for family suppers - and that Max absolutely had to be there for them. It wasn’t a family dinner without his ‘new daughter’ according to his dad. Honestly, did he really believe that or was he just saying it to keep Susan happy?

Anyways, being stuck inside was just for the day and since it was cold as fuck out there, Billy didn’t care. He cared more that he was stuck cleaning the basement - without music of course, because his dad had to make sure it was a punishment. It’s not like the basement was that dirty. Neither Susan nor his dad would have ever let that happen, but this time he wanted it clean enough ‘to eat off the floor.’ And then handed Billy some toothbrushes to do it ‘just like in the Army.’ He took it without complaint because he wasn’t exactly sure his dad wouldn’t make him brush with it afterwards. At least he hadn’t hit him. But again, that could still happen afterwards if Billy didn’t do as he said.

His only satisfaction was Max was also housebound. I mean, she was allowed to stay in her room so it wasn’t much of a punishment but at least she wasn’t allowed to see her friends. He should probably feel bad about getting any satisfaction out of it because she only talked back to Neil because she was trying to help Billy. And he did - just a little. But it was ingrained in him now to feel resentful after so many years of sucking punishment because of her, even if she wasn’t aware of it. He was beginning to wonder if she was starting to catch on though. That was the only reason he could think of why she should even try to defend him.

He remembered back to the last time they broke curfew. The night with all that crazy shit that happened. His dad had only smacked him around a bit along with being grounded. He had expected the belt for as angry as his dad was but it had been some time since then. He didn’t trust it was never going to happen again before Billy left.

He lost himself in thought as he scrubbed. Why? Why had he done it? He wasn’t really interested in Lacy. He thought maybe he could learn more about Harrington through her. She seemed to know him and, as much as he hated to admit, he was becoming fascinated with the guy. He blamed it on being stuck in Hawkins with nothing to do and no one interesting to talk to. Harrington;
involvement in all that creepy stuff at least made him interesting.

His weird relationship with both Nancy and Jonathan was mildly interesting. Even the fact that he willingly gave up his crown at school to babysit made him something worth learning more about. He could admit he always found Harrington attractive - if only in the deepest parts of his psyche but this fascination was starting to get deeper than he planned. At first it was a way to pass the time, but to allow himself to get caught up in things involving him to the point of missing curfew was unthinkable. At least Max had convinced Neil that Billy had a new ‘female’ interest by talking about her haircut. And, at least Billy’s did look better. She did fix the fried part of his hair and made the curls look softer with a hot oil treatment - which he knew to never tell his dad.

Still, when Max had gone next door to look at some shops while Lacy worked on him, the two of them had gotten a little flirty. Next thing he knew, they were in the back stockroom kissing. He didn’t even remember asking her to go back there. He had last recalled her talking about some party she had gone to when she first met Steve and they played seven minutes in heaven. She realized Steve had forgotten all about it because he had been somewhat tipsy - and at 16 he was new to the high school party scene. The first few months, he apparently had gone a bit wild drinking and making out at parties until his dad found out. She heard Steve learned to be a bit more restrained after that but she had started dating Paul by then and then graduated that year.

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FLASHBACK

“So you and Harrington, huh? Was it actually heaven? Or...more like a broken vacuum cleaner?” he teased while looking at her in the mirror and slurped loudly.

She laughed. “Actually...for someone just starting out, he was pretty good. I gave him a few pointers,” she winked at Billy. “Guessing based on his reputation afterwards, he remembered them if not who gave them to him.”

“I don’t know how he could forget someone like you teaching them. I know I never would.”

“You are a charmer, aren’t you?”

“So, you ever think now that he’s older and you’re single, that you might like to go there again.” He watched her carefully. “I hear he’s really available...if you know what I mean.”

This time she did blush and stammered a “no” but he knew she was lying. She just was playing both sides. She was clearly interested in Billy.

“Well, maybe you’d prefer someone who knew how to kiss from the start,” Billy waggled his tongue at her.

Next thing he really knew, they were hot and heavy and Max was yelling “Ew, gross! Is this what was taking so long?”

Billy felt a growl and heavy irritation and being interrupted and yet he didn’t really remember much other than he knew Lacy wasn’t really doing it for him.

He was for her though based on her flushed face. “Oh my...is that the time. I need to close up. Maybe...we could...”

He looked at her and said, “I’ll call you.”
He was broken out of his thoughts when Susan came downstairs. He looked up. Christ, he’d only gotten about 20 square feet done. And it had been hours.

“Your father’s gone out for awhile. I thought...maybe you could use a break.” She was holding a can of Pepsi and a sandwich for him.

“Sure, thanks. When is he coming back?” He sat back and took a long swig of soda and a bite of a ham and cheese.

“Not until late I think. I, uh, need to run some laundry later. Is that ok?”

“It’s your house, Susan.” And it was. Billy didn’t feel like this was home. He wasn’t even sure he knew where home was. He sat there staring at a crack in the wall that seemed vaguely familiar as she went back upstairs and finished his lunch.

He didn’t realize he had nodded off until Susan came back downstairs and started the washer for what seemed like a third time as there was fresh laundry hanging on the lines that hadn’t been there before. Fuck, how long had he slept? He looked up to see her with a larger scrubber and he wanted to scream but he didn’t know why he felt so frustrated. He vaguely remembered dreaming about Lacy and Nancy and feeling like he wasn’t strong enough. That somehow he was weak and able to do nothing but wait until someone else fixed him. That he was still yearning for something but had no idea what it was.

Susan handed a scrubber to him without a word. Then took a second one and knelt down beside him to scrub with him.

He realized she was doing “laundry” to have a reason to be in the basement just in case his dad came home early.

It was probably the nicest thing Susan had ever done for him. And he felt weak with gratitude to someone who probably doesn’t deserve it.

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_NANCY’S POV_

Nancy had spent the afternoon crafting her article in between bouts of crying and anger but she knew it needed to be done. At least she had completed all her other work first. She was smart enough to realize that there was no way she’d be able to do anything after that.

She nodded off after rereading it for the third time.

She slept fitfully and her dreams were full of images of Barb trapped in Steve’s empty pool, cocooned in her winter coat and vines pumping something into her mouth. All she could think of was “She wasn’t a good host. She didn’t survive and felt oddly detached. Then Will’s face crept in and again she had this moment of thinking that he was also not a good host. He would always be the First as he had survived the vines and the taking, but was too young to truly be used and’
consumed properly. The body chemicals were not quite right yet. But he’d been the only one available so she made do with what she had.

‘She?’ The perspective felt off...wrong somehow. But he’d been instrumental in learning about this world and its inhabitants. When the first was weakened, it fled.

She felt heat and flying and searched for someone new...someone more compatible...but she felt so weak. It had been hard to keep any cohesion. An unexpected wind cast it asunder and it weakened it further. But both parts survived and found new homes. Homes that could be properly prepared, that had the right properties to take advantage of. Bodies strong enough to withstand the changes, but young enough to be malleable. In them, it was weak but was gaining strength. Connecting to each other strengthened it. Connecting to its previous home also strengthened it even if it wasn’t still truly hosted there. The echoes remained and it could still faintly touch its mind.

Having more parts in this world would bring power. The right parts. She needed others. To build more. She didn’t forget her original need - to find the source of the pain and the one who broke her door and the ones who hurt her pets - but now she had a second desire. One so closely aligned to the first it felt inevitable: Steve. He was a bright light that drew her to him. The sound drawing her towards him, sending sensations through its system, through its vessels that felt lovely - that vibrated its entire being in such a delightful way. It shuddered and thrummed and wanted more but had been unable to find it. She had never felt desire exactly. Up to now it just wanted to survive in any way it could, but now there was something more that this world had to offer and it/she wanted it.

But it was too soon. She was too weak yet. She had tried...or rather he had tried - her split apart. The Other Second - they had both been taken together and as such shared equally in the mind.

She delved deeper into the other and saw him struggling to implant a part of him in her. Like when they had done with each other earlier. It had been easy then. They both had enough to transfer between them, but there wasn’t enough yet to split into new vessels. A small part went, but it would take time to grow. And it weakened both of them to do so. It needed time to flourish.

And more of that sensation that excited it so much. The search would continue for now for alternatives. And when it was ready, it would take Steve. Until then, it would bide its time, learn and grow strong.

Nancy woke to the sound of the phone ringing. She felt confused and dazed and unsure of how she was feeling. Vague images were slipping away. She knew she had dreamt of Barb, Steve and Will but nothing else but the uneasiness it filled her with.

The ringing stopped which meant someone else answered it. She tried to get her head together. Her eyes stung and the sleepers crusted along it as her dream images slipped away from her. She swallowed some water left in the glass by the nightstand and began feeling better. A weight started lifting off her shoulders as she reread her article and felt pleased with it. This was the first step to moving forward.

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STEVE’S POV

Sunday had been pleasant and it was hard to watch El say goodbyes, but they had to get back to Hawkins. Steve had a full week ahead of him. They had prepared an early dinner before they left
and it had been a long time since Steve had a chicken pie, but it was something Terry like making. He enjoyed watching Terry teach El how to roll out a pie crust. Steve was a decent baker in terms of muffins, cookies and basic cakes, but pie-making wasn’t one of his things. It did remind him of the things he was going to have to pick up this week before his parents return.

They got in the house at about 7:00. El was exhausted and disappeared for a bit upstairs while Steve check the answering machine and mail. He was more than a little surprised to hear Nancy’s message.

He wasn’t sure what to think but before he decided anything, he found Saturday’s paper and found the article.

He sat in a stunned stupor going over everything. It really had come to a head (even if he suspected worse was coming). He felt some responsibility to talk to Barb’s parents but he kind of hoped Nancy went without him.

Even so, he picked up the phone to call her. Instead, he got Mrs. Wheeler who told him Nancy had been sleeping and she didn’t want to bother her. When Steve said something about the Hollands, Mrs. Wheeler told him about their visit.

“Ok. Then I’m glad she got there. She had left a message and I just wanted to make sure she was ok,” Steve said.

“That’s...very sweet of you, Steve,” Karen replied. “I’ll let her know you called. And Steve. I’m so sorry about everything. I mean...I know you were friends, too,” she added, like she was unsure of what she wanted to say. “I can let you know about the service? If you want me to.”

“Sure. I’d appreciate it,” Steve said figuring that maybe no one else would.

He hung up and sat staring at the wall before getting up to look at the pool. The last place Barbara Holland had been alive. Quietly, he said, “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” El asked.

He jumped. He wasn’t used to having someone in the house actually answer him when he talked to himself. Steve turned to see her in her pajamas standing beside him, with concerned eyes focused on him.

“Just...nothing. It’s nothing. Nevermind. Do you want to watch some tv?”

“Did you record that game? Foot...ball?” El asked.

“Oh, that’s right. I did. Still, want to learn all about tossing the pigskin?”

El looked disgusted and Steve realized that was a stupid thing to say. “It’s not actually a pig...I mean it used...nevermind. There are no pigs involved. Forget I said that. Still want to watch?”

She nodded.

And then he was sorry he watched since the Colts got trounced by the Patriots. Not that he was a huge Colts fan since it was hard to root for a ‘home’ team that just became the home team that year, having moved from Baltimore. It was just weird to see the players and the fans cheering them on as if they’d played in Indianapolis their entire career when they’d barely even set down any roots yet. He wondered if any of them even felt like Indiana was home.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to those of you who comment or kudo on this fic (or any others). I do appreciate it as I know other authors do. I mostly write for my own enjoyment but it's nice to hear if others enjoy it because as fun as it is to do, it is also a lot of work so it's nice to get positive feedback.
Chapter 12 - Monday Morning...You Sure Don’t Look Fine

Chapter Summary

Monday Morning - and some fallout from the news about Barb plus Steve getting ready for his parents return. No new warnings - except for how not to do laundry.

Chapter Notes

Quick reminder - viewpoints about a character from another character's viewpoints are not my own. They are what I think that character might think about a person based on what they as a character would know at that point.

No new warnings other than nothing really major happens plotwise. Hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 12 - Monday Morning...You Sure Don’t Look Fine

STEVE’S POV

It had been a relaxing weekend but now it was Monday and school was back in session and he’d already heard all the commotion about Barb and the chemical leak. He had yet to see either Nancy or Jonathan to see how they were doing, but he’d already had to fend off several nosy kids who were asking him his opinion on the whole thing since he “knew” Barb.

He already had a headache when Carol came up to him, oddly without Tommy.

“Hey - that’s weird about Barb, huh? I mean, she just left that night to go wander off in the woods? And stumbled into that? I mean, your place isn’t exactly near the power plant.”

“I thought she drove there,” Steve said trying to be non-committal about anything. He was so afraid he’d be the one to blow it.

“Yeah, but why did she drive there? Something smells fishy about this,” Carol sound, uncharacteristically suspicious.

“Talking about yourself, Carol? I hear all you need is a good douching for that little problem,” Billy said walking up to them and putting his arm around Carol.

She shoved him off. “Fuck off, Billy. We’re having a private conversation”

“Sorry. I thought it was a conversation about your privates and I hear everyone knows about that. Isn’t that right, Steve.”

Steve glared at him. “What is wrong with you? Why would you say something like that?”
“Just trying to lighten the mood. Everyone is so twitchy today. And that Wheeler chick? downright gloomy. Her and Byers are like sucking the joy out of the whole school. Not that they’re ever giddy happy - but it’s more depressing than ever looking at them.”

“You saw Nancy? Where is she?” Steve asked, hating himself even as the words came out knowing that Billy was going to try to dig in about something. He honestly didn’t know what Hargrove’s problem was but he didn’t care. For that matter, he still didn’t know why Carol was suddenly talking to him.

"Eh...her and Byers were hanging out by the photo lab,” Billy answered as if he was bored. “So, his favorite creeper place. huh?: Tommy said as he suddenly interrupted the group.

“Figures...they probably took nudie pictures all weekend. So, how was everyone else’s weekend?” Tommy asked. He knocked Billy’s arm off of Carol’s shoulder with a chuckle.

Billy looked at Steve. “I had a fantastic weekend.”

“Didn’t see you Peterson’s party, Billy,” Tommy said. “It was awesome!”

Carol rolled her eyes. “Yeah...for those who think drinking and then crashing into trees with their heads is fun because it is such an awesome idea to drink, bend over to spin around the end of a baseball bat and then try to run a straight line right into the woods is funny.”

“Well, it didn’t have quite the same fun as doing it near a creek or pool, but it was fun - what I can remember of it. Good times. Do you remember ever having any fun, Steve? I mean you used to.” Tommy was mocking Steve and he knew it. Still, he decided this was the time to start pushing back.

“Actually, I did have a nice weekend. Not quite as fun as yours it sounds like, but at least I can remember mine.”

“Why did you become so boring? Fuck - remember that time in Madrid? Those senoritas were soooo nice.” He laughed but Steve recognized it for what it was. Tommy was pissed because Steve had been his ticket to bigger things, except Steve was no longer including him.

Carol smacked Tommy.

“Sorry, not as nice as you, of course,” Tommy said to her. “How about you, Billy? Tell me all about your weekend. I’m sure it’s much better than Stevieboys.”

“Had my own party. Some good quality whiskey then a very pretty hairdresser showed me all her secrets,” Billy said, watching Steve carefully. “I think you’d have enjoyed it, Harrington.”

Ugh...did Billy mean he hooked up with Lacy? He was not falling for that trap. He wanted to go find Nancy and Jonathan. “Well, this has been fun and all - but I gotta go.” He turned to leave.

“Hey Steve, tell Nancy I’m sorry,” Carol said quietly, her hand grasping his bicep as he turned. “For everything.” He nodded at her. He wasn’t sure what was going on there but if it helped make Carol a better person, he was all for it. He sometimes missed them.

“You hitting on Harrington, now?” Billy asked loudly. “You do get around. Is it my turn next?”

“You wish,” Carol laughed.

“Hey, don’t talk about my girl that way,” Tommy said, his voice a little irritated. Steve knew he
didn’t mind if Carol flirted, but he got real sensitive if anyone thought she was serious about it.

“I didn’t mean anything bad by it. I think it’s pretty cool she doesn’t care what people say about her.”

Steve knew that wasn’t true but he was far enough away - from them physically and emotionally that he didn’t feel like going back to correct anything. He may sometimes miss them, but unless they changed a great deal more, he wasn’t interested in investing any more time with any of them.

Which was different than how he felt about Nancy and Jonathan and he didn’t understand why himself. It’s not like they had been treating him any better. In fact some would say it was worse, but somehow he didn’t feel that way. He’d always known Nancy had a soft spot for Jonathan so he couldn’t ever say he was surprised by their behavior, and he still had a soft spot for Nancy no matter how much she’d broken his heart. He knew she was a good person and that she had deeply grieved Barb. Somewhere in the mess of leftover affection, shared trauma and guilt lay a need to make sure she was okay.

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ROBIN’S POV

Mornings were hard for Robin. She had a tendency to stay up late getting overly involved in whatever she was doing and losing track of time. It made it difficult to function before third period. Today was harder because she was keeping her ears open for any gossip about Barbara Holland. Like her, Barb was never popular, or even well-liked. Barb’s reputation had been a bookish introvert who was sometimes a little holier than thou. People called her ‘Marm’ behind her back and, to Robin’s embarrassment, she even laughed at it. The high collars, the crossed arm holding stacks of books and those glasses made her look like a librarian - and not the hot type like Van Halen sang about.

Even if she and Robin were both on the outside looking in, it was for very different reasons. Barb seemed the kind of judgy like a very religious person could be - don’t talk about sex, think about sex - keep yourself pure type of person and work hard and get ahead. When she had heard that Barb not only went to a party, but apparently drank beer, she had been shocked to her core. She had been sure Barb had been a tea-totalers, prissy, uptight nag. Like she had assumed about Nancy Wheeler.

Robin was more like Jonathan Byers she assumed, even if his creepy, slightly pervy reputation preceded him. She wasn’t sure how much truth there had been to those rumors but the fact that he had taken pictures of Nancy undressing without her knowledge had certainly kept her from trying to get to know him better.

At first she’d hoped it was wrong because he seemed artsy and a little more like someone she could have a good conversation about music with, but too many people had seen those pictures to deny it had happened. She wasn’t sure how explicit they were but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that he was watching her and Steve through a window and took pictures. She had heard about Steve breaking his camera and almost felt like it was probably justified if Steve didn’t already have a reputation for being a bit of a bully himself. If Nancy had done it, she’d have cheered her on and been proud of the girl for standing up for herself. That fact her boyfriend did it seemed a little...patriarchal to her.

Still, once Jonathan was on Steve’s radar, he was on Robin’s. She hated how she had been a little
obsessed with Steve because of Tammy but in some ways he fascinated her as well. Not for the same reasons of course. Just - he made her wonder about popularity. Why was he popular when he was, why was he losing it? Why did he not seem to care? What was going on between him and Nancy? How did Byers fit in? Why did he and Tommy have a falling out? Why was it Tommy that seemed to be holding court more than Steve? How did the new guy fit in? How had he so seamlessly seemed to take over Steve’ spot? And why did he seem to watch Steve so much? Oh yes, Robin had noticed that.

Sometimes she had a stray thought he might be a bit like her. The way he sometimes looked at Steve seemed...like how she looked at Tammy. She knew it was a ridiculous thought and maybe a bit of wishful thinking. She was just hoping to find someone like her so she didn’t feel alone. Maybe that was just her projecting on both Barb and Billy.

She certainly had heard the rumors in the few weeks Billy had been in town. The girls were behaving ridiculously around him. Even Tammy had noticed him although she hoped Tammy had better taste than to seriously think Billy Hargrove was hot. Robin couldn’t see it. Although to be fair, Robin couldn’t fairly judge male “hotness”. Sure, she could objectively recognize if a guy was conventionally handsome or cure, but “hotness” was a quality that very much depended on the viewers interpretation. She had never found any guy hot. Not like she thought Tammy was. Or Carrie Fisher. Yeah - Robin definitely thought “Princess Leia” was hot - those dark eyes, that husky voice. Same for Sigourney Weaver, even if she typically liked slightly softer girls - those deep voices were sexy. Also, Ally Sheedy from that War Games movie was pretty cute. She hoped she’d been in some more things.

But she couldn’t see Billy’s “hotness.” Billy was more of an ass so far than Harrington had ever been. When he first showed up, she’d had a split second of hoping that since he was from Cali that he’d be cool. Robin desperately needed to meet people who could think outside of the little uptight morals of Hawkins, Indiana. She couldn’t wait to finally leave it behind her if and when she got to college.

Summer band camp was not nearly enough variety for her. Although, there was that one time...with the flautist but that hadn’t gone anywhere. Just a little one-sided crush - again. At least she had been nice about it and had never said anything to anyone. The girl had just said she was flattered but it was just the beer that some older kids snuck in that made her kiss Robin but she wasn’t “really” that way.

Robin thought that was a load of bullshit. She knew alcohol had a tendency to let people say how they really feel with a convenient excuse to absolve them from their own bad behavior. It’s why she avoided drinking, even at the few parties she somehow made her way to. She couldn’t risk the truth getting out before she had a way out of Hawkins. People thought band geeks were nerdy - but truthfully, many of them knew how to party hard when the jocks and other idiots weren’t around. The guys tended to get awfully handsy and Robin just wanted to avoid the whole scene. It was easier to focus on learning her instruments and the more languages than necessary for graduating - but she wanted to travel someday. She wanted to see Paris and Madrid and Venice...for now though she’s stuck in Hawkins trying to find anything interesting at all to soak up her remaining time. And yet another reason to hate Steve and Tommy. She’d heard they’d actually been to those places and yet - they’re still stuck up little townies they’d always been. Or at least Tommy was.

As she watched the morning drama unfold in the hallway, she just couldn’t shake the thought that there seemed to be so much more going on than it appeared and somehow Steve “The Hair” Harrington was in the middle of it and yet she wondered if he even knew he was. Both Billy and Tommy hovered around him - like pulling pigtails. Now Carol seemed...what interested? Trying to make up? She couldn’t hear their conversation but it was clear that Carol was trying to get his
attention and irritated that her boyfriend and Hargrove interrupted.

She watched as Steve walked away and all of them watched him intently. And he had no idea. Damn, Robin thought - for all that he seemed to have given up his ‘crown’, his subjects still just wanted his attention.

“So have you heard the latest? Nancy and Jonathan were kissing in the hallway. Like - full on making out. And both of them were crying. They’re such weirdos. You think Steve knows about them yet?” Tammy said as she came up behind Robin.

“If not, I think he’s about to,” Robin muttered, watching Steve turn the corner and out of sight. She wished she could be a fly on that wall and wondered if there would be yet another fight between Jonathan and Steve. She didn’t know who to root for exactly. She hated the thought that as little as she thought Steve deserved the attention, she couldn’t stop thinking about him. He had everything she wanted - could even have Tammy if he had the least bit of taste but for some reason he was wrapped up in Nancy Byers who seemed like she could be so much more than either Steve Harrington’s side piece or the object of creepy Jonathan Byers’ fixation.

If she knew Nancy, she’d tell her there are other options. Between Barb’s news, and Byers and Harrington, Nancy had gone from boring, prissy teen girl to full-on drama queen. At least it kept things interesting to pass the time.

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JONATHAN’S POV

“Are you sure about this?” Jonathan asked Nancy as he pulled away from the kiss, glancing around the hallway nervously. “Shouldn’t we talk to Steve, first?” He was still wiping away her tears. He wasn’t sorry he kissed her. She needed support. It was already turning into a heartbreaking day. They had come in early to turn her article in and it was just the catalyst for her to breakdown. He’d rushed her to the Photo lab but someone was in there working already and he wasn’t going to open the door while the red light was on and ruin the developing process for them. Still, the hall itself was very quiet so they stayed there for Nancy to settle.

“Well, that would have been nice, but I think it’s a bit late for that. It’s not like I didn’t already give you my ok a few weeks ago.” He grabbed Jonathan’s shoulder and squeezed it.

Jonathan cringed as he heard Steve’s voice. “Steve…I…” He really had no idea what to say or do. He didn’t think Steve was going to punch him - or throw him against a wall but he’d been surprised by others in the past.

“Nance...are you ok? I got in late last night but I did try to call you back,” Steve asked as if he hadn’t just seen her kissing Jonathan.

“Mom told me. I...appreciate it. And Steve - I’m so sorry we haven’t really spoken before Jonathan and I…” she stopped when Steve waved her away.

“Listen. I meant it. I’m not going to deny it hurts, because it does - but if you’re leaving me for anyone, it should be him. I think you need him more than me now. And I think it’s ok if the world knows it.”

“Steve, I still…”
“If the next word out of your mouth is either ‘like’ or starts with a “L”, please don’t.”

“Is ‘care’ ok? Because I do. I’m just such a mess right now, but I really do care about you,” she said with a small smile.

“Aren’t we all?” Steve replied and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms.

“That’s very true,” Jonathan said quietly. He stood near Nancy to be supportive but he didn’t want to rub this in Steve’s face. His heart sort of broke for the other man. And wow - look how far they’ve come. There was a time Jonathan would have rejoiced in winning the girl over Steve Harrington but now he wished there was a way for all of them to be happy.

“I know it probably doesn’t mean much, but I appreciate everything you do for the kids...and what you’ve done for me as well.” Jonathan shifted his feet and looked around. There were a few curious looks at the three of them standing there talking so he made sure not to make any weird movements or loud noises. “My mom would like everyone to come over for a late brunch Saturday. Would you think about joining us?”

The bell rang, summoning them to first period.

“Yeah...maybe I will. Depends on the parental units.” Steve rolled his eyes and Jonathan once again wondered about the senior Harringtons. He pushed off the wall and stepped towards Nancy. “I’ll be at the funeral if that’s ok.” She nodded at him. “See you around,” Steve said and kissed Nancy on the forehead. He nodded at Jonathan as he walked away.

Jonathan heard the deep intake of breath and smelled the familiar cologne as he walked by them. It was oddly comforting. He thought that yeah - they could all be friends or something like that soon.

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EL’S POV

She hated that Steve had to go back to school. She was so happy about her weekend and now had no one to talk to about it. She was grateful he had left the cereal out for breakfast. She was deciding what to do with her day when she noticed a written list on the table. On it had a number of things that needed to be done around the house along with a list of things to pick up before his parents got home.

Well...she had said she would help him and he deserved it. The list was long and some of the items she didn’t quite understand (what was ‘washing linens’?) and some she didn’t know how to do (polish the silver or ‘vacuuming’)? Sweeping the floor she knew, scrubbing the bathrooms she understood. She started with the latter.

It took awhile, but she found the requisite cleaning supplies and scrubbed the tubs, sinks and toilets, wiped the mirrors down with Windex and mopped the floors. She knew this. It was one of the few chores she did at the cabin even if they only had one bathroom and Steve had three and a half. She heard the phone ring a couple of times, but since she wasn’t supposed to be here, she ignored them and let the machine pick up. She couldn’t hear the messages from the first floor, but they weren’t her business. She focused on cleaning.

Working on Steve’s bathroom made her realize he hadn’t done laundry in a while. It was full. She took the hamper out and put it in his room while she finished cleaning. She remembered she saw
what she thought was the washing machine based on tv ads she had seen so she took the clothes down but she stood staring at it in confusion. She was pretty sure the machine on the right was the washer - with the lid on top and the other one was a “dryer” with the door in the front.

She thought they both looked a little like the dishwasher from the outside. The inside of both were just large holes but the washer had some kind of spinning thing in the center. Hopper always did the laundry at a Laundromat but she was never allowed to go with him because it was too public. She had asked once why they didn’t have their own after seeing an ad for Tide, he said the cabin wasn’t set up for that - something about not having the right electrical set up.

She assumed she was just supposed to put the clothes in and close the lid. And she needed some kind of soap, right. Like the dishwasher? Above the machines there was a lot of various bottles and boxes of stuff she didn’t recognize. There was no orange Tide box like the ads. But she wondered if she could use the same stuff they used in the dishwasher. She ran upstairs to grab the box of Cascade but it was almost empty. She looked around for another but didn’t find it. She noticed the Dawn on the sink which also said “dishwashing detergent” so she decided to try that.

Staring at the machine after she put the soap in and closed the lid, she tried to figure out how to start it. There were a few buttons but she realized she had no idea what the difference between cotton and rayon was or if it should be a cold or hot cycle. Figuring it was safest to just leave the settings alone, she focused on just finding how to start it. It took a minute, but it finally started.

Satisfied, she left to go clean the windows upstairs. She remembered how to turn on the stereo and had a fun time wiping all the windows down until lunch.

She stopped to get herself a sandwich before continuing with more chores. She reviewed Steve’s list. Dusting was listed. That she could do. She saw what looked like dust rags in the small closest in the kitchen that held other cleaning supplies. She started upstairs and worked her way down.

She should have never tried doing laundry.

She thought Steve was going to kill her as she stared at the bubbles all over the floor. She sat on the steps and cried.

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STEVE’s POV

Steve was so glad to be a senior and to get out a period earlier than everyone else. He had a lot on his plate to do before his parents got home on Wednesday. He stopped and picked up the floral arrangements since they were ready. He thought he’d drop them off, check in on everything and get a few things done before going back out to the grocery store.

He stumbled into the house, trying to balance his book bag and two smaller arrangements. He dropped them off in the foyer before retrieving the main arrangement.

The answering machine was flickering. He stopped to listen to the three messages.

1. “This is your mother. We should arrive home by 10:00 pm on Wednesday. If you could be sure the turkey is in the brine before 8:00, I’d appreciate it. We’ll be serving around 4:00 pm on Thursday. Your father is bringing a couple of guests who will be staying with us for
the weekend. Please be sure the guest rooms are ready. I’ll call tonight around 9:00 to verify everything.” Great - guests. Friends or work associates of his dads. That sounds truly awful.

2. “This is Hopper. Making sure you got in ok. Your house seemed ok but I was wondering if you could keep a certain package for me longer than we talked about? Still having some long hours at the office.” - fuck, that was not going to work. El couldn’t be here when his parents got back even if he’d prefer have El for company.

3. “Hi Steve, This is Dr. Owens. We still need to get some blood tests from you. Call me at 574-382-9142 to schedule.” Steve scrambled to write the number. He’d have to call if only to tell Owens he couldn’t be leaving messages on the answering machine. Had the man forgotten about his parents?

He heard El on the steps but decided he needed to call Owens before he forgot. He picked up after two rings. “Owens.”

“Hi, uh...it’s Steve. I can’t make the appointment. My parents are coming home so maybe we can reschedule for later? I can come to you.”

“Sure. Your parents are coming home?”

“For Thanksgiving,” Steve said.

“For how long?” Ownes asked with an odd note to his voice.

“Uh, I’m not sure.” Steve didn’t want to make it sound like his parents were always gone even if he suspected Owens knew it.

“I thought they were on tour?”

That stopped Steve a minute. He didn’t often meet people who knew what his dad did for a living, but after a second he realized that Steve’s background must have been reviewed when he signed those documents, therefore Owens must have been familiarized with everyone involved when he took over.

“Guess they wanted to have some family-time for the holiday,” Steve attempted to explain. Steve didn’t quite know himself except that the guests his dad was bringing may have something to do with it. Someone he wanted to impress. He looked to see El standing there, but her eyes were red, like she’d been crying. He wanted to find out what was wrong so he wanted to cut the call short.

“Uh...huh,” Owens didn’t sound convinced but he only added, “Whelp, call me when we can arrange it but make it soon please.”

“Sure,” Steve replied “I gotta go now. I promise I’ll call soon.” He hung up. “El, what’s wrong?”

“I tried to help. Really I did. I dusted and swept and cleaned the bathrooms. And they all turned out good.”

“Ok, thank you but why are you upset.”

“I didn’t know. I thought it was like the dishwasher,” El said, glancing back at the basement stairs.

Steve walked over to the steps and started down. Before he made it halfway, he already knew. Sure enough, the last remnants of bubbles were fading away and a wet mess on the floor
surrounding the washer was left.

“I tried to clean it...but I ran out of paper towels,” she said timidly. “And my powers didn’t work.”

“What did you try?” he asked, trying not to laugh.

“I tried to put throw the bubbles in the sink - but they were all squishy and just flopped all over the place,” which explained the wet spots in areas the washer hadn’t been close to.

She seemed embarrassed. He stepped up and hugged her. “El, if I had a dime for every time I screwed up the laundry when I started, I’d be rich.”

“You are rich,” El observed.

“I mean - on my own. What I’m saying is everyone has done this at least once if no one warned them that dishwashing detergent is concentrated.”

“Concentrated?”

“Yeah - it means like it’s not watered-down so you need a lot less of it.”

“I thought concentrated meant you had to think hard. Like when I use my powers - I had to concentrate.” She seemed confused.

“It does mean that. Think of it as when you are just doing your normal everyday stuff, you have a lot of thoughts going on at once, right?” She nodded. “That’s like regular detergent. But when you need to focus on one thing - every other thought is gone so you don’t need as many thoughts - just the one but it’s really strong”.

“English is weird,” El stated.

“I don’t disagree with you,” Steve said and took her hand to go back upstairs.

“That’s a double negative,” she joked as she walked.

“That’s what you picked up? And how do you know what a double negative is?”

“I heard it on tv once. That you’re not supposed to use double negatives. I figured it out.”

He realized it wasn’t that she wasn’t completely uninformed, just inconsistently informed. Without the structure of school, her learning was uneven. Probably as things on tv came up, Hopper explained them but he didn’t have a systematic method of teaching her. Not that Steve could do anything about it but he thought he might mention it to Hopper if he really wanted her to attend school later. “Well, come on, Grammar Girl, I have more paper towels in the garage and then maybe you can use those powers to help me get some boxes out of the attic. After that, we can have fun polishing silver.”

After getting the boxes out, Steve showed El how to polish the silverware so she could get started before he went downstairs to finish cleaning up after the detergent incident. Taking his clothes out of the washer, he tried to keep his horrified shriek to himself when he realized she had put all his clothes in hot water. Not only did one of his cashmere sweaters shrink enough to fit a barbie doll, all of his underwear and t-shirts were now a solid pink from the red tee shirt glaring out from the pile of clothes.

He sighed. At least it had only been one week’s worth of clothes.
DUSTIN’S POV

It was Monday night and Steve was back, so he was looking forward to seeing him. Of course El was still there so he wouldn’t have Steve to himself but that was okay. He hoped their trip went well.

When he got there, Steve and El were busy polishing some silverware and nothing was cooking. Steve looked surprised to see him and then guilty.

“Did you forget it’s Monday night? Its movie and dinner night?” Dustin said, walking past Steve towards the kitchen.

“I’m sorry... I just lost track of time. I...don’t have anything ready. And I actually need to go to the grocery store to get stuff for the holidays. My parents will be here Wednesday and I still have school and so much to do.” Steve looked a little frazzled as he came in behind Dustin if truth be told.

Dustin took a deep breath. It was okay. He knew Steve’s parents were actually coming back this week, rather than what everyone else knew and of course, he and El had a busy weekend out of town. It was understandable that Steve was a bit swamped. Just looking at El at the table concentrating on polishing silverware made Dustin realize that maybe Steve had more on his plate than he ever admitted to. Who had silverware anymore? He knew it couldn’t be Steve’s idea so he must be doing it for his parents. He noticed a number of boxes stacked in the corner. They were marked “Thanksgiving.” Dustin knew they probably needed to be unpacked.

Dustin wanted to help.

“Hey, hey... slow down. How about I help El with the silver and you go to the grocery store while it’s still open and bring back sandwiches or something? We can snack until you get back. I brought some stuff to refill our movie stash. He held up his backpack and poured out a couple of bags of snacks - chips, candy, etc…

Steve blinked but then nodded. “If that’s okay. I just...I have a lot to do and I can’t really miss school again. I’d be gone about an hour, I think?”

“Sure, buddy. It’s fine. I can hear all about your weekend from El while you’re gone.” At that, El smiled broadly as if excited to be able to tell someone about it. And he realized she probably was. She hadn’t seen Hopper and she was unable to talk to anyone else except Steve who had been with her.

“That’s great. That would be great!” Steve grabbed a list off the counter and headed out after getting their sandwich orders.

“So, El how are you?” he asked as he sat next to her.

“Good, now I’m good.”

“Tell me about your trip,” Dustin said as he picked up a knife and copied El’s movements with the polishing cloth.

It was nice, just the two of them chatting while Steve was gone. It occurred to him that he never
had the chance to just sit with her with no one else around. She warmed up quickly and he realized that while she was shy in the group setting, one on one, she was very chatty even if she sometimes struggled for the right words.

Once they got done discussing the trip, she mentioned overhearing Hopper answering machine. “I think Steve doesn’t know what to do. His parents are coming back Wednesday but I know I can’t be here. But if I can’t be at Hopper’s either, where am I supposed to go?”

“Could you hide in the basement?” Dustin asked.

“Too risky. It’s not just them. They are bringing...guests.”

Dustin wondered who was coming. Maybe some relatives?

“I thought of hiding at Mike’s,” El said. “Or back outside.”

“Oh no. Not outside for sure. I think Mike’s is also a bad idea. I hear they also have company coming. But...” Dustin thought it would be okay - “What about my place? It’s only me and my mom and she never comes into my room. And while she has Thanksgiving off, she has to work Friday and Saturday so we’d have the house to ourselves.”

“Your...place?” she asked him.

“Yeah...I mean it’s not as cool as this place, but for a couple days it should be cool, right? Hopper would be okay with it, I think.”

“Yeah - cool.” They finished up with the silverware and began unloading the boxes which had a a set of seasonal china in it that needed to be washed. Dustin knew enough about china from his grandmother’s set to know these did not go in the dishwasher so they set about hand washing them as El told him about her mistake from earlier in the day. They both laughed when he told her he had done the same exact thing except using the Dawn in the dishwasher - just to see what would happen as an experiment and told her how pissed his mom had been when she’d found Dustin at 8 years old rolling around the suds on the kitchen floor.

When Steve returned, and after a million grocery bags were unloaded, they excitedly told him the plan. Once Steve was reassured El would not be staying in the outside cellar, he said he’d ask Hopper about it, but Dustin could tell he was relieved there was a good plan B. Dustin felt quite good about being the reason Steve’s shoulders seemed to relax a bit. He’d seen the list of chores Steve was expected to finish before Wednesday and thought his parents seemed overly demanding.

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**OWENS POV**

Something about the Harrington kid’s parents wasn’t sitting well with him. They couldn’t be bothered to come home either time their son had been beaten up. In fact, based on the records he could find, it didn’t seem like they were home all that often. But they were suddenly returning to Hawkins for Thanksgiving? When, not that long ago, Steve had said implied he’d be available for tests and the house would be empty.

He buzzed his intercom. “Linda, get me the background files on the Harringtons again.”
“Ok. I’ll bring them up shortly.”

Owens then turned his attention to another folder sitting on his desk. At least this was good news. He flipped it open to see the paperwork that had been procured for Jane Hopper. He’d be having to make a trip to Hawkins soon to deliver this once the final piece was confirmed.

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Chapter End Notes

The senior Harringtons will appear soon! Probably the chapter after the next one. And more plot will develop I promise.
Chapter 13 - Lullaby and Goodnight

Chapter Summary

More El and Steve bonding (for the last time in a while I think). New characters are introduced, the plot thickens (or as my mom used to say "the thlot pickens"), new music and the untimely arrival of guests.

I know I'm late - but this was a bit all over the place and harder for me to write since I'm now adding some new plot elements - however it's a little extra long to make up for it.

Chapter Notes

Ok - some minor warnings for this chapter

1. Bad explanations of Thanksgiving from Steve. Based on his character and the time frame, I would assume Steve would still be sort of believing the whole Pilgrims eat with the Natives peacefully narrative. Also, he would have called them Indians and not Native Americans in this time frame and his lack of understanding of native history. No harm or offense is meant by this by either me or by Steve. It's how it was then. I am actually part Native American and my father's family took an active part of ceremonies growing up and I still have the ceremonial costumes my grandmother made and wore for pow-wows she participated in.

2. Probably a bad explanation of piano tuning. I've tried to keep it brief but its intention is to show Steve's knowledge of the instrument and the expectations his dad has about maintaining it.

3. It may look like a teacher has an inappropriate interest in Steve. It is not how it seems and explained quickly. The other students misinterpret it - mostly because it's Carol and Tommy and they're given to seeing the worst in everyone.

4. Introductions of new characters. Yes, I've now complicated the plot. Help me.

5. Suspicions of infidelity - of adult (not teen) characters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 13 - Lullaby and Goodnight

STEVE’S POV

Tuesday at school dragged - mostly because all he did was think about everything he had to get done after it. So many chores and errands still on the list. At least the inside windows were done
as was the silver and dusting thanks to El. He showed her how to use the vacuum and use the
dryer so the guest bedding at least would be done when he got home. He also pulled his parents
bedding down and asked her to run that. It used the same settings as the guest bedding and he left
the detergent pre-measured for her. She was still nervous about it but he felt like he wanted to give
her a small boost of confidence. And he never mentioned the pink underwear as he gave a brief
overview of how to basic laundry.

He called Hopper at lunch and thankfully he was in. But just to be safe, he kept to code.

“Hey, Hopper. I got your message. Unfortunately, I can’t keep the package at my house. My
parents would sure be surprised when they got home tomorrow night, but Dustin offered to hold
onto it for you if that’s ok?” He bit his thumb nervously as the silence dragged out as he looked
around. He wasn’t really concerned about anyone overhearing on his end. He was more nervous
about Hopper saying no or being pissed about it.

Finally, Hopper spoke. “Uh, yeah. Ok. Sorry about that. Lot of activity going on around here yet.
If you think it’s okay - but the same rules apply. I don’t suppose you could pick it up and deliver it
to me Thursday. It was a Thanksgiving present.”

Steve thought about how pissed his parents would be if he disappeared on Thursday for a little bit.
He’d be expected to help entertain at dinner, but honestly, outside of helping his Mom in the
kitchen, he didn’t think they’d want him hanging around too much. But if Hopper thought it was
safe enough, then El should have Thanksgiving with him.

“Yeah, yeah, I can do that. Probably not until late morning or mid-afternoon though.”

“That’s fine. I appreciate you looking after it for me,” Hopper replied. “Have a nice holiday.”

“You, too.” Steve hung up and had about fifteen minutes left for his lunch. He had leftover
snacks from the road trip still in his car so he just got a granola bar and some twizzlers while he
tried to start on the math homework he knew he wouldn’t have much time to do it later.
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**JONATHAN’S POV**

Tuesday was going slightly better than Monday had. Or at least Nancy hadn’t cried at all yet and,
other than the announcement for a brief assembly to honor Barbara Holland to be held the next
day, no one said anything to either of them. In fact, most people seemed a bit subdued considering
it was the last full day before Thanksgiving break. There was an early out at 12:00 for everyone the
next day. Usually the other students would be up to pranks and other hijinks in anticipation for the
fall break.

He wondered if it was finally sinking in that a classmate had actually died. Up until this weekend
it had been only a theory, along with kidnapping, running away - even alien abduction - which
turned out to be more accurate than anyone outside of the group would ever know. It was
tantamount to exciting gossip since she wasn’t really friends with anyone other than Nancy. He
overheard a few people make rude comments about Nancy yesterday, but then overheard others
shutting them down. Seeing Nancy’s public grief may have actually made it seem real. At one
time, when she dated Steve, she had been on her way to being almost popular. Some people still
seemed to like her and so had more empathy than they did when it had been Jonathan’s brother.
Maybe that wasn’t fair. Jonathan knew that maybe some people had empathized with him, but it’s not like he ever let people into his life much. Murray wasn’t wrong. He had trust issues. It hadn’t helped he’d heard all the rumors about Will’s disappearance, including that he had killed his own brother. It hurt that anyone could have ever thought that and that he heard from so few people that supported him against those kinds of rumors. Of course Nancy had - and Steve, oddly enough, at least before their fight in the alley when he threw those very same types of rumors back at Jonathan and his family. That had hurt. Even if now he understood why.

He wondered if that’s why those rumors never went much further than the meanest kids after that though. It took a bit for Steve for fall off that popularity ladder, mostly once Tommy realized he was never getting Steve back as a friend. Once they got back to school after the first round of demogorgons, Steve and Nancy didn’t pay him much attention but he also knew they didn’t allow anyone to talk shit about him anymore.

So, maybe some of that was at play here yet. Nancy still had some goodwill focused towards her from those days with Steve. Especially since, at least publicly, Steve didn’t seem to be holding a grudge towards her.

Speaking of - where was he? Jonathan looked around the cafeteria and saw no sign of him. “Have you seen Steve today?” he asked Nancy.

“No, actually. Although with his parents coming into town, I suspect he’s trying to stay under the radar.”

“Have you met them?”

“No. I mean not really. I’ve seen them a couple of times but since Steve always picked me up, I was never at the house when they were home. Truthfully, as you know, I never went to his house much to start with.”

Jonathan knew. They had discussed how being at Steve’s made her anxious. Thinking about what she should have done that night. Seeing Steve’s room and the pool made it hard to relax.

“He never really talked about them other than to say they didn’t along well. I never pushed him on it,” Nancy admitted. “I know he got anxious about making sure the house was clean if he knew they were coming back into town. And that his dad expected him to work for him after graduation which he wasn’t looking forward to.”

Jonathan thought it must be nice to know you were guaranteed a job whether or not you were qualified for it. Even if it wasn’t something you loved - a good income was nothing to ignore. People who were raised with money never appreciated how grateful they should be for it. It smacked of arrogance when someone threw away opportunities when they were thrown their way while people like his mom had to struggle for every dime and decide which bill to pay in order to not have a utility cut off.

He remembers that those two months a few years back with no electricity or heat when Lonnie had been late with support and the car broke down. Mom had chosen to pay the water bill since it was April and they could do without heat since it was Spring. Two months of peanut butter sandwiches, crackers and apples basically since they couldn’t cook or use the refrigerator. That was when Jonathan had decided to look for a job. He had just turned 15 and was allowed to work limited hours on weekends.

He suddenly realized that was also when he had realized he was jealous of Steve. Steve who got a car for his 16th birthday. Steve who always had new clothes - without tears, stains, or didn’t fit
right. He’d been working when Steve and his current girl of the month had shown up with Tommy and Carol while Jonathan had been bussing the tables at the diner.

Tommy had been loud and obnoxious and he overheard him talking about some party they were planning to go to afterwards while Jonathan would still be working. They all started gossiping about who would hook up and laughing so hard that Tommy accidentally knocked his soda all over Jonathan as he had walked passed them.

FLASHBACK

“Oops! My bad,” Tommy snickered. “But honestly, that shirt went out last decade. It’s time for the trash anyways.”

“I thought that’s where his clothes came from to start with,” the girl with Steve said with a snort. Her name was Cindy and she had been well-known to be a snob.

“They’re not that bad,” Carol added, which at first surprised Jonathan. “He’s always in the latest fashions from Good Will.” She just smiled at him and then turned to laugh with Tommy who was howling. That didn’t surprise him at all.

Steve just sat there and never said a word. Jonathan couldn’t look at any of them. Fortunately, his boss called him back at moment so he was able to escape.

He watched as Steve got up to pay for the whole table while the rest of the group had headed outside to Steve’s new car and he was seething with anger. Then he overheard Steve say, “Hey, can you give this to Byers? Tell him they were just being idiots.”

Later, the cashier, Shelley handed him a $20 and said, ‘Your friend left this for you.”

He recalls her shocked face when he grabbed it and hissed, “He’s not my friend.” He thought Steve was just trying to further humiliate him by rubbing his nose in the fact that he had money while the Byers didn’t. It grated on his nerves that he couldn’t just throw it back in Steve’s face or rip it in half, but he took it. It would be stupid to waste it when he could use it for something they actually needed.

“Who pissed in your cornflakes, honey?” Shelley asked before waiting on the next customer.

END FLASHBACK

He’s not sure why he was remembering that moment now but thinking back, he realized Steve hadn’t dated Cindy for long after that. And he realized now that he was getting to know Steve better that maybe he wasn’t trying to make fun of him as much as Jonathan had thought he had. He had just never stopped his friends from doing so.

He was also beginning to realize in some ways, Jonathan had it better than Steve. Not just Nancy - but Jonathan had a mother and brother who cared about him. People who he knew would fight for him. Nancy also had parents who cared. And a brother, even if sometimes it seemed like he didn’t, that would fight for her. Who did Steve have growing up? Tommy? Carol?

He looked around the cafeteria and saw the two in question, gathered with Billy and several other popular students and they were all laughing. Specifically at some poor soul who Tommy had just
dumped milk on. He really was only five years old sometimes.

Suddenly Jonathan appreciated the efforts Steve had made in trying to be better. He had given up his only close friends when he realized they were not who he wanted to be.

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**STEVE’S POV**

After school the day went by in a blink. Maybe because he was so nervous about getting everything done before his parents got home and there never seemed to be enough time to get all the errands done, it was 7:00 before he knew it and he and El hadn’t eaten supper yet.

She had helped him make up the second guest bedroom. He would wash the bedding from her room the next day.

Thanks to her help, most everything in the house was ready with the exception of cooking and the final cleanup of the kitchen and resetting the dining table, but he would do that Wednesday along with a few other chores.

He and El ate grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup for dinner before tackling the holiday decorations. At least it wasn’t Christmas with a tree and a million other decorations to put up. Mostly it was placing the floral arrangements and a few cinnamon scented candles around. And, of course the tableware. They folded some napkins and placed some of the bigger pieces around as El asked questions.

“I’m confused about this holiday. I’ve seen some stuff on TV about this and Christmas but I don’t understand them. What is so special about these days?”

And then Steve remembered she probably never celebrated Thanksgiving. By the time Hopper found her the previous winter, it had already been passed. Same thing for Christmas and it saddened him that she had never had this to celebrate.

“OK, well it’s a bit of a long story - but holidays in general are a way to remember really important anniversaries and are often times when you make an effort to spend time with your family.”

“Like a birthday? Hopper told me that one day he’d have a birthday party for me...when it was safe.”

“Yes...so like Christmas is Christ’s birthday so everyone who is Christian celebrates it.”

“Christ? He’s like a god or something?”

And wow...Steve was not going into this with her. He had no idea what Hopper’s religion was so he did not want to step on any toes. He and his family didn’t really discuss it much other than the holiday thing.

“I’ll let Hopper tell you about that. But anyways - some holidays are based on religions - but some are like based on a historical event - like Bastille Day. Remember when I told you about that?”

El nodded.

“So, our Independence Day on July 4th is like that. The anniversary of our country when we
declared independence from England. Thanksgiving is a little like that. It’s also supposed to celebrate our country.”

“How? What does the turkey have to do with it?”

“Um...do you know who the Indians are?”

“Like the Cleveland Indians? Hopper watches baseball so I know them. He explained baseball.”

Wow, Steve had no idea where to go. El was really far behind in just the basics.

“Ok, not sure how much American history you know but in brief many of our ancestors, called Pilgrims, came here from other places like England but there were already some people living here, called Indians. So - at some point they had to live together - like you and Hopper are from different places but now live together. Like if the cabin was the US and the Lab was England. You fled England and moved into the cabin and now live there. That’s kind of how our country was formed. Like all of us moved into the cabin that Hopper lives in. And then think about the first time you ate dinner together. Do you remember that?”

“Yes. He gave me eggos, and peas, and meatloaf.”

“Thanksgiving is like remembering that meal - except the first meal the Pilgrims and Indians ate was turkey so we eat that to remember how we came here to start a new life with the people that lived here already.”

He knew it wasn’t quite like that. History wasn’t his best subject and he certainly learned that it wasn’t a simple, or as pleasant as that but 1) it wasn’t important in this context and 2) Steve didn’t really know the whole story anyways.

He knew stories about the Alamo, Pocahontas and of course had seen his share of westerns but even he recognized they were probably not only exaggerated but some of them were outright lies. It’s not like they really taught much about it in high school history outside of the fact that the white man basically came in and took over but made it seem like a good thing. He doubted it was.

What was the phrase he’d heard one time - something about victors writing history? And now that he knew the kinds of things the government like to keep secrets about (and that they weren’t necessarily the good guys), it made him wonder if he should try to learn more. He wondered how the Indians felt about it. If they were as happy about being made “civilized” as history portrayed them. How they felt about strangers moving in and taking over their land and making them change to accomodate the newcomers. He doubted they were as willing as some suggested. He wasn’t even sure how he could figure out the truth. Nancy probably would know.

For now though, it was much too heavy to think about. For him, it never meant more than a chance to actually see his parents, miss school and watch some football if dad allowed him to be that pedestrian.

He thought Hopper would make it mean more than that for El and that made him happy.

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**HOPPER’S POV**

He was excited to get El home. He had missed her. It was amazing how much he had missed her.
He wasn’t planning on making a big Thanksgiving meal but he was picking some up a day early from the Perkins across town. It should reheat well and it would have all the requisite trimming, even if he was going to buy some additional cranberry sauce. He’d also pick up a pumpkin pie. He wanted El to have all the traditional foods.

Joyce had asked them to join them for Thanksgiving, but Hopper was still a little nervous about El possibly being seen in public so he refused politely, as much as he would have loved to join them. Although, he laughed to himself that the Perkins food would probably be better. A good cook, Joyce was not.

He knew he needed to restock the cabin before she returned so he spent Tuesday evening grocery shopping and making sure no one followed him back to the house. When he got it, the cabin seemed lifeless without her. It also smelled a little stale. It was probably time to wash the bedding and do some dusting. He’d gotten used to her doing most of the cleaning to alleviate her boredom, but he still did all the laundry. He’d do it the next night after work. At least then he could go back to the trailer and clean that up afterwards before locking it down for awhile.

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WILL’S POV

Will was excited because Jonathan was planning on taking him to the record store on Wednesday since school was letting out early. Maybe he could find the records he was looking for. He was in his room after school doing homework. Mike’s family was going out of town for the holiday and he had to pack that afternoon. Lucas’ family had company coming in so he also had to go home after school. He’d asked Dustin about doing something after school but said he was busy.

He thought about seeing if Max wanted to do something together but that felt weird. The two of them had never been alone together and he wasn’t sure what they would do. He also vaguely remembered she was grounded or something. He hadn’t paid much attention to her when she was complaining about it. Plus, if he was honest Billy scared him. Logically he knew Billy helped them that night but the way Dustin and Lucas had described his behavior at the junkyard led Will to think if the demo dogs hadn’t shown up, he would have beaten either Steve or Lucas up. Max always said her step-brother was a dick and he thought she was probably underplaying that because she always sounded slightly scared. And if Max was scared of him, Will had every reason to be because he thought Max was tough.

He wasn’t used to being home alone but it couldn’t be helped. Jonathan had switched shifts to be able to take Will to the store the next day and his mom was working. He was feeling itchy to get out. He thought about wondering over to see Steve but remembered his parents were around. He didn’t want to accidentally see them - or rather have them see him. He knew it would seem weird that a 13 year wanted to see their 17/18 year old son - how old was Steve again? He was odd but not stupid.

Instead, he turned on the radio and for once NPR was actually playing something he wanted to listen to. It wasn’t a piano piece per se but it had a lot of piano and strings in it and no annoying voices. It was very pleasant. He began drawing to pass the time as the music swirled around him. That’s how it felt. Like he could soar along with the notes. While it didn’t make him feel quite as good as the things Steve played that night, it was really nice.

Before he knew it, his mom was coming in the door, asking where he was. He looked down to see an assortment of drawings he wasn’t even aware he’d really done. A couple of Steve surrounded
by demo dogs, baseball bats, pianos and music notes, there was one of Nancy and Billy, with what looked like the lab behind them, there was another of Billy leaning against his car outside Steve’s house. The drawings were rough - not like his usual detailed drawings but it was still clear what they were. Man, he had really zoned out. It happened occasionally but Dr. Owens that was nothing to be overly concerned about considering what he’d been through.

“Will, honey, can you come out and help me with dinner?”

“Sure, mom!”

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BILLY’S POV

“What are you listening to?”

“Nothing, shitbird. Get out of here.” Billy was in his room, almost napping when Max barged in interrupting his relaxation. He was almost surprised when she just frowned at him and then closed the door again.

The music on NPR had soothed the irritation he had felt from earlier that day having to hang around Tommy and Carol. He found them overly annoying but just when he thought he’d cut them off, they’d provide some kind of interesting tidbit about other people.

FLASHBACK

“Did you see how that substitute was looking at Steve today in math?” Carol muttered to Nicole

“Like she wanted to eat him up. She couldn’t stop staring,” Nicole chuckled. “It was so gross. She even called his name after class and he just walked away like he never heard her.”

“You think he’s hot for teacher?” Billy asked, coolly. The idea of Harrington with an older woman was laughable. I mean, sure some of the older women in Hawkins seemed to look at Billy like that but he was Billy - bad boy from California. He’d bring excitement to their bed if he had half an inkling of desire to do so. He didn’t, even if he played the game a bit. But for the locals to go for a townie they’ve probably known since childhood, yeah that was kind of off.

“He barely looked at her. It’s like he’s in another world anymore,” Carol replied. “Probably still hung up on, Nancy”

“I’d like her to look at me like that,” Tommy said, wistfully. “She’s kinda hot.”

“She’s in her twenties, Tommy!”

“Yeah...is Christie Brinkley almost 30 and I’d do her in a heartbeat.”

“Like she’d ever make the time for you. You’re no King Steve,” someone next to Tommy said. Billy didn’t remember his name but clearly Tommy wasn’t happy with his comeback because the next thing he knew the guy was wearing Tommy’s carton of milk on his head.

He plastered on a smile like he thought it was funny, but in his head he made a note to find out more about this substitute. He couldn’t have Steve trying to take his crown back or letting some
hillbilly backwoods no thing substitute get their paws on him.  

Although the last part he’d never say out loud.  

But maybe if he paid attention to her, she’d forget all about Stevie and that would solve both issues.

Miss Anders was sitting in the classroom after school organizing some items on her desk when Billy looked in. He didn’t have her for class so she wouldn’t know him from Adam Leblonsky.

“Miss Anders?”

“Yes?”

“Hi, my name is Adam. I was wondering if you’d seen Steve Harrington around? I could have sworn he said he had tutoring with you after class and...well...you see he’s my ride home.” He leaned against the door jamb with one arm raised against it.

She looked confused. But he couldn’t deny she was pretty. Early to mid twenties, long dark hair rolled up in a bun and wearing a white blouse and pencil skirt. She looked like she’d stepped out of that Van Halen video. She was picking up her purse and getting up to leave.

“Uh...no. I’m not tutoring Steve at all. Actually, I’m just substituting for a few days. The regular teacher has the flu and is expected to be out. Maybe he was tutoring Steve? Sorry I can’t help you.”

She walked up to the door, clearly expecting him to move, but he didn’t.

“Well, I’m sorry too, ma’am. I don’t suppose you could give me a lift?” He waggled his tongue and smiled his flirtiest with her.

“Uh, no Mr....I’m sorry I didn’t get your last name?”

“Lebronsky,” Billy said, filling his voice with as much charm as he could muster.

“I’m sorry. That would be inappropriate. I could take you to the office to make a phone call?” She moved to go passed him.

“No. I guess I’ll just look for Steve some more. I’m sure he wouldn’t leave me stranded. Not a stand up guy like him.” Billy didn’t see any flicker of interest in him or Steve from her so he assumed Carol and them had just been blowing smoke out of their ass.

She was partway down the hall and then turned around. “So, do you know Steve Harrington well?”

“Why, I sure do. I could tell you anything you want to know about him.” he felt like he was oozing with sincerity.

“Does he play piano?” she asked, surprising him. That was not what he expected at all. She shook her head and laughed. “I’m sure it sounds ridiculous but my little sister used to compete and I’m sure one of the other competitors was named Steve Harrington but he dropped out of the circuit and she always wondered what had happened to him. I was trying to figure out if that was him. He’s the right age and I think looks like him. I tried to ask today but he didn’t hear me.”
“In fact, I have heard Steve play. He seems quite good. Your little sister plays like Steve?” Billy asked, interest building. While not the expected reason for the woman’s interest in Steve, at least it wasn’t the others had thought. Billy felt a sense of relief wash through him.

“Oh yes, but he was always beating her. She’s always wanted the chance to outperform him in competition. She always said he won because the judges were biased because of who his father was.”

Without knowing why he was asking, he said, “Is she in Hawkins?” There was an anticipation in his stomach, eager to know if she was near.

“Oh, no. We’re from Chicago but she’s attending Julliard now. First year - full ride can you believe it? I’m so proud of her. Wish I could play but I was all thumbs. I was much better at math and the sciences.”

“What brings you to Hawkins?” Billy asked.

“A job that didn’t pan out I’m afraid. So, I’m substituting for now until I can find something else. I’d better go. Are you sure you don’t want to go to the office?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks.”

END FLASHBACK

He still didn’t understand these weird feelings he kept having, particularly when he thought about Harrington. He didn’t understand why he half wanted to punch Miss Anders in the face and drag her by her hair to the quarry and throw her in until she talked about her sister. Or why he’d been somewhat disappointed when she said she didn’t play piano.

Someone banged at the door, louder this time.

“What?!”

“Billy, I hate to ask, but I need more butter. Could you run to the store and get it?” Susan’s quiet voice echoed through the door.

Fuck no, he didn’t want to - still she had helped him and it was reason to get out of the house.

“Sure, why not?”

He absolutely did not intentionally drive past the Harrington place on his way to the store, even if it was in the other direction.

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EL’S POV

She was eager to see Hopper again. She knew he wanted to her to call him dad or something like that but she just couldn’t bring herself to do it yet. As much as she cared for him, and she did a lot and was grateful for everything he had done, they had a long way to go to be able to be like any of those families she saw on TV. She’d been trying to learn but based on what she knew so far, it wasn’t easy being in a family. Hopper had talked about his a bit but it was clear his own father
wasn’t much better than Papa. Mike’s parents, while not like either Papa or Hopper’s Dad, wasn’t much to get excited about and it seemed as if Steve’s parents caused him more anxiety than comfort.

Will’s mom was the only ‘parent’ she knew that seemed to like her kids, even if Dustin spoke fondly of his. She was nervous about going to his house - even if it was only going to be for one night for fear she’d be disillusioned again. She wasn’t planning on meeting his mom, but she knew she wouldn’t help but overhear or see some of their interactions.

She already missed Aunt Becky more than she thought. It had truly been an eye opening experience. One of the closest she had outside of Hopper of an adult caring for her. Steve didn’t count. As grateful as she was to him, he wasn’t actually an adult yet. But she was very fond of him. He was more like Will’s brother to her - or at least she guessed since mostly what she knew about the Byer boys was from Mike.

After she had seen her mother’s memories, she considered using her powers to see if she could see inside people - see more about their memories and feelings. But her mother, in her own way, had volunteered that information and it just felt wrong somehow to do that to someone that wasn’t aware of what she was doing.

She had been arguing with herself for a week about it. She spied on Mike during the year they were apart - but only externally. At that point she didn’t even know she could slip into anyone’s memories but now that she had, she wanted to. She wanted to feel how Mike felt about her, particularly since she had been unable to actually been with him. She even sat down to do it once, but the phone rang and interrupted her concentration. While she didn’t answer it, she decided not to try again. It felt….intrusive.

Some might argue that watching Mike the way she had was already intrusive. That was what she had been training for in the lab. To watch strangers and report on their activities. That’s what Papa had wanted and since he wasn’t a good man, maybe that wasn’t a good thing.

She was still conflicted but decided not to pursue anything like that for awhile. Instead, she decided if she was going to try to improve her powers, she focus on what Dustin had called telekinesis. It was handier anyways. It had certainly helped in getting the boxes out of storage for Steve.

She was really enjoying staying with him. Again, she had been nervous when Hopper had told her it was necessary. He had just said to put up with it for a few days and at least it would be something new to experience - although she teased her about not getting too used to the big luxurious bathrooms Steve was sure to have. She had thought with Steve at school and not really knowing him, it was going to be a bit lonely but she’d been through worse. Instead, he had gone out of his way to make her feel “at home.” She liked that he tried to explain things to her without talking down to her. She knew she had a lot to learn about the world.

She was however confused when she found him at the piano with all kinds of tools and tinkering away after she had bathed and gotten ready for bed. She had come downstairs to get something to drink and to ask him to read to her one last night. They were only halfway through the book and she was going to ask him if she could borrow it, but she wanted to hear him one last time.

“What are you doing?” she asked from the doorway as she walked in.

“Oh - well I thought I should just make sure the piano is tuned properly. It sounds ok but I want to verify it.”
“What does tuning mean?” she sat next to him and looked at the array of things he had.

“Do you remember Dustin’s discussion on sound frequencies?” Steve asked.

“Yes,”

“Well, pianos have to be tuned so specific so the key hits a specific note and then the subsequent ones need to be set at proper intervals in between so it can sound correct.”

“What happens if it’s not?”

“It doesn’t sound good, that’s for sure. I don’t have any examples but imagine a cow trying to hum a song.”

She giggled at the imagery.

“Anyways, so I don’t want it to sound like a herd of cows so I’m verifying that all the notes sound like they are supposed to sound.”

She looked to see a box of tools that looked like really weird utensils, like the ones she had been polishing. “What are those?”

“These are tuning forks. So the first step is to use one of them to set your initial note. Some people use the C or F forks, I mostly use the A fork.”

“A fork?”

“This gets a little complicated - but basically music is made up of notes. Those notes are A, B, C, D, E, F G with some flat and sharps - and then those notes are repeated an octave higher or lower. This is middle C.” He hits a white key in the middle of the piano. “These are the C just above and below.” He hits two keys - one higher on the keys, one lower. “See how they have the same kind of tone, just higher or lower? That’s an octave. Go on. Hit those keys.”

She does. And she can hear what he’s saying.

“Can you find the Cs that are above or below that one?” He leans back and lets her look at the piano closely. She realizes there is a pattern of white versus black keys. Eventually she hits one and she thinks it’s right.”

“Good. Perfect. So anyways, I’m going to tune on the A.” He plays it. “Can you find the other As?” Again, it takes her awhile but she finds them. She’s feeling pretty good about it.

“Good. Okay. So I’m going to tune to A.”

She watched him use the fork to hit his knee and she leans back and looks at him in surprise.

“You need to hit a hard surface to get the sound.”

‘Why not the piano?” she asks, since obviously the piano is hard.

“I don’t want to damage it.” He does it again and then holds it on the piano standing up, ball end down, and a soft pitch is emitted. She is surprised to hear it.

“I wanted you to hear what I’m comparing it to. I sometimes hold it in my teeth because I can hear it on my head better.”
She frowns at him and he laughs.

‘Don’t worry. I clean them before and after when I do that. I won’t do it tonight so you can hear what I’m doing.’ He taps his knee again, puts the fork on the piano and hits the key. The notes sound the same to El.

“That actually sounds pretty good.” He sounds relieved.

“What would you do if it didn’t?”

“I’d have to tune all 88 keys which is takes a long time.”

“How?”

He shows her the inside where there are a lot of strings. He plays a note and she sees a hammer hit the strings.

“See how there are three strings attached to the key? Do you see the nuts the strings are attached to?” El nods when she sees where Steve is pointing. “You adjust the nuts to tighten or loosen the strings to get the right tone. If you turn it clockwise, it gets sharper. Counterclockwise makes it flatter. First thing I’ll do is damp two of the strings so it only rings one key. Then I’ll use the wrench to adjust accordingly. I’ll then to the same for the other two strings.”

El looks at all the strings and understood why it would take so long to adjust.

“Wow, that must take a long time,” she said.

“It does. Fortunately, I really just did it two weeks ago since I was stuck at home and bored and it seems to have held so that’s one thing I don’t have to do tonight. I was just testing to make sure everything was still okay.”

Would you play something for me?” El asked. She figured she may as well ask since this would be her last time in awhile.

“Sure, anything in particular?” Steve said as he was putting his tools away.

“Something soft? I’m kind of tired so nothing too loud. Like one of those things you played before?”

“Do you want one of them or something different?”

“Both?”

“Ok. Let’s start with ‘Claire de Lune’ then.” She sat next to him, still amazed as she watched his fingers go across the keys. It was so relaxing but her back was starting to hurt sitting on the bench so she moved to the sofa when she saw Penny wander into the room and settle on it.

“That’s really pretty,” she said when he finished. He smiled softly at her.

“Ok, so something new before we go up and continue reading about Frank and Joe’s adventures, right?” Steve asked.

She nodded and petted Penny. Her white fur was so soft and she liked the way the warmth of Penny’s weight on her lap felt.

He went to look at some of the music scores he had and finally pulled one out. “It’s been awhile
since I’ve played Handel’s Water Music so you’ll have to forgive me if it’s not as polished as the other pieces.”

It was a beautiful, calm piece and before she knew it, her eyes were closing as she let the music soothe her.

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STEVE’S POV

He hadn’t played Handel in some time. It wasn’t his favorite. A little on the repetitive side and had none of the dramatic flourishes a Liszt or Chopin composition had. Steve couldn’t deny that he enjoyed the occasional dramatic pounding of keys to get aggression out. Handel’s work required a more deft and delicate fingering than he liked. On the other hand, those pieces tended to wake him up when he performed them so it was just as well. He needed to be able to sleep soundly - just like El was doing on the sofa. She was out.

He laughed to himself and then played Brahms’ ‘Lullaby’ to amuse himself.

He tried to wake her to go up to bed, but she kept sleepily waving him off.

“Ok, then. Forgive me, but I’m carrying you up. Penny, forgive me too, but I need to move you.” He lifted Penny off El’s lap and she gave him the side-eye before strolling out of the room like she had been planning to do so. He then reached for El who snorted and half nodded as he lifted her up. Her head flopped on his shoulder and she let out a slight grumble and muttered in a whining tone, “But I don’t want the Eggos in my shoes.”

He tried hard not to laugh as he carried her upstairs, Penny following.

He guessed Joe and Frank’s adventure would have to wait for another time.

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Steve woke from a sound slumber at some loud noises outside. He jumped up before he knew what was going on and reached for the bat propped against the dresser. The sounds of voices trying to stay hush and car doors slamming, and the definite sound of a trunk closing loudly. He ran down the hall to look out the hall window over the front door.

Shit, shit, shit….this can NOT be happening! His parents...what the hell? They weren’t supposed to be back until the next day. What were they doing here? He looked out again in time to see a couple he didn’t know also getting out of the car. FUCK!!!

His thoughts raced as he tried to figure out what to do. Then something touched him!

“Shit! Fuck!” He jumped about ten feet and turned to see El, grateful he hadn’t swung the bat in reflex.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, looking concerned.

“My parents! They’re home. Oh god...oh my god!!! And you’re...here! SHIT!” He was spinning. Why was he terrible in these kinds of situations. They couldn’t find El. They just couldn’t. And not just because El wasn’t supposed to be seen...but how on earth would he explain a 13 year-old girl in his house?
“I can hide,” El said.

“Oh...right, right. But your stuff…”

“Is mostly packed. I’ll go grab it.”

“Ok. Go to my room ok. They won’t go in there. Maybe in the bathroom until I get back.” He hoped. That would be even harder to explain.

He turned to head downstairs.

“Your bat,” El said, pointing at the weapon in his hand. “Let me take it.”

Oh right, that would be a bad idea to go downstairs with it in his hands. He almost handed it to him but realized he needed his robe at least since there were some unknown people coming in. He considered not going down at all. Which was worse for his dad - not checking on someone coming in the house or greeting newcomers in his pajamas. Maybe he’d have to ask Miss Manners what the proper greeting etiquette was when strangers came into your home in the middle of the night when you are trying to hide a super powered and very young girl.

He went to his room and hid the bat in the closet, almost wanting to take out the whiskey he had hidden in there, but knowing that was a bad idea. Instead, he took a deep breath and put his dark navy velour robe on and headed downstairs.

“Mom, Dad - I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow.” He tried to seem pleased to see them but he could see his parents eyeing the place ready to criticize.

“Darling, we were able to get an earlier flight so we decided to come home early.”

“You could have called to let me know,” Steve said and his mother air kissed his cheeks.

“It was last minute, my dear.”

“You’re up late, son. It is a school night, isn’t it?” his dad asked.

“I was sleeping.”

“Oh, you just seem a little overly flushed,” his dad replied, looking critically at him.

“Maybe he’s hiding a girl upstairs, James,” the man with his parents said with a bit of humor. “Sowing some of those wild oats.” He laughed broadly, his very pale skin turning red with the humor. It looked like maybe he had been drinking a bit.

Steve really flushed. “No...of course not,”

“He’s teasing,” his mother said. “Steven knows better than to have girls over when we’re not home, don’t you?” Steve nodded. “Why don’t you take the Winston’s luggage upstairs to the Blue room.” Steve breathed a sigh of relief. At least it wasn’t the guest room El had been in. It was the other room.

“Perhaps you should introduce us first,” the other woman said, speaking for the first time. She was younger than his parents, and clearly much younger and attractive than her husband. She had a slight accent Steve couldn’t place, but considering all the countries his parents travelled to, that wasn’t unusual. He wondered if one of them was a musician but that still wouldn’t explain why his parents brought them here. It’s not like they never entertained but usually to impress the locals
rather than bringing out of town guests in for a holiday. His parents were more apt to holiday outside of Hawkins.

“Oh - of course. How silly of me,” his mother said. She seemed rather nervous. “This is my son, Steven. Steven, this is Mr. and Mrs. Winston. Now, I’m sure we’re all tired after a long day of travelling.”

And that was it. No explanation for who or why they were there.

“Why don’t you show me the guest room, Steven so I can get us settled in? I think Peter and your father are going to have a nightcap in his study.” Mrs. Winston followed him up, with the bags he couldn’t carry the first trip. At least she didn’t seem to mind carrying some of her own things. He’d have to go down and get his parents bags later as they would expect him to do it.

“Hawkins is such a charming little town. Feels very Americana - what I’ve seen so far in the middle of the night, of course. Do you like it here, Steven?”

“Steve. Only my parents call me Steven,” he replied.

“And call me Monica. Mrs. Winston is Peter’s mother,” she said with a small laugh.

That wasn’t going to happen. He couldn’t even bring himself to call Mrs. Byers ‘Joyce’ and he liked her. Something about these two were giving him the creeps. Like they were trying too hard or something.

He opened the door to the room and she looked around. “Charming! It’s just darling. Oh...and a Queen sized bed. I haven’t slept in one that small in a while. It will certainly be cosy.” She sprawled out on the bed. “It feels so good to lie down. Those tiny little planes just cramp my legs.” She stretched her legs and then propped her arms behind her head and looked out the door.

He’d been on long flights before so he knew how cramped they could be.

“Just put the bags by the dresser. I’ll unpack in a bit. You’d best get back to your girlfriend.” She winked at him.

“What - no I don’t…”

“That was your room just over there, right? I saw a shadow move across the wall.” Steve turned quickly and looked out and saw his door was slightly propped open. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

Oh god….oh god….he couldn’t get caught. He shut the door on the way out, and then shut his before going downstairs to get his parents luggage.

His mom stopped him in the foyer. “Good to see you. The house looks okay. Thank you. I am sorry we surprised you. We just...well it was nice to fly a private jet for a change. The Winstons knew some other folks flying in this direction and they were willing to accommodate a small change to drop us off. Anyways...these people are important to your father so please be on your best behavior.” She was whispering as she looked at the closed doors of the study where presumably they were having their nightcap.

A private jet? Who were these people? His dad used them occasionally since going to the larger airports where farther away and took a while to drive to them, but it had to be for a really good reason since it was expensive. It was odd how sometimes his dad cheapened out on the dumbest things but then paid for a private flight or, for that matter, a heated pool in Indiana that he almost
never used.

And his mother thanking him for the house. It was weird.

“Okay, but who are they?” he asked, in the same hushed tone.

“They’re new business partners that might help us expand my father’s holdings. Maybe help you find work or get into college after school. They seem to know just about everyone who’s anyone.”

“How did you meet them?” She tugged on Steve’s arm to lead them out of the foyer and into the kitchen.

“Mrs. Winston is a patron and a bit of a fan of your father’s.” She looked like she was sucking lemons. “They met at an after concert reception. She convinced her husband to discuss investing in our businesses.” His mom was now pursing her lips as if deciding what she should say. “She used to be a cellist - but she injured her hand to can’t perform anymore.”

Steve assumed he knew what was really going on. Monica Winston and his father. Was she one of his affairs already or just in the making and his mom was trying to prevent it by keeping a close eye on them? She would never divorce his dad willingly but he guessed she’d never competed against someone like Monica.

“Anyways - we must be good hosts this weekend.”

Steve watched as she put her game face on. One he’d seen too many times after catching his dad flirting a bit too much.

He took the bags upstairs and then went into his room where El was now hiding in the bathroom.

“Sorry about that. I overheard. Just, the door didn’t shit right and my bag was still sitting there. I was trying to hide it.”

“That’s ok. Now - you can take the bed. I’ve locked the door so they can’t come in.” He piled some extra blankets on the floor and made a nest for himself. Before turning the light off, he turned on the radio, to NPR which at least playing some light jazz. “That’s should help hide any additional noise,” he whispered to her.

He slept restlessly through the night, half-awake most of the time for fear someone would either open the door (even though he knew it was locked) or El would make a loud noise he’d have to explain or just trying to figure out how he was sneaking her out of the house in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

So we finally meet the Harrington Seniors, if briefly. Yes, there is more going on with them because like an idiot I have decided to complicate my own plot. Some of this may not be resolved in this particular story if I decide to sort of do a version of Season 3 based on continuing from the primary plot here. If I don’t then, certainly it would be resolved in this story. Just need to decide if it's one story or two connected ones.

Hope you enjoy. Let me know if I've made any egregious errors!
And hey - bonus for those of you who read this far. I have, in the past done something I call Halloween Slashables. I am considering doing it again this year. Basically I will take slash pairing halloween-themed prompts. You give me a fandom and a pairing and tell me if you want a trick (darkish) or treat (sweeter) and then the Halloween theme prompt. Not just "Ghosts" or "Scarecrow" - something a little more in depth like "Picnic in a Graveyard" or "Poisoned Adams Apples" along with any "DO NOTS" and I'll do my best to write it. They tend to be short and framed as drabbles - although the muse sometimes takes it differently. I'll post them in October.

I will do crossovers and any pairups, OT3 or Mores for any fandom and pairings I write in. See my dashboard for examples from prior years (I last did it in 2015 I think). I'm usually open for suggestions if you're not sure. There are few things I won't write (bodily fluid play, daddy/mommy kink or regressive age play are some of the few I don't like) so ask.

Except for the kids in Stranger Things in sexual situations (not comfortable with that at all), I'm good with a lot of pairings. I mostly do m/m but am open to f/f (Robin/Heather for instance) or Het for OT3, poly or orgy requests. Requests DO NOT need to be sexual, but characters will be in some kind of romantic/sexual relationship. Not all stories will actually have sex.

Since they aren't long, keep requests and list of wants short. I will do my best to accommodate. I will let you know if it's something I really can't do.
Chapter 14 - Atonal and Out of Time

Chapter Summary

Steve's parents have come home early and has thrown his schedule off. While he may manage things with El, things don't go quite so well with his parents. Billy, Nancy, Carol are all also having a no good terrible day.

Chapter Notes

This is an angsty chapter. Everyone is basically having a bad day. But it will start moving some plot forward. Sorry - nothing soothing here but I promise next chapter I will get something in. I will be updating a few tags as well.

Warnings: Steve No So Great Parents and his dad's idea of punishment borders on child abuse (nothing overly graphic - but it is described).

Big warning on a non-consensual groping. This is something long in the past that happened to Carol's mother. If this upsets you, skip Carol's section and go to end to learn the importance of the scene.

Discussion of infidelity by Steve's dad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14 - Atonal and Out of Time

STEVE’S POV

It had been a long night worrying about how he was sneaking El out of the house, but in a stroke of luck at around 7:00 am, his mother tapped on his door and asked Steve through a shut door that she needed him to run out to get some espresso and croissants for their guests. It’s not something they had in the house but there was one specialty bakery shop in town that offered it. And apparently Monica had been surprised that it was something the Harrington’s didn’t have “considering how much time they spent in Europe and New York.” Plus the waffles and sausage his mom had planned on was too heavy for Monica in the morning.

“It’s not like you’d want it and we’re not home that much to warrant putting that kind of money into when we can just get it at Frederique’s.” His mom looked a little off from the whole exchange, probably because she knew the reception that even that was probably going to get. Frederique’s was an overpriced, douchey place but probably the closest Hawkins had to an European-style cafe but it was about as close to one as to Paris France is to Paris, Texas. Having actually had true French cuisine at an earlier time in his life, he knew Frederique’s was nothing like it however most of the locals didn’t know so it went over well when someone was trying to seem impressive.
“You know I have school, right? We have a half-day today.” Steve said through the door. He was already dressed since he’d had trouble sleeping anyways.

“I’ll call you off. I really need your help here today.”

Steve sighed. He really couldn’t afford more time off from school but it gave him the opportunity to get El out of the house quietly. “Ok, mom. Just give me a few minutes.”

He leaned back against the door and rubbed his eyes. He’d hoped to at least have some time away from them this morning.

When he opened his eyes, El was watching him. “Time to go?” she asked softly.

“Yeah, I guess. I’m sorry about this.”

She didn’t have much in the way of stuff so she easily moved them through Steve’s window to the backyard, near the garage while they kept their fingers crossed that no one was watching. Yeah, for superpowers!

“Maybe I could just levitate myself out,” she whispered.

“I’d rather not risk you accidently falling. Just step slowly and very quietly. We’ll sneak down the stairs. Just skip the fourth step. It squeaks.”

It was a straight shot down the stairs to the front door. Steve peered around the corner and didn’t see anything. “Wait here one second. I’m going to unlock the door before we go down.”

He went quietly downstairs, mindful of the noisy step and got to the door. He unbolted the deadlock and the chain and turned to motion her down as he opened the door. El started down the stairs and got about half way down and froze.

“Steve, here’s a fifty.” He jumped, startled. His mom walked into the foyer holding out a bill. That was a lot of money for a few coffees and croissants. He looked up and saw El standing stock still on the top of the step. Please, don’t let his mom turn around. “I’ve already called the order in. Got some extra for tomorrow as well. Keep the change.” He looked at his mom and and took the money.

His mom started turning back but in the direction of the steps.

Steve lunged forward in the opposite direction getting her attention. “Dummy me! I almost forgot my keys!” He jangled the keys loudly in his hands as if he was fumbling with them. She took the bait and followed in his direction as El ran behind her and out the door.

“Steve, you seem a little jumpy. Did you sleep okay?” She looked concerned.

“What...no of course I did.”

“Those black circles under your eyes say differently. Are you having nightmares about the bear attack again?”

“What...oh...yeah I guess.” He was surprised his mom even remembered that.

Just then Monica joined them. “You were attacked by a bear? How dreadful.” She looked very put together, as if she’d walked off a magazine cover. Her make-up was way too heavy for Steve to appreciate.
“Did I forget to mention that, Monica? That’s why we wanted to come home to see our son. Make sure he was okay. He’s been having nightmares. We offered to get his therapy but he’s trying to tough it out.” She patted his arm and he wanted to die of embarrassment.

“I could give you the name of someone in New York. He’s very good.” Monica said.

“Thank you for the offer but Steve doesn’t care for New York. He’s a small town boy at heart. But I admit, there are times I wish he would get out of Hawkins a bit more often and see the world. Maybe after school. I think a year abroad might be a good idea before settling down.”

Steve frowned. He’s not sure where his mom got that idea. And he didn’t like the way either one of them were looking at him. Is that why they rarely asked him to with them anymore? Did they think he didn’t like traveling? He didn’t remember ever complaining but maybe he had.

“MONICA? Where is my medicine?” Pete’s voice rang down the steps.

“Husband calls. They’re just so helpless sometimes,” Monica smiled and headed upstairs. “Thank you for getting my coffee. I can’t function without it.”

“Sure. I’d better go.”

Steve turned to leave and his mom whispered, “Don’t leave me alone with her too long. I might kill her. Or myself.” She chuckled as if the two of them were sharing a big joke. Steve didn’t get it, until he noticed the glass in her hand. A mimosa. She was starting early.

It was going to be a long day.

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_Dustin’s POV_

The radio came to life in his backpack. “Dustin, come in. I need to drop your package off now,” Steve’s voice crackled over the line, slightly muffled. Class was about to start and they were heading in towards their lockers and Steve was just chatting away as if he wasn’t also trying to get to class.

“Why is Steve on your radio?” Will asked Dustin.

“What package?” Mike asked.

“Why isn’t he at school? The high still has classes today, right?” Lucas asked, the only one of the group besides Dustin without an older sibling attending the high school.

Will and Mike nodded at Lucas.

Dustin hesitated. “Uh...it was something I ordered for my mom so I couldn’t have it sent to the house so I sent it to Steve’s. Let me just get this.” He groped around his bag to pull the radio out.

Just then Billy’s Camaro swung into the parking lot and slammed to a stop. Max jumped out.

“Thanks for making me late, Billy!”

“Fuck off,” Billy said as he peeled off to the high school lot.

“What’s his issue?” Lucas asked.

“Today or in general?” Mike asked.
Dustin was able to step away a bit as the rest of the group talked to Max.

“Dude, why are you calling? Why aren’t you in school? Over.” he asked, in a hushed whisper.

“Long story short, there’s been a change of plans. My parents are home. Your package can’t stay here today but I can pick it up tomorrow.”

Will interrupted, “I thought his parents had been home.” Dustin blinked. He hadn’t realized Will wasn’t over with the rest of the group. He just shook his head at Will to put him off.

“OK...uh - my mom’s probably left for work so use the key in the stone frog by the door. You can hide the package in my room. Over”

The warning bell rang which ended everyone’s conversations.

“Gotta go, Steve. Talk to you later. Over.” Dustin ran into the hall, glad he already had his books for his first class. He crossed his fingers that Will wouldn’t ask about Steve’s parents again.

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**Billy’s POV**

Billy was tired. He had overslept and was going to probably pay for that later after the mad scramble this morning trying to get he and Max to school on time. He was just lucky his dad had an early shift and was already out of the house by the time Max had finally banged on the door and woken him. He was surprised that his dad hadn’t at least woken him before he left, but at least he didn’t see Billy still dressed from the night before but covered in dirt he didn’t remember getting on him. Sure he had worked on his car a bit the night before which could explain the leftover grease on his hands, but that didn’t explain the actual dirt under his nails.

He also knew he looked like shit. There had been no time to do more than the fastest of rinse-offs in the shower which he absolutely had to do to make it look like he hadn’t been rolling around a cornfield again.

He hoped he wasn’t starting to sleep walk again. He’d done it for a brief while after his mom left and he’d been filled with anxiety and anger. It had gotten so bad for a while his dad had taken to nailing the window shut in his room and locking the door from the outside at night to keep him from walking outside. He did not want that happening again. It eventually stopped when he started finding other ways to let his anger out. Sure he knew street fighting was probably not the healthiest way to express himself - but fuck it. He would do what he needed to. Max should be grateful he didn’t choose to take it out on her the way she’d been complaining in the car. It grated on his nerves. Jesus, his head hurt.

At least it was a half day. If he could manage to not beat anyone half to death before lunch, he’d consider himself lucky. Maybe after school, he’d see if Steve’s house was still empty and find out if there was any more booze hiding in the boy’s closet.

He rounded the corner to see Jonathan and Nancy huddled in a corner, chatting it up although he thought Nancy looked worse than he did. The Byers freak was rubbing her arms and his voice dripping with concern. He backed up to listen in. He was nosy that way.

“Nancy, are you sure everything is ok?”

“Of course it’s not!” The girl looked paler than he’d seen her and that was saying something. Honestly, she looked as though a strong wind would knock her down.
“I mean outside of...you know...?” Jonathan half whispered, but Billy could still hear them. In fact, he could hear them better than he would have expected from this distance.

“Isn’t that enough? I’m just...tired. I can’t sleep. I can’t stop crying over...It’s been a goddamn year, Jonathan. You’d think I’d be dealing with her being gone better by now. I’m so angry at myself that I can’t seem to stop thinking about it.”

“I mean...I guess yeah, it’s been that long since she was taken...but with everything going on now, I’m not surprised you’d be feeling so....”

“Raw? That’s what I feel like. A piece of raw meat. I yelled at Holly this morning. Holly!? All she wanted was for me to put her hair in a ponytail and I screeched at her.”

“Oh...Nancy.” Jonathan pulled her in for a hug when she started sobbing.

“What’s that I’m feeling. A piece of raw meat. I yelled at Holly this morning. Holly!? All she wanted was for me to put her hair in a ponytail and I screeched at her.”

“Oh...Nancy.” Jonathan pulled her in for a hug when she started sobbing.

“Whatcha looking at Billy?” Tommy said as she came up behind him and slapped his shoulder. He looked around and saw the couple. Billy felt the intake of breath and just knew Tommy was about to open his big mouth. He decided he didn’t have the patience for any of it today.

“Nothing. Let’s get to class,” he said and yanked on Tommy’s jacket.

“But...” Tommy said. “Come on...man. It’s too easy.”

“But nothing. It is too easy. Makes it boring. Just leave them alone,” he glanced back and saw Jonathan watching them, tugging Nancy in closer in a protective stance.

“Sheesh...alright. Hey, are you going to Matt’s party on Saturday?” Tommy asked as they wandered away. Then he started droning on about how cool it would be. He had this sudden desire to punch Tommy into silence but clenched his fists so tightly he thought he would have drawn blood on his palm if he had nails.

“Where’s Carol?” He finally asked. At least with her around, Tommy shut up to kiss her so that was a benefit.

“Oh...uh...well, she had something to do this morning,” Tommy said walking into the classroom. Billy then saw her sitting at desk glaring at Tommy.

“Uh huh. Broke up again, did you?”

Tommy flushed. “No...no, we just had a disagreement.”

Carol was giving them the finger then turned back to her book.

Billy raised his eyebrows at her then looked at Tommy.

“Ok...maybe more than a little. She wants some “space” apparently, whatever that’s supposed to mean.” Tommy huffed and sat down.

Billy understood. He also wanted space from Tommy. And that probably wasn’t going to happen if Carol and Tommy weren’t seeing each other. The other boy would probably latch himself onto someone else. Since there was a long weekend ahead, it wouldn’t have to be Billy. So Billy just focused on not hitting him or anyone else for the rest of the day.

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CAROL’S POV

Carol was pissed. This hot and cold thing she had with Tommy was getting old. Most of the time he treated her well, but she was starting to see that the way he treated others was not good. She lost track of what the teacher was talking about and she thought about the previous night.

Flashback

Carol was truly starting to regret some of the things she’d said about Nancy and how she’d treated Barb. It was an ugly truth about herself she was starting to see. Her mom had asked her if she knew the girl when the news came out and the truth was, she didn’t. Not really. She told her mom a little of what she knew but what came out of her mouth had been sharp and pointed and her mother frowned at her.

“So, what the only thing you know about a girl that you apparently partied with, was that she was kind of boring and dressed like a librarian and the only reason you talked to her was because she was Steve Harrington’s girlfriend’s friend and he asked you to be nice to her? Why would he have to ask you to be nice to her? Were you not? Are you generally not nice to people?”

Carol had had to fumble with the answer and then fumbled even more when her mom finally asked, “Whatever happened to Steve anyways? I thought you were friends but I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“Oh, we’re not friends anymore. Tommy and he had a fight last year. They only see each other at basketball usually.”

Her mom pursed her lips in thought. “So you are not friends with Steve because Tommy isn’t friends with him? What was the fight about?”

“Oh...his girlfriend. Steve saw her with another guy and Tommy was just trying to make him feel better, but then afterwards, he called us assholes. After he went back to her, he never spoke to us again.” She wanted to say Steve was pussy-whipped but knew her mom would not like that language. It had been true though. It had been sometimes sickening to see the lengths Steve went to keep Nancy happy and in the end, she had just dumped him. And yet, Steve still seemed to prefer Nancy over Tommy and herself. It was hard to fathom and harder to forgive.

“He’s dating Nancy Wheeler, right? I know her mother from Book Club.”

“Not anymore. They broke up I guess,” she said, embarrassed but still couldn’t keep the bitter tone out of her mouth. Sure she felt bad about Nancy’s loss about Barb, but it was still hard to easily just play nice.

She had no idea her mom knew Nancy’s mom. She knew her mom was in book club, but she never paid any attention since reading bored her.

“So, I kind of recall there was an incident about some graffiti at the movie theater about Nancy last year. I know Steve had been involved but I understand he helped clean it up. Was that his idea to write that about her?”

“No,” she admitted. “But he didn’t...stop us.”

“Was it yours?” Her mom narrowed her focus on Carol’s face. She squirmed under the scrutiny.
“I sincerely hope not,” her mom continued. “I didn’t raise you to be so uncharitable. Did you know when I was in school, this was this boy who got angry because I wouldn’t go out with him. I used to have to cross the auditorium to get to one of my classes and one day he decided to wait for me. He got his jollies feeling up my breasts every chance he got after that and no one cared. It was almost like it was my fault for having large breasts. He told everyone about it. I got a reputation for being easy which back then was much harder to live with. The boys all thought it a big laugh. The girls, however, were downright mean. I’ve never forgiven them for that. It made me distrust people for a long time. Lucky for me, your father wasn’t like any of them and stood up for me.”

“You never told me that story before.”

“I hoped I would never need to. I’m grateful it never went beyond that but the feeling that no one cared stayed with me. And just having people look down on me for something I didn’t do changed me. Even if she had done it, it still gives no one the right to bully her.”

“She forgave Steve but neither of them ever forgave us,” Carol argued. “And he was our friend first.”

“So, why did she and Steve break up? Did he do something that stupid again?”

“Not sure, I don’t think so. I mean he seemed to treat her well all year from what I could tell. But she’s now seeing that guy that he fought with us about so clearly she was cheating on him all that time.” She was frustrated because a part of her sincerely believed that and she was angry on Steve’s behalf, but the other part knew she was missing something.

“Things are never that clear. If that’s the case, why has Steve not come back to you?”

“I don’t know. It’s so weird. Like he’s still kind of hanging out with them? Like he’s somehow more okay with the guy that stole his girl more than he is with us.”

Her mom leaned back to think about it and then finally said. “Well, you can’t really steal someone but that does sound a little odd, I guess. Seems to me as if maybe Steve learned his lesson and did something to rectify it. Did you? Did you ever once apologize? Or did Tommy and you just bully him, too?”

Carol looked away and didn’t say anything, which was apparently enough for her mother. “Maybe he was right. Maybe you two are assholes.”

She stood up as Carol looked at her gobsmacked.

Her mom crossed her arms and stared down. “Some lessons are hard to learn. I love you but right now...I’m so very disappointed in you. I think you need to consider what kind of person you want to be and what kind of people you want in your life.”

She’d been thinking about that conversation for a couple of days now. Deciding that maybe she wanted to make some changes, she had a long discussion with Tommy who disagreed that they had been in the wrong. Then he called her mother a bleeding heart idiot which pissed her off. The fight then escalated when she said something about how at least Steve seemed to be trying to be a better person and Tommy was still the same asshole he always was. Tommy then started accusing Carol about being interested in Steve now that he was single again.

By then, she’d been so pissed she stormed out of the car and started walking home, as stupid as that was. Tommy drove off in a huff and left her there. She was walking home in a rage at 9:00 pm at night. It was probably a good five miles but she assumed Tommy would cool down and return
for her.

About 15 minutes into her walk, she saw Billy’s Camaro drive past. She was really regretting her impulsive act of storming off. It was really cold so she tried to wave him down but he didn’t seem to see her. Probably had a hot date with someone.

Not long after that, she saw a station wagon that did slow down after she started waving at it. She was already tired of walking and hoped she could hitch. She was surprised when Nancy Wheeler stepped out.

“Carol, are you ok?”

The irony of it. Still...gift horse and all. “Tommy and I had a fight. He left me.”

“He left you on the side of the road?” She sounded shocked.

“Well, I expect he’ll swing back in a couple of minutes. He usually does when we fight. Although, it might serve him right if I’m not here when he does get back. Would you mind giving me a lift home? I’m getting a little cold.”

Nancy stared at her and then at the road where she had been heading to like she was confused.

Carol had the sense she was interrupting some plans and watched as Nancy seemed to speak to herself.

“Can’t just leave her...he can wait…” Carol heard her muttering to herself and wondered if Nancy was losing it.

Just then she heard before she saw Tommy’s car coming back.

“Don’t worry, Nancy. Sounds like the asshole’s coming back.” Carol watched as Tommy slammed to a stop.

Nancy looked up, startled but then said, “No, it’s ok. I can take you if you don’t want to go with him.”

Just then Tommy rolled down the passenger window. “Get in.” Carol bent down to see the anger lining his face. She also saw the already open can of beer sitting in the cupholder and decided for once she didn’t want to deal with him anymore.

“No, Nancy can take me home.”

Tommy threw the car into park and stepped out and looked over the roof of the car at both of them. “Get in, Carol. I’m sure the Princess has more important places to go.”

Nancy looked up the road again, almost wistfully. “No, it’s ok. I can...go later.” Her voice was still and a little stilted. Now Carol was confused. Nancy could be standoffish, but she seemed downright uncomfortable. As she should be. The girl was not dressed for the weather. It struck Carol that she must have been in a hurry to get somewhere if she hadn’t even put a coat on.

Carol was really debating with herself about getting into either car. She was furious with Tommy, but the way Nancy was watching her was beginning to creep her out. Still, she decided to go with Nancy. Tommy needed to learn a lesson about not just leaving her on the side of the road whenever they fought.
“Fuck off, Tommy.” And she got into the station wagon.

Tommy raced off. Nancy slid back in and put her seat belt on. Of course, ‘Little Miss Goody Two Shoes’ would have to wear her seatbelt.

The drive back home was weird. Nancy was quiet. Not that she was ever a chatterbox but she was silent and staring straight ahead of her as if she was concentrating really hard on remembering how to drive. Maybe she was because based on the sudden stops and starts she was doing, Nancy Wheeler was not a good driver. Now that Carol thought about it, it seemed as if Steve had driven everywhere when they had been dating and now she was coming in Jonathan’s car so maybe she really never drove that much.

Carol did not like silence so she tried to apologize and give her condolences about Barb to fill the car with sound. Carol sounded nervous to herself but Nancy was strangely cool as if she barely knew Barb.

“Yes, I’ve been sad about her. She wasn’t able to be strong enough. I….miss her.” Nancy’s voice was stunted but maybe she was trying not to cry again. Carol knew the girl had been an emotional wreck the last few days. Lots of kids were chittering about it, Carol being one of them but now starting to feel bad about it.

They got to one intersection and Nancy just stared straight ahead for the longest time. Carol had said to turn right but she wasn’t moving. She was muttering to herself. “I’m not strong enough. Not yet. We’re not...ready.”

“I guess it must be hard to lose a friend like that. I don’t think anyone is ready for that.” Carol tried to be sympathetic but it felt like shirt that didn’t feel right. She wondered if her mom and Steve were right. Maybe she was an asshole if she couldn’t even drudge up sincere compassion for her classmate. Well, she could fake it with the best of them and maybe if she faked it long enough, it would become real. But not tonight. She was tired and cold and just wanted to get home and if Wheeler was pausing at every intersection like she was trying to remember how to steer the wheel, she’d have been home by now. When Nancy just stared at her for a second with a blank look, Carol decided it was time to end this weird interaction.

“So...if you could just turn here now, we’d almost be at the house.”

Nancy blinked at her, almost like her old self. “Oh, sure. Sorry. I just, you must think I’m a little odd. I’m just tired, you know. I’m just not ready to say goodbye to her yet. Guess that sounds weird.”

Carol just stared at her. She might feel bad for Nancy and sorry for how she’s treated her, but she was beginning to think she was as freaky as Byers. Maybe they were well suited to each other. It was probably just as well that she dumped Steve. He might be sad now but in the long run, it was probably healthier for him. She suspected that someday Nancy Wheeler might end up in the nuthouse. For now she played along.

“I uh, I know I asked Steve to pass on my condolences, but I really am sorry about it.” Carol forced the sincerity through her teeth.

“You talked to Steve?” Nancy asked. Her face started to look like she was blanking out again

“He didn’t tell you?” Now Carol was surprised. She was sure that Steve would have said something if for no other reason than to just have a reason to talk to Nancy. Steve might seem cool about Byers stealing his girl, but she knew Steve had actually cared about Nancy. She known him
through all his other ‘girlfriends’ and Nancy had been different for him. It’s what pissed Tommy off so much because neither of them had ever been able to see what was so special about her. Carol couldn’t deny she’d always been a little miffed that Steve couldn’t have fallen for Nicole. As Carol’s best friends, that would have been awesome but instead it made for awkward outings for the four of them. She was sure Steve is being generous in the hopes Wheeler would pull her head out of her ass and realize Byers was a waste and she’d go running back to Steve. Carol thought that unlikely now that she was starting to see the girl was almost as nutty as her new boyfriend.

Nancy tilted her head and then replied coolly, “Yes. Yes he did mention it. Thank you.”

They pulled up to Carol’s house and she got out quickly. Carol wasn’t capable of dealing with her anymore at the moment. She’d just try to keep her mom’s words in mind and not be cruel. “Well, thanks for the lift. Tell Jonathan I’m sorry I delayed you.”

“Jonathan? Why would...uh, nevermind. Yes, yes I will tell Jonathan that,” Nancy said, obvious from her tone that was not going to happen.

Carol watched as Nancy pulled away and headed not in the direction of the Byers house, or even the Wheeler house but back in the direction they came from. She wondered where Nancy was really going.

She didn’t get a chance to think about it for long as the porch light turned on and her mother was standing there looking disappointed in her.

“It’s a school night, Carol. I don’t care about the weekends but on a school night you know you are supposed to be home by 9:00.”

“Sorry, Mom. Had a fight with Tommy.”

Her mom looked at her with concern. “Are you ok?”

“Not sure. I think I have a lot of thinking to do,” Carol replied.

Her mom nodded at her and then said, ‘Well, I was going to make some tea, Would you like some?’ That was her parents’ usual nightly ritual. Carol had always found it so boring that every night at 9:00 her parents got some tea and a snack as they watched tv, but tonight it sounded nice.

“Yeah. I could use something to warm up.”

END FLASHBACK

She realized the bell rang and she’d missed most of what the teacher had been talking about. Well, only a couple of hours to go before the long weekend. She was still trying to decide if she was going to the party on Saturday and probably seeing Tommy there or if, for once, she’d skip it.

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LACEY’S POV

Tuesday had been a long day. She had closed the shop and was driving home. The road was dark and she hated driving this way but it was the fastest stretch, even if it went past that creepy lab
where the chemical spill had happened. Not that she could see anything from the road. It was pretty far in, but there were a lot of ‘No Trespassing’ signs posted all along the chain link fence that encircled the property.

She almost stopped the car in surprise when she saw Billy Hargrove standing in the headlights of his Camaro. That was a sweet car and she’d really hoped to get a ride in it. She’d been hoping that maybe Billy would stop in again or call but it had only been a few days and since it was the holidays, who knew what family stuff he had going on so she’d be patient. She liked him. He’d been charming and attentive and the man could kiss. She appreciated that he hadn’t pushed for more before she was ready. She just been with Paul for so long that it was hard for her to move on. She felt a little guilty about it, but it was time.

And she would have stopped except she was even more surprised to see a station wagon pull up from the opposite direction and stop. She couldn’t slow down without being noticed. She tried to look inside the car on the way past but it was too dark and she was going too fast. She’d looked in her rearview mirror and saw Billy watch her car drive away but the other driver hadn’t gotten out yet. It didn’t take long to lose sight of them and she was certainly not turning around.

What on earth were they doing out here? Could Billy...be dealing or something? She couldn’t think of any other reason. Maybe she should be glad that Billy hadn’t called her again.

At least Wednesday was a short day. She only had three clients booked and she had scheduled them early. Then she was supposed to go help her mom get the house ready for her two brothers who were coming home for the holidays.

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**STEVE’S POV**

Eventually Steve got back with breakfast and coffees in hand. He was proud of himself for not spilling anything.

His parents and their guests were in the great room where his dad was playing some Bartok at the seemingly utter delight of Monica.

He sat the food down in the kitchen and popped his head in as the last notes were fading off. Steve was not a Bartok fan. The atonality of some of his pieces made his head hurt. His father was a fan though because it was complex and not created to just be “pleasurable fluff but to expand the idea of what music was.”

“Finally! Breakfast has arrived!” Monica exclaimed as she jumped up off the sofa. “What a lovely way to start the day! A magnificent private concert by a devilishly handsome man,” she gushed as she patted his father’s shoulder - and had he ever seen his dad almost blush before? He looked to his mother who had a pinched look about her but Monica didn’t notice. She just blustered on. “Followed by espresso and croissants delivered by his even more handsome son.” She winked at Steve who knew he turned three shades of red, not just from embarrassment but also anger because he saw his dad’s face when she said that. Steve was going to pay for that compliment.

“Well, it could have been better if the piano was in tune the way it’s supposed to be,” his dad remarked coolly.
“It sounded fine to me,” Monica said. “Don’t you agree, dear?” She looked to her husband who seemed amused.

“Sounded perfect.”

“The F6 is a little flat and the D4 is a little sharp. Did you even tune this, Steve? It sounds like cows trampled through here.”

“Yes, dad. Two weeks ago.”

“Hmmn...maybe you need your ears cleaned?

“Not everyone has perfect pitch like you, James,” his mother said in a placating tone. “Why don’t we go enjoy some breakfast before you need to leave.”

It was like his father hadn’t heard her. “Why is it so hard for you to do the few things we ask of you. Don’t think I didn’t notice the state of the other guest room this morning. Or the fact that it was clear someone had used that bathroom. Who was here, Steven? What slut did you have staying here? Or was it that waste of oxygen Tommy again.”

Steve heard the tone and knew his dad was just getting started. He had hoped that company might make his dad put on the “perfect parent routine” but clearly Monica’s compliment implying Steve was better looking than his dad was clearly getting under his skin.

He tried to ignore it and shift the conversation. “Leave? Where are you going?” Steve asked, just grateful they were leaving. Things would calm down and hopefully they could all not have an embarrassing meltdown in front of guests. Because honestly if that happened, his dad was sure to really take it out on Steve after they left. It had been a long time since his dad exacted physical discipline, but his knees still felt those times when he’d been forced to kneel on uncooked rice on the cement by the pool. The ruler to his knuckles positively tickled after an hour of that. His dad never went for the traditional punishments - they were far too hands-on but he found other creative ways to make Steve feel his wrath.

“We are going to look at some property that we’re developing with your father. Perhaps, you should come with us. I understand you may start working for your father after graduation,” Monica suggested.

“Not unless his grades improve,” his dad said in a sharp tone. “The boy can’t even do basic chemistry. What were the only As you got last semester? Typing and gym? The only way he’d work for me at this point is as a secretary.”

Steve wanted to die of embarrassment. And he wanted to lash out. He was tired and angry. Before he knew it he spit out, “Well, at least I’d be the first secretary you wouldn’t try to bang!”

He felt the slap before he even realized what he said. And it hadn’t been his father. His mother actually slapped him.

And shit. He really just said that. He was horrified with himself. He stood frozen. He tried to say something. Anything but he was frozen.

“Well, look at that. I’m empty. I could use another mimosa,” Monica said, breaking the tension and pulling Steve’s mom along with him. “You make the best, Candace. Could you refill mine? Come along, dear,” she said to Peter.

“Mom, I’m sorry…I didn’t mean...” Steve floundered. He ran his hands nervously through his
hair.

She glared back at him. “Not now, Steven James. I think maybe you should go for a run before you open your mouth again.”

He nodded. He knew he’d be running for awhile. He turned to go but his father gripped his arm and hissed at him, “I’d take your car now but I know your mother needs your help this weekend, but don’t think you won’t be punished. I think you need to learn just how good you have it so for now you have a long weekend reprieve but I want you to take the time to think about how you think you should be punished for embarrassing us like that. And be creative.”

Steve almost shivered. He absolutely hated when his dad gave him the choice. “It didn’t happen often. The last time was when his parents learned about the party when Barb got taken. He got to choose from the rice option (his father’s personal favorite) for an hour, no food except for bread for three days (and since it was basketball season, he hadn’t opted for that), sleeping in the garage for three days and having his car keys taken for the same period.

He’d opted for the rice. That was the last time he’d been punished. As much as he hated being left alone so much, when they finally returned he just wanted them gone again. His dad more than his mom. That was the truly regretful thing about it. He didn’t care about insulting his dad. The cheater deserved it. His mom, as absent as she sometimes was, still made an effort. It was just that she chose to follow his dad rather than stay with Steve but when she was home, he often enjoyed their time together and now he’d hurt and embarrassed her. The roiling in his gut was almost punishment enough. Why couldn’t he learn to think before he spoke. His tendency to open his mouth when he was angry is what got him in the most trouble. He felt the same shame over the things he’d said to Jonathan that day in the alley.

He trudged upstairs and got his running clothes on. He looked outside and it just started to drizzle. This was going to be a long, cold, wet run and Steve felt like he damned well deserved to have to do it.

Chapter End Notes

Carol’s mom learns that Carol has not been so nice to some people and discusses how “slut-shaming” harmed her in school when she had been groped by a guy regularly and he lied about her putting out. It helps Carol realize that maybe she is the asshole Steve accused her of being. FYI...this is something that happened to my mom and she did not tell me about until it actually happened to me in high school.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter even if it's a bit angsty. I know updates are coming slower but it's because of RI issues and just making sure the plot stays together now that it's more complicated.
Chapter 15 - To Try When Your Arms Are Too Weary

Chapter Summary

Steve apologizes to his mom, we learn a bit more about his parents, Dr. Owens continues to look into things and Will finally gets to a record store.

Chapter Notes

Guess I need to add Dr. Owens to the character list now. I hadn't really intended for him to have a large role but I think it's heading there.

No real new warnings in this chapter but there is grief discussion with Barb's Mom and discussions of infidelity about Steve's parents. Know in this discussion I am not condoning their choices, just that life is complicated and sometimes people make choices or accept behaviors other people don't understand. Clearly the choices they've made have not made them great parents but they didn't necessarily set out to be bad parents.

This is not nearly as angsty as the last chapter I think. Plot continues to slog along. Once we get through Thanksgiving and the weekend, we'll have more soft babysitter Steve I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 15 - To Try When Your Arms Are Too Weary

STEVE’S POV

It was a long, cold, wet run, much like Steve had expected. What he hadn’t expected was to have Dr. Owens pull up beside him on the way back to the house.

“Isn’t it a bit dismal for a run?” Dr. Owens said as he rolled down the window.

“Felt the need to get out of the house for a bit,” Steve replied in between deep breaths. It felt weird looking down into the doctor’s Mercedes on the side of the road. “What are you doing in town?”

“Needed to follow up on some things, including your blood tests which you haven’t called about.”

“Oh...well. I haven’t been able to get away much. Parents are home and all.” Steve fussed at his sleeve.

“I heard. Anyways, if you have a few minutes, we could draw some blood and get that off your busy plate.” Dr. Owens smiled at him.

“Here?” Steve looked into the back seat and saw several bags there. “You just carry that stuff
with you?”

Now Dr. Owens laughed. “No. I had hoped to get your sample while I was in town but I wasn’t expecting to find you while I was driving. We’d have to go back to my motel room.”

There was a long pause before Owens added. “I have to refrigerate the sample. Won’t take more than twenty minutes.”

If Steve had been in a better mood or if he knew the doctor better, he might have joked about how sketchy the whole thing looked. Instead he just looked inside the expensive car and said, “I’m wet.”

“I can see that. I’ll pop the trunk and you can grab a towel out of the duffel bag to sit on.”

Now Steve couldn’t help it. “You just carry towels for any random stranger you pick up?”

“No. just ones I know. Kidding. It’s my gym bag.” At Steve’s incredulous look, he added “Believe it or not, I actually have to work out to keep this physique.” Steve blinked in disbelief until Owens left him off the hook. “It’s for my physical therapy for my leg. Don’t worry, I don’t think I sweated on it too much, but you probably don’t want to wipe your face on it.”

Steve heard the trunk pop open so he walked around and saw the bag in question. The towel was on top fortunately. He grabbed it and quickly got in the car after draping the towel over the seat. “I can’t be too long.” He took the baseball cap off that he had worn to help keep the rain out of his eyes.

“No problemo,” Owens said. “I have some things to do, too.” There was some basic top forty radio station on softly so Steve could barely make out the sounds of the Cars “Drive” playing. He liked that song. The heat in the car felt good. Owens reached over and turned it up even more. Steve hadn’t realized exactly how cold he was. While he had put on a long sleeve shirt for the run to help compensate for the chill, he’d still worn shorts. His sweat pants would have gotten too heavy in the rain. His thighs now felt like ice. His socks were soaked and squishy.

After a bit, Owens asked, “Your parents coming home tonight?”

Steve humphed. “They came home last night.”

“Really? Thought they had tickets for a flight tonight?”

Steve fleetingly wondered how Owens knew that, but assumed he just guessed based on their phone conversation. “Well, they brought company who knew someone who knew someone with a private plane I guess.”

“Guests? Who came with them?” Owens asked.

“I don’t know them. Peter and Monica somebody or another. Can’t remember the last name. Some guy my dad’s doing a deal with I guess. Investment property? I’m not too sure. Dad doesn’t really tell me anything. Not that I care about it anyway.” He watched out the window trying not to think about the hurt look on his mom’s face when he opened his mouth. He really tried not to think about his dad or their guests.

It didn’t take long to reach the motel just outside of the city limits. Owens room was in the back where there was little traffic. The incongruity of a Mercedes sitting in front of the Dew Drop Inn hadn’t escaped Steve’s attention. Steve knew the reputation of the place if for no other reason that some of the kids at school that wanted to hook up and didn’t have an empty house like Steve’s
could afford a crappy room here for a few hours and no one bothered them. The manager certainly didn’t care so long as you paid first. Steve himself had never been there before and his skin itched just looking at the room.

“I know. Not much to look at but well, the government doesn’t give you much choice.”

“Not that it’s any of my business but your car…” Steve hesitated and then plowed on “It looks like you could have upgraded a bit.”

“Well, you’re right. It’s not your business but truthfully, I like places like this. I don’t like wasting money when I don’t need to. Plus here? No one notices you, no one cares. And as bad as it looks, there are no bed bugs.”

“So you don’t want people to know you’re here?” Steve asked as he sat down on a threadbare seat next to a coffee-stained table that had Johnny B + Veronica 4Ever carved into it. He didn’t know anyone named Veronica but Steve slightly chuckled as he thought of Jonathan Byers going by Johnny B. The guy would probably beat him up again if Steve called him that.

“I’d rather not have people notice me while I’m here. Since I was at the press conference, some reporter may recognize me and I just as soon not get involved in those conversations right now. Roll up your sleeve, lower your arm and then start making a fist with your hand a few times to get the blood pumping.”

Owens got his equipment out and then washed his hands thoroughly before sat down. After putting on some latex gloves, he wrapped a rubber tube around Steve’s upper arm. As he got the needle and sample bottle ready he asked, “You been feeling okay otherwise? I mean you’re running so I assume you’re ok but let’s just verify everything.”

“Yeah. Still trying to get back to top shape for basketball, but there’s nothing unusual.”

“No fever? No unusual pains or aches, outside of what you’d expect?”

“No.”

“How are you sleeping?”

“OK, I guess. Some nightmares but nothing unusual I don’t think.”

Owens finished getting the sample and put it into the refrigerator. “Can I check your wounds? I want to make sure they look ok.”

“Ok.” Steve lifted his shirt and Owens examined his side, pulling the top of his shorts down just enough to see the marks on the hip. Then he lifted Steve’s leg up and checked his leg. Owens hummed his approval. “I gotta say, the wounds are healing rather well. No sign of infection and even the scarring is going to be less than I thought they’d be. You are quite fortunate, young man.”

“Thanks. I mean, I’ve always been a bit of a quick healer but even I’ve been a bit surprised, although I’ve never had an injury like this before so I wasn’t sure.”

“It’s good. I was afraid of infection. We don’t know exactly what those things are - what you call demodogs - but given where they come from I was certain there would be a worse reaction to their bite. I’m certainly glad they weren’t poisonous but they could have had some kind of bacteria in their saliva your immune system might not have been able to handle. I’ve seen dog and cat bites that can get pretty ugly and those are from this side.” Owens was patting his knee in a comforting
Steve started to feel faint. He knew he wasn’t the best student and while he generally understood health from the physical side of athletics, he hadn’t really stopped to think about what could have happened to him. Maybe he’d glad he didn’t think about. He’d have probably started imagining all kinds of symptoms. “Is that why you asked about the tennis shots in the hospital?” He knew the word was wrong as soon as he said it.

“Tetanus...yes,” Owens corrected him with a slight smile. At least it wasn’t condescending. Steve still flushed with embarrassment over his error. He sometimes got words confused. In English, French and Spanish. Some part of him knew he shouldn’t be embarrassed. He was mostly fluent in three languages which was more than most of his peers, but he still made dumb mistakes like that and went hot recalling the humiliation of every time his dad would correct him.

“We gave you a booster just in case. It’s why you had those antibiotics as well. Seems to have done the trick,” Owens continued as if Steve wasn’t squirming over his mistake or dwelling on the possibilities of infection.

“Anyways, I know you said you were short on time so I’ll drive you back. Maybe a little closer to home?” Owens got up and put his things away as Steve rolled his sleeve down and got up to head to the car.

During the drive, Owens asked about Steve’s post high school plans, which Steve didn’t have so he just hemmed and hawed about waiting to hear back from some colleges and maybe a basketball scholarship.

“You know, I also played basketball in school. Not well mind you. I certainly wasn’t as athletic as you are. And I was never a swimmer.”

“You checked up on me?” Steve asked, a little surprised although now that he thought about it, it made sense. The government agency that required them to sign non-disclosure agreements was bound to do background checks. Owens just looked at him.

“It came up. Along with your other...skills.”

“My other...what?” Steve asked.

The car stopped three blocks from his house.

“You’re almost 18 -and speak three languages. You were a bit of a child prodigy in piano, like your father.”

“I’m nothing like my father,” Steve replied coolly. He didn’t like the comparison.

“Sorry. Bit of a sore subject, I know. I’m just saying you have skills. That you have potential.”

Steve felt like he was being viewed under a microscope. Like somehow the government could see inside him. And wasn’t that a laugh. If they still had El, they probably could have. Hell, maybe they had others that no one knew about. Just because they stopped the lab in Hawkins didn’t mean it wasn’t going on somewhere else.

He got out of the car without replying and slammed the door.

As he crossed the street, Owens rolled down the window. “I know it’s not probably any of my business but is everything ok at home?”
Steve almost liked Owens...as far as being able to like anyone who had anything to do with Lab business but he didn’t trust him. Didn’t trust that the Mercedes he was in was paid for by some other child hidden in a lab somewhere. Steve smiled but said, “Like you said, not your business.”

Owens looked at him and Steve saw the recognition that Owens knew Steve didn’t trust him. “Fair enough. I know I haven’t earned it, but call if you need help.”

Steve might have replied but just then a familiar station wagon drove up with Mrs. Wheeler politely waving at him. He saw her notice Dr. Owens with a frown on her face and slowed the car. She rolled down the driver side. Owens drove off.

“Sweetie, it’s pouring. What are you doing out here? Thought you were in school?”

“No. I’m helping my mom with some things for the holidays so she called me off. Needed to take a break and cool down a bit.” He waved to Holly sitting in the back seat. He grinned when Holly waved back and yelled, “Teve, teve, teve,” excitedly. It had been awhile since he’d seen the little girl.

“That’s nice of you to help her. Maybe I should have done that for Nancy.”

“I doubt Nancy would have agreed to that. She likes school a bit too much.”

‘And cooking too little,” Mrs. Wheeler replied.

Steve smiled fondly at the thought of Nancy trying to help in the kitchen. She wasn’t hopeless, just uninterested. He made faces at Holly and couldn’t help but notice Mrs. Wheeler smiling at them.

“Who was that?” Mrs. Wheeler asked looking down towards where Owens car went.


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KAREN’S POV

As Karen wandered the grocery store, packed with other shoppers trying to get their holiday trimmings, she couldn’t get Steve out of her mind. Something was off but she couldn’t place it. Steve had always been polite and charming but he had dated her daughter for a year and she had never met his parents. They were always busy or gone. She guessed that now that Nancy and Steve had broken up, she needn’t worry about it but something seemed slightly sad about the boy. She wished she had noticed it sooner but she spent so long being slightly angry about how Nancy had hidden Steve behind her back, she had been determined to not like him.

Young love. It felt like a lifetime ago since since she’d had any of that kind of drama. She didn’t miss it exactly but she missed some of the excitement. The most she had to look forward to was some daytime soaps and if the new and improved detergent would actually get the grass stains out of Holly’s dress. She glanced down at her daughter sitting in the cart who was, thankfully, playing quietly with a doll.

As she pondered about the sweet potatoes, she noticed Marsha Holland standing over the strawberries and staring off into the distance. She looked worn down and thin, like the slightest
breeze would knock her over.

“Marsha? Marsha, are you okay?”

“These were her favorites. She loved strawberries. Thought I should make something for her for Thanksgiving and just remembered….she won’t be there again.”

Karen was at a loss as to what to do. She was afraid if she tried to hug her, Marsha would just crumble.

“I tried making a pumpkin pie this morning…” she started laughing, but tears were streaming down her face. “I forgot the sugar. Can you imagine? What would she have thought about that? And I...just, just can’t...Todd still wants to do something. Said she’d want us to. Barb loved Thanksgiving. His sister invited us you know, but then the funeral’s on Monday...and I can’t go out of town now...but I just can’t...”

Some people were starting to look at them and Holly as starting to mumble loudly to herself. Karen glared at the people staring at them. How dare they judge her? She tugged on the list clamped tightly in Marsha’s fist. It wasn’t long and she could tell what was holiday related and what were actually necessities.

“Let me have this. I’ll finish your shopping for you. I’ll bring it out to your car when I’m done. And then tomorrow you and Todd can come over to our house for dinner. I serve around 4:00 pm. Nancy would love to see you.”

Marsha stared at her through watery eyes and just nodded. “Thank you.”

Karen watched as she made her way out and then sped through her shopping just trying to be done. She hoped Ted would be okay with the additional guests but maybe Todd and he could veg out in front of the TV after they eat. It wasn’t going to be a fun Thanksgiving anyways, nothing ever was anymore. She loved her family but she sometimes didn’t like them when they treated her like she was the live-in maid and cook. Mike had a habit of mouthing off and Nancy disappeared constantly. When was the last time any of them said thank you? When was the last time any of them asked how her day was? She thought back to Steve and how lucky his mother was that he was willing to help her out.

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**NANCY’S POV**

For a half day, it seemed long. She was overly tired from sleeping fitfully the night before. She’d had bizarre dreams about wandering around in the woods with Billy Hargrove of all people. Then she’d been stuck in the lab, unable to get out. She and Billy had been screaming, their echoes bouncing around concrete walls. It felt like they were searching for something they lost but couldn’t remember what it was. Being pulled towards something that she couldn’t let go of.

She half thought she dreamt of picking Carol up off the side of the road as well until Carol had nodded a thanks to her across the hall. When the scuttlebutt had gotten around that Carol and Tommy were “off again”, she knew that part of her night hadn’t been a dream. She had nodded off early while writing an essay and her mom and woken her up to take something to her Nana who lived about fifteen minutes from them. She’d been a little groggy when she got in the car. Her Nana had already been in her pajamas so Nancy just dropped off the box and headed home when
she saw Carol on the road.

It came to her in bits and pieces but she wasn’t sure what she had dreamt and what had happened. It was weird but she felt off, like she was coming down with a cold. She debated about going to the record store with Jonathan and Will. He had invited her along and at first she hadn’t planned on it, but then decided it might be nice to spend some time with them. She just needed to wake up.

She hoped there was some Diet Coke in the vending machine. She needed the caffeine. She walked in the vending machine room between third and fourth periods. Trying to get change from the bill machine was sometimes tough and she had to try several times before it finally took her wrinkled dollar.

“So, what were you doing out so late on a school night?” Tommy’s voice sent a shrill through her. He had almost never directly spoken to her.

“I don’t see what business it is of yours,” Nancy said as she selected the Diet Coke. It rumbled out of the machine. Tommy being faster and more athletic than her, grabbed it.

“It’s not. But seeing how you seem to get into everyone else’s business, I thought you should know what it feels like.” He started flipping the can in the air.

“Give me my drink,” Nancy said, annoyed that she’d now have to wait to open it. She tried to grab it during a long toss up, but Tommy easily got it being taller than her.

“Or what?” Tommy asked. At least he stopped throwing the can around.

Nancy crossed her arms and glared at him. He was such an ass.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Your new little boyfriend isn’t here to defend you.”

“I don’t need him to defend me,” Nancy replied and reached out to try to take the drink from him.

“Maybe not. You certainly seem to have your share of defenders though. Are you really that good in the sack?”

“You’re disgusting, Tommy.”

“True. I don’t deny it. You are too, though. The way you treated Harrington? After everything he did for you? That’s what’s really disgusting. And he still acts like you’re better than we are.”

“I am,” Nancy said. She’d leave the room but he was blocking the exit.

He leaned forward and hissed in her face. “I was his best friend for years before you came along. And he just dumped me because of you? You were no one before he noticed you.”

“You sound like a jealous ex,” Nancy spit out. She was sure Tommy would be apoplectic at the implication. She probably should feel threatened but she didn’t. Tommy was mostly bluster. Not always, but he’d never seen him actually hurt a girl.

“Well, isn’t this cozy. Who knew the vending room was the place for skeezy hookups?” Billy appeared behind Tommy. “Out of the way, T-bone. You’re blocking my way. I need a little something sweet.” He winked at Nancy as he pushed past Tommy and went to the candy machine.

Nancy took the opportunity to get out of the room. Stupidly though, she automatically turned as Tommy called her name.
“Nancy, you forgot your drink.” She turned just in time for him to pop the top and spray it in her face and all over her shirt. “Oops. That looks a little familiar, doesn’t it?” Tommy said with a bite as he left, dropping the can on the floor at her feet.

A couple of girls went passed and giggled and she froze in place, furious.

“I hear baking soda can get that out,” Billy said, handing her an unopened Diet Coke as he left and ducked into the classroom just through the door to the next hall before the bell rang.

Great, now she was going to be late for fourth period.

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ROBIN’S POV

It was a study period but band geeks like her were allowed to do it in the band room or sign out one of the rehearsal rooms for practice. She was in the practice room farthest from the hall rehearsing for the Christmas Jubilee Concert. It was almost the end of the period and she was frustrated over a couple of transitions she was having issues with. Irritated with herself, she packed up a bit earlier and was people-watching as classes let out.

She didn’t have far to go for her next class - Biology. Not one of her favorites. Her teacher hadn’t found it amusing when she and her lab partner, Randy, were pretending their dissected frogs were fencing while quoting Monty Python. Mr. Sanders had come up behind her as she was saying, “Go away or I shall taunt you a second time” in an outrageous french accent. Randy howled. Mr. Sanders didn’t. That was the first time in her life she had gotten detention and her parents hadn’t been happy about it. It was Randy’s fifth which led to an automatic in-school suspension and Mr. Sanders broke them up.

Now she was partners with Amber Althouse which would have been okay except apparently she’s recently developed a bit of a crush on Harrington because he was nice to her like once. It was like reliving it with Tammy all over again except at least she didn’t have a crush on Amber like she did Tammy. Also, Amber didn’t say much so she didn’t have to hear her wax poetic about him. She just had to suffer seeing her doodle ‘Steve + Amber’ or ‘Amber Harrington’ in her Trapper Keeper. Ugh...what was so great about biggest douchebag in the school? Other than his hair that is, which even she had to admit was kind of fantastic.

Speaking of, she noticed his ex leaving the vending room apparently having words with Tommy. She looked annoyed. Nancy wasn’t her type but she thought she looked a little fierce which was always sort of...attractive. Until Tommy sprayed a shaken soda all over her. Then she just stood there, mouth open in shock before her eyes narrowed in anger looking like a G-rated Carrie. Good thing telekinesis and that shit wasn’t real because Nancy looked like she was about to burn the school down. Or at least Tommy and a few girls near her. Tommy laughed as he walked away.

Scratch her earlier thought. Tommy was actually the biggest douchebag. She almost went out to check on Nancy, particularly when she saw Billy Hargrove come out of the room. And again, Robin had to reassess. Harrington was now like the third biggest douche because Hargrove certainly was worse than him. She expected a further confrontation between him and Nancy but instead he just tossed a new soda to her and walked away as Nancy stared after him looking confused.

It was so confusing. Everyone knew about the animosity between all of them but no one really
knew why. In fact, the only people who had reason to feel any animosity seemed to still be friendly. That whole Steve/Nancy/Jonathan thing was too trippy. That was such a little drama circle. It was probably more interesting that the plays Robin was doing in their actual drama class. Honestly, if she had to perform in “Our Town” one more time, she thought she’d quit. She tried to suggest “Arsenic and Old Lace” but Mrs. Winters, who was the drama coach as well as an English teacher, thought a comedy about killing people somehow wasn’t appropriate for high school.

Nancy stormed off down the hall so Robin just put the whole thing behind her. Maybe she’d write a play about all these idiots someday.

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STEVE’S POV

Steve was relieved when he got back to the house, his dad’s car was gone. Cautiously entering it, it was silent except for the sound of the radio playing and some clanking in the kitchen.

He walked quietly and looked in to see his mom cleaning up the breakfast dishes, humming to herself. A half-empty Mimosa on the counter next to her.

“Mom, where is everyone?”

She didn’t turn around. She waved a knife around that he thought she was washing. “Oh you...business stuff. Interesting projects to talk about and land to look at.”

“Even...Mrs. Winston?” he asked quietly, hoping he didn’t set her off.

She froze and just said, “Yes. Of course. Apparently she makes all the big decisions. Not just a fluffy housewife like...” she stopped. “Yes, they’re gone,” she restarted. “Won’t be back until tonight.” She turned around and it had been clear that she had been crying. “But...that leaves us with some time to get everything ready for tomorrow. Why don’t you go take a quick shower and come back to help me start the oyster stuffing?”

Normally Steve would do just that but he had never said anything quite so...big before. They weren’t huggers and lord knows he’d never try it with his dad, but for once he decided to try it. Maybe she just stab him with the steak knife.

He came up behind her and hugged her gently and whispered. “I’m sorry.” He was trying not to get upset. He was feeling on edge which often led to outbursts of emotions - sometimes crying, usually anger and that led to him running his mouth about shit he didn’t really mean. He thought Nancy’s sudden outburst while drunk and realized maybe he was being a bit hypocritical of her. His first thought of course was alcohol often makes you more truthful than usual but that’s not always the case. His mother for instance was better at hiding things when she was slightly tipsy. Sure, he gave Nancy a chance the next day to say it, but was that fair? To put her on the spot like that?

Maybe he should have given her a bit a space. Maybe they’d still be together.

Probably not since the first chance she had to get away, she slept with Jonathan. Shit, he didn’t mean to go down that mental route. And who was he to judge? Jonathan was probably better for her anyways.
His mom knew better than to run her mouth when she was upset. He needed to learn that skill. She grabbed a hold of his forearm that was wrapped around her waist and just nodded. He didn’t want to drag the moment out so he let go to go take his shower.

Before he headed upstairs, he heard, “Steven?”

He turned and she was looking at him.

“I’m only going to say this once but you’re almost 18 and you should know that life is not a fairy tale. Happy endings don’t look the same to everyone. And happy endings aren’t happy every day. When you get married, you need to learn you have to make compromises. You need to accept everyone has flaws. Just know what the flaws are you are willing to accept.

I’m very aware that our marriage may not be what most people in Hawkins would consider normal if they knew about it but I knew that going into it. Your father isn’t perfect but I’ve accepted his flaws. I’m well aware of how he relieves his stress.”

“His stress…?” Steve started to ask.

She held up a hand to stave him off. “He’s worked hard all his life and has managed to achieve more than what many people could given his upbringing. I know we haven’t discussed it much and maybe that was wrong. He had nothing except a love for an instrument that he couldn’t afford to play. He got lucky to find a sponsor to allow him to pursue it but he had to work for it. He didn’t have the advantages you have growing up so it’s frustrating for him to see you squander opportunities. He wants you to succeed. That to him is happiness. To not owe anyone anything. He may not be the best at expressing it but he does love you. We both do. We are trying to give you the tools you need to survive in this world. We’re not going to be here forever.”

Steve paled and headed towards her. “Is something wrong? Are you sick or something?”

She smiled gently. “No, but you never know what could happen. It’s an unstable world. He likes to be prepared. He wants you to be prepared.”

“Then why hasn’t he prepared me? I know nothing about his businesses. He didn’t even want me to go with them today when the Winston’s suggested it.”

“That’s on me. I’ve asked him to wait until you graduate. I wanted you to have the childhood he didn’t have. Maybe I went too far, gave you too much freedom but both of us were raised in strict households. I...didn’t want that for you.”

It was a lot to take in. His mom had never really spoken about their past. Beyond some casual stories, they never discussed much. He had never met his dad’s parents as he said they passed away long before he had ever met his mom. He knew his mom’s dad briefly as a child, but he had died when Steve was about six so he only had vague memories.

“And on that note, if you can behave the rest of the weekend, your father will forgo any punishment. Now, let’s put this unpleasantry behind us and enjoy our day. When was the last time we got to cook together?”

By the time he got finished with his shower and got downstairs, his mom had put on the cast recording of “Man from La Mancha” and had flour all over the counter as she rolled out a pastry crust. He threw on an apron and started getting things together.

The afternoon went by far more pleasantly than the morning had as they focused on cooking and singing along with his mom’s favorite musicals. It was nice to see her smiling at him for a change,
even if some of that was the wine she had moved onto after lunch. At least she shared it with him. She didn’t care that the legal drinking age in Indiana was 19 (or was moving to 21 before Steve could get there which totally sucked), wine didn’t count in her opinion. She felt every educated person should grow up appreciating wine. It was only when Steve drank hard liquor she had an issue with, which reminded him he still had that bottle of Jack in his closet Tommy had left behind.

They’d gone through several albums, until their voices were giving out but Steve admitted he loved belted out “The Impossible Dream” several times during the course of the day. If the lyrics “To be willing to march into Hell for a heavenly cause” meant a little more to him now, he’d never admit it.

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WILL’S POV

Finally school was over and the break began. Jonathan picked him up, Nancy in the passenger seat. He thought they were going to drop her off but she decided to join them saying, “She could use a little music to pick her up.”

He liked Nancy well enough. Not that she spoke to him much. Of course, she didn’t even speak to her own brother that much without arguing. Most of Will’s opinions about Nancy had been filtered through his best friend Mike. Since she was there, he asked if Mike could go along.

So now Mike and Will were scouring the old records. At first, Will was a little nervous that Mike might make fun of Will for looking for some classical music when Jonathan pulled one out for him to look at.

“Why do you want that. Isn’t it kind of boring?” Mike asked, flipping the album over.

“I find it relaxing I guess. Helps me sleep,” Will explained. He decided to leave out the other part about it feeling kind of good. He’d never heard anyone talk about music giving them those kind of feelings. Just another way Will Byers was weird. Sometimes he wondered if his mom drank when she was pregnant, or did some kind of drugs because maybe that would explain why he felt so different than everyone else seemed to. Or was so prone to such weird happenings.

He knew it wasn’t true of course. His mom would never have done that but it sure would be nice to have such an easy reason.

“I guess that makes sense,” Mike said and then handed it back to him. Will felt relieved that Mike was not going to ask more about it.

He was busy flipping through the Js in the rock section as Will continued on the other side of the aisle in classical. Jonathan had gone over to Nancy who was looking at something closely she pulled off a display shelf and seemed interested in.

“What did you find?” Jonathan asked.

“Moonlight Sonata,” she said with a smile. “I know it sounds stupid, but for some reason it’s been going through my head a lot. I must have heard somewhere recently. I had forgotten how nice it is to just listen to music like that.”

Will just looked at her. Was that weird? Both of them suddenly wanting to hear classical music?
“Huh, am I going to be surrounded by snobby music fans now. I think the two of you are listening to music behind my back,” Jonathan smiled and lightly kissed her cheek.

“Oh, gross. I do NOT need to see that!” Mike yelled across the store, over the strains of the Pretenders.

Jonathan flushed, embarrassed but Nancy just pulled a face at him and kissed Jonathan back in retaliation.

Mike pretended to gag. “It was bad enough with Steve, but man, Jonathan’s almost like a brother to me. That just makes it…” Mike shook as if disgusted.


“Yeah, gross.”

“Does that make Steve, Han Solo?”

“No. No! Steve is no way like Han,” Mike yelled.

“Oh, I don’t know. Ruggedly handsome, kinda funny, comes in at the last minute to save people,” Will kidded and then stopped as he realized what he said. He hoped Mike didn’t pick up on it.

“No, he’s more like…like Chewbacca. Still a cool fighter but with way too much hair,” Mike laughed and Will was relieved that the moment passed. But it occurred to him that maybe Steve had played ‘Moonlight Sonata’ for Nancy recently and a small twinge of unpleasantness went through him. He didn’t like the thought of her at Steve’s house. He wasn’t sure if it was more the thought she could see Steve behind Jonathan’s back (would she do that? It certainly hadn’t taken her long to go from Steve to Jonathan so maybe she’d change her mind again?) or if he didn’t like the idea of Steve playing for her.

He knew it was ridiculous.

“Wow, I think that’s Steve’s dad?” Nancy said, breaking him out of his reverie. “Wonder who those people are?”

Jonathan and Nancy were looking out the front window. Will decided he had to see and Mike followed him.

Sure enough, it looked like the guy in the photos at Steve’s house. He seemed so stern. He looked in deep conversation with the couple as they walked towards a car. The woman was not his mother. They were all carrying large briefcases.

“Not what I thought his dad would look like,” Jonathan said.

“I would have thought he’d have more hair,” Mike said, making the all chuckle.

Will couldn’t wait for them to leave again. After all, he’d been unable to go back to visit since that first night and he really wanted to see Steve again and show him the album he was picking up. He thought he might ask him for piano lessons.

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BILLY’s POV
Max and he had decided not to mention anything about the half day. It gave them a good excuse to not be home for as long as possible. He dropped Max off at the arcade, ignoring the fact that it only seemed to be Sinclair waiting for her. He wondered where the other ragamuffins were.

It had finally stopped raining but he really didn’t know where he wanted to kill time at. He thought of the quarry and just sitting in his car but he was so tired he thought he’d fall asleep and risk missing dinner.

He also didn’t want to risk driving around and getting seen. He opted for people watching. Or a particular person he wanted to watch. He wasn’t going to until he drove past Harrington’s and noticed a Mercedes parked in the street a few houses up and an older guy watching the house. Something about him seemed familiar somehow. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong.

He decided to stroll down the sidewalk and act as if he were looking for a dog. “Mitzy! MITZY!” he yelled just a bit louder as he got near the car. The man suddenly looked up at him as he approached.

“You haven’t by chance seen a small shih tzu running around?” Those were those fancy kind of dogs rich people like the Harrington’s had, right? Poodles seemed too obvious. “Mangy looking thing. Little bitch got out on me taking her to the groomer.”

The man quickly shuffled his folders to the side. “Nope, nope sorry. I haven’t seen any dogs. Just got myself turned around. How do I get to Main from here?”

Billy quickly spieled out directions and the man sped off like a bat out of hell.

He wondered what was so fascinating at the Harrington house because as sure as the sun sets in the west, that man was not lost. He looked around before making his way to the Harrington backyard. That was the place to spy. Lots of trees to hide in, no back fence and often the curtains were left open.

He laughed seeing Harrington in an apron. There was a woman with him. At first Billy wondered if he got a new girlfriend but after a short while it was apparent this was an older woman and Harrington wasn’t known for attracting the Hawkins Lonely house Wives Club. That was Billy’s area whether he went through with it or not. Generally not. Most of them were cows. There were only a few he’d even consider if he was desperate enough.

Still, it was clear this was Harrington’s mother or aunt at best. They had the same kind of hair and had a careful kind of familiarity of moving around each other. Body language spoke louder than words. Billy was fluent in it. He had to be. This was not a mother and son who were actually close but seemed like they wanted to be but had no idea how. Somewhere between his own mother and his relationship with Susan.

They finally seemed to break some ice when both of them started singing. It was a bit hard to hear but Harrington had a surprisingly decent voice, even if was some goofy Broadway shit. Billy made himself comfortable in a nearby tree with a low limb and closed his eyes to focus on the sound and just listened for awhile.

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OWENS POV
He knew who Billy Hargrove was. Hopper had tried to keep him out of it, but Owens was aware. He just chose not to tell anyone else just yet. There were enough people caught up in this and Owens was still unsure how to untangle everything.

On top of that, he was concerned about Steve. Granted the boy didn’t give him much room to show that, but he sensed that maybe he had few adults in his life he could trust. It was taking some time to get more background on his parents but there was clearly an absence there. It was something Owens knew well.

He had hoped to catch a glimpse of the senior Harringtons in person before he left but he really didn’t want to be seen. He had important papers to deliver to Hopper at the diner. It was one thing he could try to settle for these people. The diner was risky enough but Hopper would not tell him where the cabin was (though truthfully owens knew but didn’t want to betray what trust he had earned) nor could they do this at the station.

Well, he was a little early, but he could go in at get a sandwich awhile and wait.

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HOPPER’S POV

He couldn’t believe Owens came through. Jane Hopper. He stared at the paper incredulously.

It had really happened. He couldn’t wait to tell her. He was to surprise her on Thanksgiving with it. It seemed like such a wonderful thing to be grateful for.

Now he just had to wait for Steve to bring her home.

Chapter End Notes

A few things.

1. Sorry for the delay. Real life is getting a bit complicated so I don't have as much time to focus on this. That said, don't worry. This story will get finished.

2. May be bit of more delay as I may do some Halloween based shorter fics for October. No one's left any requests so I'll just write what I want.

3. Some people may see what I've done with Steve's parents as justifying or excusing behavior. I'm not. It's from a character's perspective. Most people have reasons for doing what they do and feel justified for doing it. They are the heroes of their own stories so to speak. I think Dacre himself said something about that trying to get backstory on Billy. I don't like cardboard "villains" and prefer if I can understand the motivations for some characters even if I don't agree with them personally. Just because I write it does not mean I agree with it.

Most interesting class I ever had was Debate Class where we were required to debate from both sides - even things you vehemently disagreed with. It was a great way understand different perspectives but to also understand your own viewpoint in the end and have stronger arguments for them. That said, i still don't like his parents and I'm
writing them!

Hope you enjoy this chapter!
Chapter 16 - The Waiting is the Hardest Part

Chapter Summary

The day before Thanksgiving...

A little Steve, El and Hopper bonding, a little Nancy and Jonathan and a little Billy and his right hand.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry this is so late. I know I said I was taking a bit of a break but I never meant for quite this long (plus I only got one Urban Legend story done). All I can say is Real Life got a way from me and is kicking a bit of my ass right now. In no way am I abandoning this story, just may take a bit longer for updates (although I'll certainly try to get the Thanksgiving chapter out around Thanksgiving!).

Quick Warnings for this chapter: Mention of masterbation but nothing overly descriptive.

Nancy is seemingly having some conflicting thoughts about Steve (and Stancy) and questioning why she's still thinking about him when she's with Jonathan. There are two basic reasons. One, this is still fairly close time-wise to when they broke up and anyone who has ever broken up knows it generally takes a bit to get over the decision or doubt- even if you are the one that initiated it. People are human and grey. This is no way is a negative comment on Jancy. Just the reality of starting a relationship quickly after ending another one even if you know it's the right thing to do. This is the inbetween of ending of one relationship and developing of the next. The second reason is more plot based and not really Nancy's fault. Some of this will continue in future chapters so be aware of it if that's something that bothers you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 16 - The Waiting is the Hardest Part

STEVE’S POV

Dinner had been early and stilted. As busy as he and his mother had been getting everything prepared for actual Thanksgiving, they had opted for a simple dinner that night. Steaks - which Steve happily manned the grill for even in November chilly weather. It had stopped raining earlier in the afternoon. The heat of the grill kept him warm enough. He was happy to be away from the company and at least it was still early enough to have some remaining daylight along with the porch lights to see what he was doing. His mom had potatoes baking in the oven and had mixed a salad. The most elaborate part of dinner was the chocolate caramel trifle they had made but it was misleading. It looked pretty served in tall glass goblets but it was easy to make.

Apparently his dad and guests had stopped somewhere for a couple of drinks before they returned
though as they were all chatting happily when they came into the house and greeted both his mother and him enthusiastically before retiring to the parlor so his dad could play Chopin rather sloppily on the piano. Hearing his dad laugh at his own mistakes was a rather new experience. Usually he was so pristine in his playing, Steve often felt as if the soul had been sucked out of the piece.

He guessed whatever business they had attended to earlier went well. Not that he’d probably ever know what it was. He didn’t care. He had yet to pick up El and take her to Hopper’s. His mom had kept him busy and he’d been unable to get away. He planned to go right after dinner. He was lost in thought, looking around when a ray of light reflected off of something on the ground and startled him. This time of year usually left the woods behind his house seem dark and dreary - and a little foreboding since Barb if he was honest with himself.

Cautiously he walked over to see what it was, a part of him wondering if he should get the bat. He reminded himself that the gate was closed and as far as they knew, everything died with it. Still, his fight or flight instincts were on high alert these days.

It didn’t take long for him to find it. A lighter on the ground. One of those cheap BIC disposables. He looked around wondering how long it had been there and feeling a little weird that someone had obviously been back here. It was pretty clean and when he flicked the BIC, it still worked so it wasn’t some old relic from one of Steve’s infamous parties. Thinking about the parties, it reminded him that a lot of kids used the woods as a shortcut. He was probably just being paranoid. Besides, he lost his good lighter in the tunnels so this would be useful until he replaced it. He was still trying to quit smoking but it just felt better to have it on him.

At dinner he tried his best to be ‘seen and not heard’ and apparently that was enough to keep his dad in good spirits. He politely sat and listened to them discussing his dad’s upcoming tour: Vienna, London, Berlin, Rome...even Tokyo was on the list. It could be after Valentine’s Day until he saw them again. They hated Hawkins in January. Steve wasn’t sure he blamed them. January was always miserable but he at times resented them for leaving him behind and missed them not being here, although the latter was getting easier to deal with as he got older.

“It’s a shame young Steven here can’t travel with you. It would be such a good experience for a young man like him to see the world,” Peter said, his mouth still slightly full.

“Yes, well. Maybe after he graduates. We’ve talked about giving him a summer tour before he goes off to college,” his mom said, smiling at him. “You always enjoyed Barcelona.”

“You’ve been?” Monica asked, taking a sip of wine.

“Yes...when he was younger he traveled with us more. He used to play but it’s just not a passion like it is for his father so there was no reason for him to accompany us anymore.” His mother answered for him which was just as well since this was the first time they confirmed that a trip was his likely graduation present. He had assumed it but wasn’t sure.

“Ummm...he found sports more to his liking,” his dad said, coolly but not filled with the usual animosity for sports he usually had.

He glanced at his mother whose face looked tight but added “Yes - anyways since he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do, we decided he needed to be in school more regularly. Plus the schools these days are being far stricter in what they allow for excused absences. It’s terrible that parents can’t make the decision for what is right for their child anymore. Plus he still joined us for two weeks every summer so he hasn’t been completely stuck in Hawkins.”
Huh - stuck in Hawkins. That was a good way to phrase it. That’s exactly how he felt. Stuck in Hawkins. As much as he wanted to leave, he now felt an obligation to help keep Hawkins safe.

Steve waited for some comments about his lack of success at school but nothing came. Conversation turned to dessert and then the stock market. They are having a lively discussion about the ramifications of the feds cutting the discount rate to 8% and banks cutting the prime to 11%. Steve had no idea what any of that meant and just started to clean up the plates rather than contribute to a conversation he neither understood nor wanted to.

After loading the dishwasher and seeing his parents in a pleasant mood, he took a chance.

“Hey, is it ok if I go out for a bit? Some friends are back from college for the holiday and I said I stop by to say hi while they’re home.”

Before his parents could say no, Monica piped up. “It’s so nice you stay in touch. It’s so hard once you leave for college. You meet new people and sometimes the old people just don’t seem as interesting anymore and yet, you should never really forget where you come from.” She smiled at Steve and then looked at his dad.

His mom coughed and said, “Of course - your family...your roots are important and Steve knows that.”

Steve thought he was imagining the slight tension in the air but it had already become clear his mom wasn’t overly fond of Monica, no matter how polite they were all being.

Although, he’s sure it’s because of Monica his parents not only agree but just add, “Be home before midnight. You’re still on your junior license,” as if Steve needed to be reminded he’s not 18 yet. Close but not quite.

He’s grateful for the release. He grabbed his things quickly, including the walkie, and headed over to Dustín’s house.

Since he radioed from his driveway, El is waiting for him outside and quickly got in the car, keeping Dustín from engaging either of them in conversation. Steve just said a quick, “Thanks and I hope you and your mom have a good Thanksgiving” before taking off.

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**EL’S POV**

She was so grateful Steve finally picked her up. She was almost ready to try walking home. She thought he’d forgotten her. Not that hanging with Dustín was bad but he was very chatty and she wasn’t used to it. Plus she missed Hop.

“I’m so sorry, El. My parents have been on me all day. I couldn’t get away.” Steve seemed a little frazzled.

She wasn’t sure what that meant but understood Steve had just been busy and had not forgotten her. That made her feel better.

“So you ready to go home? To see Hopper?” Steve asked and the question sent a rush of warm feelings through her. Home. When she had first started living with Hopper, she wasn’t sure what “home” meant when the tv people talked about it. At first she thought it was just where you were
from - so she thought it meant the lab - but that never gave her the feelings those people seemed to talk about. Now that Steve said it, she feels like she has a new understanding. Home is about feelings like being warm and safe, comfortable, trusting those around you - and those are not feelings she’s as familiar with as she’d like to be. But she feels those things now with Hopper, with Mike even if she didn’t get to see him much and, of course, to a lesser extent some of the other people she’s gotten to know through them. Steve is now one of those people.

“Yes...home. I want to go home.” And she feels a sense of gratitude that such a place exists for her now. She watched Steve thrum his fingers against the steering wheel, still seeming a little tense from whatever his parents were ‘on hin’ for and wonders if Steve ever felt like he was home. She hasn’t known him long but she wants him to feel that way.

It doesn’t take long to drive to the cabin and mostly Steve hums along with the radio so El just watches out the window and appreciates the colors the trees have turned, even if it’s the last of the season. She knew soon the leaves would fall and winter would be back. She shivered a bit thinking how hard those weeks were the previous year trying to live outside. She glanced over to make sure Steve didn’t notice her sudden change. He didn’t. He was too busy singing along with the man on the radio. When he sang “You got lucky, babe, when I found you,” she smiled thinking about how Hopper had found her. She thought Steve had a nice voice, better than the man on the radio, but she couldn’t deny the song was good.

“Who’s this,” she asked Steve when no one was singing.

“Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers,” Steve replied, as he made the final turn into the dirt road that led to the cabin. “Do you like it?”

El nodded but realized he couldn’t see her so she spoke softly. “Yes. It’s good.”

“Pretty sure I have one of his albums around. If you ever come over again, I could play it for you if you’d like.”

“Yes. That would be nice,” El said. She was going to say more, but Steve came to a stop next to Hopper’s truck.

Hopper was standing on the porch, backlit by the porchlight. He must have heard them pull in. She is so happy to see him and wanted nothing more than to run and hug him but she hesitated. It seemed like Steve is planning to just drop her off and leave. Without really thinking about it, she got out of the car and leaned down and asked, “Can you bring my stuff in?” and ran to Hopper without waiting for an answer. She knew he would do it, but she had to make sure he came into the house. She thought she could get him to stay for a bit - maybe make tea and convince him to play a game. Maybe they can finally play Uno since there’s three people. Hopper would never play because it wasn’t fun with two people.

She hugged Hopper tight.

“Missed you, kid.” Hopper almost whispered in her hair and she felt a small kiss on the top of her head.

She was home. “Miss you, too. Safe now?” She felt his arms tighten around her.

“Yeah, I think so,” Hopper sounded relieved.

“Here you go, ma’am,” Steve said as he stepped up to the cabin with her bags. “Should I just leave them here or take them in?”
“I’ll take them,” Hopper started to reach out.

“No, take them in,” El interrupted. “My room. Straight in the back.” She didn’t want Steve to leave yet.

Hopper and Steve eyed each other warily but then Hopper shrugged his shoulders. “You heard her.”

Steve chuckled and walked into the house.

“What’s that about, El?” Hopper asked.

“Don’t want him to go home yet.”

“It’s Thanksgiving Eve. I’m sure his parents want him home.”

“No, they’ve been ‘on’ him all day.” She still wasn’t sure what that meant but it didn’t sound good. She wasn’t exactly knowledgeable about what a good parent was but so far Steve’s parents were nothing like Hopper or Joyce or even Mike’s or Dustin’s parents. At best she thought maybe they were like Max’s parents. She didn’t know Max that well but she had the sense that Max’s parents were also nothing like the other ones. El didn’t think it was a good thing and she wanted Steve to stay. Plus, something smelled really good.

“What is that smell? Did you cook?”

Hopper looked at her and she registered that he noticed the change in topic and nodded. “No - it’s just soup I picked up at the diner that I’m heating up...and some bread. But tomorrow we’re going to make a turkey. And sweet potatoes and stuffing. I mean it’s not much but I know you’ve never really had a Thanksgiving. I thought we could do that.”

El walked into the house. There was a small vase of flowers on the table. She touched the petals. “Pretty.” She then looked back at Hop. “We’re going to have Thanksgiving? A real one?” El almost wanted to cry when Hop nodded. She hugged him again.

“Yeah...I mean I’m going to try. I’ve never done a turkey before so it might end up a little dry.”

“Try brining the turkey tonight and then when you cook it tomorrow, start with it upside down for the first hour and then flip it back. Don’t forget to let it rest for about 20 minutes before eating it.” Steve said as he came back into the room. “Whelp, your bags are all in. I guess I’ll take off now.” Steve came back out and headed for the door.

El rushed to him. “No! Stay! Have some soup.” She grabbed his hand and tugged him towards the kitchen.

Steve glanced between them and looked hesitantly at the table. “I don’t want to interrupt your family time - plus I already...”

She was sure he was going to say he already ate but she didn’t care. “Stay. Then we can play some games. Please!!”

Hopper shrugged his shoulders and went to get another place setting. El could feel when Steve relented. She felt sure enough she let go to find another chair and to make space at the tiny table.

Steve didn’t eat alot but he seemed to relax - more like when it had just been the two of them before his parents returned. They told Hopper all about their trip and the book that Steve had been
reading to her. Hopper laughed when Steve mentioned the Hardy Boys. Apparently they were books he read as a kid as well and El took note. Hopper rarely spoke about his past so it was nice to hear him talk about books he enjoyed reading. She asked Hopper if she could get more of them later on.

“Maybe you’d prefer Nancy Drew?” Hopper asked.

“Who is Nancy Drew?” El asked.

“She’s kind of like a one woman Hardy Boys.”

“So it takes two boys to do the same thing as one girl?” El asked seriously but both of them laughed.

“That’s probably truer than you know,” Steve said with a smile and a far away look.

She wondered if he was thinking about Mike’s sister. She knew they had been like Mike and her, but now Nancy was like that with Jonathan. She wasn’t sure she understood but the tv shows show watched in the daytime often had people going back and forth. She certainly hoped that didn’t happen with Mike. No one ever seemed that happy.

She decided she didn’t want to ask. “What is brining?” El asked.

Steve buttered a second piece of bread before answering. “Basically you soak the turkey in a salty type of water the night before cooking it.”

“So we need to do it tonight?”

“Yes,” Steve nodded. “Or early tomorrow if you’re planning on eating late.”

“We’ll probably eat early.” Hop added. “Packers are playing the Lions.” At El’s look of confusion, Hopper added, “Football...it’s a Thanksgiving tradition. We’ll watch the Macy’s Day parade in the morning then stuff our faces before watching football and napping.”

El looked at Steve. It seemed like an odd tradition but at least she understood a little more about football now. Steve just smiled at her and nodded. She decided she’d just go along with it.

“So about the turkey - how do you do that brining thing?” El asked. Steve seemed to know a lot despite what Mike occasionally said about Steve being an idiot. She thought Mike was wrong.

Steve looked at Hopper who had a lost look on his face. Finally he said, “I could do it for you before I leave if you want - as long as you have plenty of salt on hand.”

Dinner finished and they cleared up the plates. Steve washed the dishes as El dried them and Hopper put the clean ones away.

Then Steve set out to brine the turkey. El was fascinated as she watched him go through the few spices they had and talk to himself about how to do it.

“I’ll need a very large pot or dish the whole turkey can fit into.” Steve was holding the turkey. “Guessing it’s about 8 lbs? Truthfully, it could wait until the morning to brine. You need about one hour brine time for each pound but it won’t hurt to do it overnight.”

Hopper pulled out a large pot and set it on the counter. Steve looked at it and at the turkey and agreed it would work.
Steve pulled out salt and sugar and a few herbs El didn’t know what they were. He opened one bottle and just said, “Nope...that’s old.” He threw the bottle out. “Well...this is going to be pretty simple but you can add all kinds of things to a brine,” he explained as he went through the cupboard. Then he looked like he noticed jar Hop had recently brought home. El recognized the yellow jar. It was something called Mrs. Dash. Steve read the label and seemed satisfied. “This could actually work.”

El remembered the lady at the police station bought it for Hop and he was annoyed because she kept trying to get him to stop using salt. Apparently too much wasn’t good for your heart. She was a little worried about the salt Steve said he was going to use because she wanted Hop’s heart to stay good but then figured it was a holiday so she stayed quiet. Hop had almost thrown the bottle of Mrs. Dash out but El had asked to look at it and then just put it away. She knew Flo was just trying to help no matter how interfering and nosy Hop said she was. El had been planning on trying to convince Hop to use it.

Steve filled the large pot with water and added a lot of salt, sugar and the Mrs. Dash. “It’ll be a simple brine but should work. Just rinse it off before cooking - and butter both the skin and under the skin as well before putting it in. Redo it when you turn it over.” He slid the turkey into the water and then sat a bowl on top. El looked at him and was about to ask when he answered “It’s to keep it under the water. It needs to be weighed down.”

He put the pot into the fridge.

“That’s it?” Hopper asked.

“Yup. Just remember those other instructions and you should be good.”

“Huh, how about that...all I ever knew how to do was carve the turkey,” Hopper asked. “In case you haven’t guessed, I don’t cook much.”

“His vegetables are soggy,” El added, helpfully. Hopper frowned at her. “Well they are. Peas are all mushy. Yechhh. Steve’s aren’t. And his meatloaf is good.” El had a brilliant thought. “You should teach Hop how to cook. He was showing me how to make some stuff while I was there.”

“How’d you learn to cook?” Hopper asked.

“Well...I guess from Home Ec and helping out at home a lot.” Steve shifted on his feet. El could tell he was uncomfortable.

“Oh...they didn’t really offer that to guys when I was in school. Time’s change, I guess.”

Steve now looked really uncomfortable and El couldn’t help it. She didn’t intentionally try to read people, but some people ‘thought’ or ‘felt’ loudly and she could feel certain energies radiate off of them if she was close enough. Steve was feeling a little embarrassed but she didn’t know why. She elbowed Hop because she assumed he said something wrong.

Hopper looked at her and she tilted her head towards Steve. He must have understood what she wanted because he suddenly piped up. “That’s...a good thing. I wish I had learned how to cook better back then. Would have saved me some truly awful early attempts.”

“Early?” El asked with a smile. “What was that awful lemon thing you made a while back?”

Now Hopper rolled his eyes. “It was supposed to be salmon loaf. Don’t ask. It just tasted like lemons.”
Steve laughed, and El felt his relief. “Maybe avoid anything with ‘loaf’ in the name from now on to start with.”

Now that everyone was okay again, El wanted to move on. “If you’re done, can we play now?” El asked. “I want to try Uno now that we have a third person here.”

“I see - that’s why I’m here. Just to be the third player,” Steve joked.

An hour later found El winning yet another round of Uno, much to the dismay of Hopper who insists he’s a great poker player but who Steve accuses of having “tells,” whatever that means. Neither answer her question about what poker is and she just forgets about it while slamming down another Wild Card and thinking this could only be better if Mike were also there.

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**BILLY’S POV**

Billy wasn’t sure when he started running so hot. He thought after sitting in the Harrington’s tree in the chilly weather, a hot shower would feel nice but as the water rolled over him, he kept cooling the water down. With his luck, he was probably getting sick from sitting his dumbass out there all afternoon. What was he thinking? Was he that bored in Hawkins that spying on the former King was the only interesting thing to do?

He needed a better hobby. Or a job. Not that his dad would let him take one while school was still in session. As much as Neil tried to instill responsibility in Billy, he wouldn’t give up the free babysitting services Billy provided just so Billy could earn some money.

And he was stuck again watching Max. It was getting old. Almost as soon as he finally came home, Susan had to run to the store because she had forgotten some dumb ingredients for the sweet potato casserole mush she made. Who the fuck put marshmallows in food? And his dad was working late before the holiday.

Max was what 13? 14? Hell, by that age Billy had already been considered old enough to watch Maxine so why the hell couldn’t she watch herself now? She ran around all day long anyways.

Didn’t matter. He didn’t have anywhere to go anyways. He got out of the shower and toweled off.

He saw Max’s door was shut. He put an ear to it just to be sure she was in there. He wasn’t going to be caught out again not knowing she snuck out of her window. He suggested nailing her window shut but of course, Susan wouldn’t hear of it. ’What if there was a fire?’ Blah, blah.

He heard her talking on the walkie talkies that she thinks no one knows about. Well...maybe Neil didn’t. Or if he did, he didn’t know who she was spending her time talking to. Susan had just decided she’d rather have Max be able to talk to her friends from the safety of their house rather than sneaking out to see them. And the walkie talkie meant the phone line wasn’t tied up.

“Yeah...he’s been ok, I guess. At least he’s mainly avoiding me, as usual,” Max said.

“Well, just be careful. It’s a long holiday weekend to be stuck with him. I just feel like one day he’s going to explode. I think he has anger issues.”

“You think? Duh!” Max laughed.
Billy almost laughed out loud. Anger issues. She wasn’t wrong. He was well aware of it. Hell - he sometimes wonders what would have happened that night in the junkyard if those demo dogs hadn’t shown up. He’d been in a mood to fight and they were the perfect outlet. If they hadn’t shown up, he wonders how much harder he would have gone after Steve.

Steve...god he was sick of himself thinking about the boy. What was it that made him a constant in Billy’s thoughts? Sometimes he thought he really wanted to punch the daylights out of him and rub his nose in the loss of his dumb Hawkins crown, which even Billy knew was a ridiculous thing to crow about. Other times...well punching wasn’t what he wanted to do. His dreams had been filled with intense fighting that when Billy finally wrestled Steve to the ground and had him trapped, Billy could feel the instinct to make Steve submit to him want to take over.

Twice he’d woken up humping the pillow, hard as a rock dreaming it was Steve under him. Billy wasn’t an idiot - nor did he care to become an outcast so he sure as shit wasn’t going to do anything about it. He just had to stop...obsessing about Steve somehow.

He went into his room and grabbed a magazine out of his drawer. He found a slender brunette with dark brown eyes to admire. Or tried to…

The more he thought about her, the more his thoughts went to Steve. Why was that guy watching their house? What were he and his mom’s cooking? Why was it the first time he’d even seen Steve’s mom? When did he start playing piano and why did no one seem to know anything about it? Why did he keep alcohol in his closet? OK - that was a given. Most teenagers did.

But why on earth did Nancy Wheeler pick Jonathan over Steve? Was his hair as soft as it looked? Were his lips as soft as they looked?

Fuck it. He threw the magazine to the side. He needed to get laid...by a woman...soon.

In the meantime, no one but he and his right hand would know he was imagining anything less feminine than the girl in the magazine.

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NANCY’S POV

Nancy wasn’t sure if she was happy or upset that her mom invited Barb’s parents over for Thanksgiving. The holiday was going to be tough enough without them right in the room. Mike was pitching a fit about not being allowed to go out the next day. She knew he wanted to go up to Hop’s cabin and see El, even if Hop hadn’t agreed to it. But their grandparents were coming over as well as the Hollands. It was going to be a full day of pretending to keep a happy face on.

Nancy hated pretending. She’d learned her lesson. It sucked when everyone knew there was a reason to be sad but everyone pretended for everyone else’s sake that they were ok. It was such bullshit.

She had hoped she’d be able to join Jonathan at some point during the day but her mother made it clear that they were all supposed to stay. It also meant her Nana would probably get nosy about Steve and their breakup. Unlike her mom, her grandmother could be particularly insistent on getting answers. Nancy wonders if that’s where she got her own desire to getting to the bottom of things - although in her Nana’s case, it focused on the town gossip. It gave Nancy a headache to think about.
She called Jonathan just to let him know. Will picked up after several rings.

“Hi Will. Is Jonathan home?”

“Sure. Let me get him.”

Nancy waited for a few seconds before Will got back on. “He’ll be here in a minute. He’s out back chopping some wood for the fireplace.”

“OK, thanks. How are you doing, Will?”

“Uh, ok I guess. A little stir crazy. I know everyone’s excited about being home for the holiday but I’ve been home a little too much. I want to get out.”

Nancy laughed. She got it. “Sorry, Will. I know Mike can’t get out tomorrow but maybe on Friday you guys could do something.”

“Yeah, that’d be good. Hey...uh...do you know when um...Steve’s parents are leaving?”

That was a weird question. “Uh...no. I haven’t really spoken to him much lately. Why?”

“No reason...just, um...he said he’d lend me some records after they left. Oh...here’s Jonathan. Um, bye!”

“Uh, hello. Nancy?” Jonathan’s voice came over the line and it sounded good to Nancy.

“What was that about?” Nancy asked.

“I think Will has a bit of a case of hero worship. The way the other boys played up Steve’s actions made him seem like a superhero.”

“Hero worship? Or a crush?” Nancy asked, humor lacing her voice.

“Uh…” Jonathan hesitated. “I don’t think…”

“It’s ok, Jonathan. You don’t have to tell me but you know I don’t...I wouldn’t think anything bad about Will if it was a crush. I mean - let’s face it - Steve has the best hair in town.”

“Should I be jealous?” Jonathan asked and Nancy wondered if that was a little uncertainty in his voice.

“You have...other qualities I very much like so no...you have no reason to be jealous.” Nancy squirmed a little under the lie since she’d been having these weird, unresolved feelings and dreams about Steve. She knew she didn’t really want to go back to him but at the same time couldn’t deny the desire to do so, even if she really wanted to be with Jonathan. She never understood until recently how you could possibly have feelings for two people at one time. She wasn’t in love with Jonathan yet but knew she was getting there and she wasn’t still in love with Steve, if she had ever really been, but knew it wouldn’t take much. It was an uncomfortable place for her to be so as unhappy as it made her to pretend, she found herself pretending more than she wanted.

“Good to know. Maybe you could tell me what those qualities are?” Jonathan asked with a slight amused tone to his voice.

“Are you asking me to count the ways I love thee, Jonathan Byers?” Nancy laughed.

“You’ve been studying the Elizabeth Barrett Browning in English too much. And I’m very fond of
you, too.”

Nancy chuckled. It was too soon for either of them to profess their love. She was glad they could honest about that at least.

“Anyways, I was calling to tell you I won’t see you tomorrow but maybe we could see a movie on Friday?”

“Black Friday? Are you crazy? It’ll be a nightmare out there. You know I hate crowds.”

‘Everyone will be shopping and not at the theater. It shouldn’t be too bad,” Nancy reassured him. “Plus...I need something to take my mind off of Saturday.” With Barb’s parents here tomorrow and the funeral on Saturday, Nancy needed a break in between.

“Oh, yeah. Sure Nance, we’ll go to the movies tomorrow,” Jonathan said.

They talked for a while longer before hanging up. Soon she hoped she could put this grief behind her and move on. It was exhausting her. She was so tired of just being so tired all the time.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed. Again, sorry for the delay. Fingers crossed for getting the Thanksgiving chapter out in a timely fashion.
Chapter 17 - Have a Turkey Lurky

Chapter Summary

Thanksgiving Day in Hawkins.

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving to my US readers. Happy Thursday to everyone else.

Basically this is just Thanksgiving Day in Hawkins. Some are good, some not so good. A lot of grandparents visit.

Warnings: Some discussion about the treatment of minorities in the US, Tommy and Billy being gross and crude, and Lonnie Byers. A lot of food and the Macy's Day Parade mentioned.

Also - quickly written since I wanted to get it out today - so apologies if there are typos or errors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 17 - Have a Turkey Lurky

DUSTIN’S POV

“Happy Thanksgiving, Dusty! I made your favorite this morning. Blueberry pancakes and bacon for my favorite growing boy.”

“Thanks, mom.” Dustin was still only half-awake, but the lure of the smell coaxed him out of his room. He sat down in the hard wooden chair a sudden oomph.

“Did you sleep well?” His mom’s cheery voice only slightly aggravated him this early. He knew how hard she tried to give him a real family holiday but with just the two of them, sometimes it was hard to understand but he was grateful she tried. After spending some time with El, he realized how lucky he was to have her at all.

He slathered butter onto his pancakes and drenched them with blueberry syrup. He took a bite before answering. “Mmm, yeah.” It really tasted good. It took another bite, before he swallowed the first and then tried to mumble “Dees arf delthious.”

“Dusty, slow down! They’re not going anywhere. And don’t talk with your mouth full.”

She may have been chiding him, but he heard the fond and slightly amused tone in her voice. He swallowed before talking again. “Sorry, mom. These are really good. I...really appreciate that you made them.”
She looked taken aback for a second which made him realize how rarely he really thanked her.

“So what are your plans today? I’ll probably have dinner ready about 5:00 if that’s ok with you. I know how you like to see your friends. I’ll bet Mike has some special campaign planned, doesn’t he? You kids are so creative.”

“Uh - not today. He has family in and can’t have anyone over. And I think the Hollands will also be there.” Dustin said, realizing for the first time he really hadn’t made any plans with anyone. His mom was right. They often tried to play something special when they didn’t have school. Last year they had played all weekend at Will’s house since they had just gotten him back and no one wanted to be separated from him. He barely remembers eating with his mom the previous year. He knew Mike really was irritated about his mom inviting the Hollands but Dustin thought it was kind of nice of Mrs. Wheeler to ask. Although, maybe if his mom had done it he’d have been just as annoyed.

“Oh. That’s very thoughtful of them. I’m sure...they’ll appreciate it.” Her voice trailed off and she got a bit subdued for a second before taking a deep breath and rebounded with, “Well I’m sure Lucas and Will might want to do something,” his mom said. She sounded like she wanted to reassure him.

“Will’s dad is actually coming into town. And Lucas’s grandparents came in so they have plans already so I thought I might stay home today. We could watch the parade together. Then I can help you with dinner.”

“Dusty, is everything all right?” She looked concerned. “Are you feeling ok? I feel like something’s been on your mind the last few weeks. Is it Mews?”

“Oh, yeah. Everything’s fine. I mean - I miss Mews so of course that isn’t ok...like at all...but just...well I just don’t get to see you that much because you work...and I...just want to stay home. Maybe you could show me some stuff about cooking.”

She took a sip of her Sanka and looked at him. “You want to learn how to cook?” She sounded dubious at the thought.

“Steve told you cooking will impress girls?”

“Well no - but like he’s really good and the girls all like him and then seem to be impressed when they learn he can cook. El couldn’t stop talking about it.” As soon as he said it, he knew he shouldn’t have. Not that he didn’t trust his mom, just that he couldn’t tell her about El without confessing the whole story.


“Uh, they broke up. But no...El is a girl at school that Steve sometimes...uh babysits.”

“Oh...well. You don’t have to learn how to cook just to impress girls. Plenty of girls will like you. And you don’t have to feel like you need to help out more around the house but I appreciate that you want to.”

“Well, I figure it’s kind of like chemistry, right? So that’s cool. Plus who knows, maybe I could be really good at it.”
His mom nodded, amused. “OK, sure. You can help me in the kitchen later. But for now, let’s finish these pancakes. The parade is coming on soon!”

**LUCA’S POV**

He loved his grandparents. Really he did. But with both sets in the house, it was crowded. Normally one set came at Thanksgiving and one at Christmas, but this year got tangled. His mom’s parents were planning to visit his aunt in Ohio for Christmas because it will be their baby’s first Christmas but they didn’t want to travel. His dad’s parents booked a cruise for their fortieth anniversary but it’s right before the holiday and they didn’t want to travel so close together.

The only good thing was it kept Erica occupied and less snarky than her usual self. She might get away with back talking their parents on occasion, but Grandma Sinclair would wash her mouth out with soap.

Lucas kind of enjoyed seeing Erica having to play nice.

“Lucas, why don’t you go turn the parade on for your grandma.” His dad was never one for watching that kind of stuff but he was making a point since Bryant Gumbel was one of the hosts. While his dad never dwelt on the difficulties he, and his parents, had growing up as a black man in America, Lucas was aware of some of the incidents. Had certainly heard his own share of insults from people like Troy and others. His dad liked to support and share success stories of other minorities. Truthfully - while his friends celebrated Thanksgiving with the old, tired stories of Pilgrims and Indians sharing a meal while they glossed over some of the actual history of Native Americans, his parents did not.

They made a point to discuss the treatment of Native Americans as well as their own people’s history and the similarities in frank terms. His parents didn’t dwell on it but they also didn’t shield Lucas from the truth. It was ugly sometimes and he wished sometimes the party could understand it more.

So anyways - his dad wanted to watch Bryant Gumbel host something so uniquely American as the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade as a way to show things were getting better even if there was a long way to go.

Erica sat next to Nana Josie, his mom’s mom, while his other grandmother pulled out some needlework. He laid on the floor, flipping through his new X-men comic before he turned to a new series he just started called Transformers. He wasn’t sure about it but he liked the idea of the robotics used. Plus Optimus Prime was cool name. He glanced up every now and then to see certain balloons and floats go by. I liked the Superman one and Garfield was kind of funny.

“Oh look, I love tap dancing,” Nana Josie said.

He looked up to see the cast of some broadway show performing. Halfway through, Erica got up and pretended she could tap dance which he just rolled his eyes at. All in al though, he was pretty happy just hanging out. He wondered how Max was doing. He knew she wasn’t looking forward to an entire day of family closeness.

**MAX’S POV**
Billy disappeared shortly after breakfast. She didn’t know where and she didn’t care. As long as he was gone. All his dad said was not to be late for dinner which her mom said would be around 5:00.

To be nice, she offered to help her mom in the kitchen, but her mom shooed her away. She wasn’t sure what to do with herself so she plopped herself down in front of the tv and watched the dumb parade. Her mom liked it and came out every now and then to see what was going on. Neil went out to the shed and did god knows what. All she knew was he said she could have the tv until the game came on.

She really hated the holidays.

She spent the afternoon practicing her kickflips on her board. Like any other day when she was bored.

**WILL’S POV**

“Mom, why didn’t you tell us he was coming?” Jonathan sounded pissed. His mom dropped the bomb after they had finished breakfast and started cleaning up. Jonathan was washing dishes and his mom was looking for the “good china,” which in their house just meant dishes that matched and had no cracks in them. After being at Steve’s house, Will now knew what they had was not “good china”. Steve’s parents had an entire cabinet filled with fancy, pretty china that he said they rarely used, plus they had seasonal dishware according to Dustin that they kept packed in boxes. Will’s mom’s “good china” wasn’t even as nice as the stuff Steve used every day.

“Well, because I knew you would act like this, Jonathan. I knew you wouldn’t want to see him.”

“I don’t. And you know what, probably Will doesn’t either. It’s not like he’s been around lately.” Jonathan turned to Will, who was trying to ignore their conversation. He was watching the parade even though they all thought it was kind of lame. “You don’t want to see him, do you Will?”

Will hated being put on the spot like this. He didn’t want to upset either of them. He knew why Jonathan didn’t want to see him, but it was still his dad. As hurt as Will was over everything that happened, in his heart of hearts, he wanted his dad to love him.

“Don’t. Don’t do that to your brother. Don’t put him on the spot like that.” It had been awhile since he heard his mom get upset with Jonathan. “So please, could you try to be nice to him for a few hours?”

“It’s Thanksgiving!” Jonathan yelled. “Why can’t it just be us?”

“Because it’s not. Or have you forgotten that our custody arrangement includes alternating holidays? He could have insisted you and Will go to his place. He didn’t. He hasn’t for a year now. All he asked was to spend today with us. And while I know you don’t want to see him, I thought maybe you’d want to see your grandmother.

“Granny May is coming?” Will asked. He hadn’t seen her for some time because she lived in Florida. He looked away from the Woody Woodpecker balloon floating down the parade route.

“Yes, she’s visiting Lonnie and wanted to see you. She’s been worried since you...went missing but you know her health hasn’t been that great.” She turned to Jonathan and said “So please, could you try to be nice to him for a few hours?”
“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” Jonathan asked. ‘You must have known, the way you’ve been cleaning lately. I just thought you were…”

“Trying to keep busy? Well, honestly - “ she looked at Will with apologetic eyes, “I didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up in case he didn’t…”

“In case he didn’t show up, as usual.” Will cringed at the bitterness in Jonathan’s voice. It hurt that Jonathan seemed to hate their dad so much but he kind of understood. Jonathan never said much but he knew Jonathan took the brunt of their dad’s anger and that he often shielded Will from the last of it. Will was young but not stupid.

She turned back to Jonathan. “So, please just be civil. That’s all I’m asking. They won’t be here until 2:00 so we all have some time to prepare. Now, I need to get the turkey in the oven.”

“It’ll be good to see Granny May, I guess. And Dad,” Will whispered as he focused on the Marching band that was now coming onto the screen. The costumes were cheesy cowboy themed, but oddly the music wasn’t too bad. It wasn’t Moonlight Sonata...but he was starting to like listening to some of the more orchestral pieces he was hearing on NPR. He was also enjoying some of the Broadway tunes...because it reminded him of Dustin and Steve playing together. Not that he was ever going to mention that to his dad. He already knew what his dad’s reaction to that would be.

He just hoped his dad wouldn’t want to watch football with them. Will found it tediously boring. He had tried to like it, but like Jonathan, just never thought it was that fun to watch.

As expected, dinner was a bit strained but everyone seemed on good behavior.

“Sorry - the turkey is so dry...and the mashed potatoes are a bit lumpy,” his mom said. He could hear the stress in her voice.

“Cooking was never your strong point, Joyce,” Lonnie said.

Will hated the look on his mom’s face and he could Jonathan was about to finally say something besides yes or no when asked a question, but Granny May spoke up.

“You were always so good with sewing, my dear. No one can be good at everything, isn’t that right, Lonnie? Gosh, I can remember one year when I accidentally mixed up the salt and the sugar for your father’s birthday cake. We had just gotten married and I wanted it to be so perfect for his first birthday. He almost spit up but said, “I appreciate that you tried sweetheart.” We laughed about that for years.” She sighed looking up. “I miss that man.”

Lonnie rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything. None of them had ever met their grandfather as he had passed long before Joyce and Lonnie married.

“So, how’s school Jonathan? Still doing that photography thing?” Grandma May said finally. “Your mother sent me some shots you took of Will in his Halloween costume. It was really cute.”

“Thanks.” Jonathan mumbled.

“Not really going to pay the bills will it?” Lonnie asked.
“Well, I expect there are plenty of places that use photographers. I mean, newspapers, magazines, Olan Mills...all kinds of places are paying for people to take photos. I don’t know why Jonathan couldn’t do that.” Granny May smiled at Jonathan.

‘Please don’t, please don’t,’ Will was wishing hard. He knew Jonathan hated the idea of those studio portraits like at Sears or Olan Mills.

“Actually, Nancy and I might have a shot at an internship at the local paper this summer,” Jonathan said, with a glare at his father.

‘What?!’” his mom exclaimed. “You didn’t say anything before about this?!” His mom was so happy and Will was thrilled for Jonathan, even if he was confused about why Jonathan had never mentioned anything about it.

“Well, it’s too soon, but we met the editor of the Hawkins Post and he asked to see our work and then said we should come see him in April about summer internships.”

“How wonderful!” Granny May cried.

“I’m so proud of you,” his mom added.

Will looked at Lonnie who shrugged and gazed at Jonathan for a moment. “Well, doesn’t sound like it’s a done deal yet…” he hesitated but then added, “but I hope it works out for you.”

Which was about the nicest thing Lonnie had said to Jonathan in some time.

“So...who’s Nancy?”

Jonathan blushed and Will, knowing his dad’s penchant for insulting Jonathan’s lack of friends or a love life, suddenly blurted out “His girlfriend! She’s really nice and pretty.”

It was worth seeing the look on his dad’s face. “So, you’ve met this Nancy?” he asked Joyce.

“Yes, she’s a wonderful young lady.”

“Huh. Well, I guess congratulations are in order,” Lonnie said.

All in all...it wasn’t as terrible as Will thought it might be but he still wished he had a dad more like Lucas. Heck, he’d even take Mike’s dad. The man might be clueless but he was always nice.

MIKE’S POV

This sucked. The only decent thing about this Thanksgiving was the food because his mom made a great turkey. He loved the Stove Top stuffing and shoveled as much as he could but skipped the canned cranberry sauce and ate only a little of that weird green bean thing she made. Just enough to keep his mom happy. But she made sweet potatoes on which he put way too much syrup and crescent rolls on which he put too much butter.

But he’d still rather be over hanging out with El, or the party - heck he’d even take seeing Max for the afternoon than hanging around his own house. The conversation was boring and stilted, Nancy was sullen, Holly was cranky and his dad and Mr. Holland were dozing in front of the TV with a boring football game on. His mom and Mrs. Holland were in the kitchen cleaning up.
He was able to sneak to the basement once to at least radio El and wish her a Happy Thanksgiving. He was jealous at how much she sounded like she was enjoying herself - going on and on about the parade and the food Hopper was making - even the fact that Steve had been there the night before to brine their turkey - whatever that meant - made him want to pull his hair out. He wanted to be a part of her first real Thanksgiving. Instead, he was stuck here trying to decide if was better to be bored in the family room watching football with his dad or hanging in the kitchen listening to his mom discuss her plans for Black Friday.

Ugh...it was too late to make a decision as his mom decided to put him and Nancy to work divvying up leftovers.

STEVE’S POV

Breakfast had been civil. His mom made crepes and Mimosas for breakfast and then their guests and dad retired to the great room to play music. He had shooed his mom in with them and said he would handle cleaning the kitchen and getting the turkey in the oven. As he worked, the strains of Beethoven’s Fifth filled the house which made Steve feel like getting the working in the kitchen some big dramatic event. He had a random thought about what life would be like if there was a constant soundtrack going on.

He putted around as long as he could before joining them.

“Steve, do you remember Beethoven’s Sonata Opus 6?” his dad asked from the piano bench as he walked into the room.

Did he remember? Of course he did. It was one of the pieces his dad used to train him. He just nods.

His dad scooted over and patted the bench. “Well come on then, let’s play.”

He wondered if his mom put something in his Mimosa to make him so friendly or if it was just a show for their guests. They hadn’t played together in a few years.

“I might be a bit rusty,” Steve said.

Monica spoke up. “Don’t be silly. We’re not expecting perfect. In fact, I’ll be the page turner for you so you don’t have to do it all from memory.”

She stood on the side next to Steve and placed the sheet music on the piano. They must have dug it out earlier.

They had a false start when Steve’s tempo didn’t quite match his dad’s but Steve was pleasantly surprised when his dad just smiled a bit. “Come on. A bit faster. I know you can do that.”

It took him back to long hours of instructions and the satisfaction he had the few times he dad had no complaints about his playing. They were some of the few fond memories he had of their time playing together.

It was a relatively short, jaunty piece and ended all too soon to the applause of his mother and their guests.

“Play something else!” Monica said. “You are more talented than your parents let on.”
“Uh...thanks. I don’t really play much anymore.”

“Come on, Steve. Treat our guests to something. Surely, something has stuck in there.

Once again, Steve found himself playing “Moonlight Sonata” and “Clair de Lune.” He figured since he had recently played them, he’d be less likely to mess it up in front of anyone. He knew it wasn’t nearly as good as his father’s playing, but it wasn’t bad. At least everyone seemed mostly impressed.

“So, Steve - I guess you have been practicing.” His dad sounded almost pleased before he continued. ‘I noticed you had the sheet music out for Cats. Is there something you want to tell us?” His dad asked. Steve was wondering when the barb would come.

“Uh...I have a friend that wants to perform it for his mother for Christmas. I was helping him practice.” He said it quietly, not knowing the reaction. He didn’t think his dad would be too bad about it since they had company and he knew his mom liked it.

“How darling,” Monica said. “That is just the sweetest thing. Go on play it then. I’m sure you have a lovely singing voice as well.”

Steve was a bit mortified. He had never really sung much in front of an audience and he almost said no but when he looked at the smile on his mother’s face, he decided to try. Hopefully at least she would like it.

It seemed to go longer than any performance piece he had ever done, but it wasn’t too bad. He was grateful however when the doorbell rang and interrupted them.

“I’d better go see who it is,” his mother said.

Steve got up as well. He was done performing for the day, he hoped.

As he walked into the hall, he was surprised to see his mother talking to Tommy.

“Look who’s here to see you,” she said.

“Hey, Tommy/ What’s...uh...up?

“Hello. It’s 11:00 on Thanksgiving. What else - our annual football game? We’re all waiting for you.” Tommy grinned at him as he yelled.

Steve walked up to him. As his mom walked away, she waved at Tommy. “It’s so nice to see you, Tommy. It’s been too long.”

He heard her walk into the parlor and basically announce that Steve was heading out for his annual football game with his friends. He assumed that meant she wanted him to go. OK, weird, but not as weird as Tommy standing there and asking.

“Tommy, we haven’t spoken in almost a year.” Why are you here?” Steve asked.

“It’s tradition!” And you’re still talking to the other guys, right?”

“They’ve mostly been a bit dickish lately. Plus - I’m still kind of recovering…” Steve said. He thought he could at least leave the house but go find something else to do.

“Right - so we thought we’d do touch football instead. And some of the girls will be playing,” Tommy waggled his eyebrows. “Susan Underwood is playing and she’s asking for you,” Tommy
sniggered.

“Ah...so she’ll only play if I’ll play but it’s the only way for you to try to touch her boobs without Carol getting pissed? Am I getting that right?”

“Got it in one.”

‘You know, that’s a really stupid thing to do,” Steve argued. He’d really learned some lessons about touching people when they didn’t want to be touched.

“Look, it’s not going to be some free for all. Some of the girls asked to play and they know what they’re getting into so we decided we would. And if hey - there’s an accidental boob touch or dick slide, it happens, you know. We’re not going to go out of our way to do it.”

Steve heard the piano start again - with something from Schubert this time.

“Or you could stay in and continue listening to this very exciting concert from your father.”

Tommy knew where to hit so he decided to join them. At least he could make sure no one got out of hand.

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**BILLY’S POV**

After breakfast, he took off again. He didn’t even know he was planning to swing past the Harrington’s until he found himself there. He had realized he had lost his lighter the night before, and even though he had another one, he decided while he was there to look around for it. That’s what he told himself until he heard music. Once he heard the sounds of the piano filtering through the autumn air, he felt a slight shiver go through him. It felt good. He forgot about the lighter and found his way to the place he had sat in the previous day and let the music wash through him.

It was so pleasant - particularly when the familiar strains of “Moonlight Sonata” and “Clair de Lune” filled the air. The vibrations went through him and simultaneously felt exhilarating and calming at the same time. He felt himself float with the music - expanding as the music swelled and soaring as the music tumbled along the melody.

He only broke out of it at the sound of singing. He was sure it was some kind of show tune - not that he was familiar with it - but he was damn sure that was Harrington’s voice. He would have laughed but the guy actually sounded good.

He noticed Tommy walking up to the house and wondered what was going on. He was sure those two were no longer friends. He slipped out of the tree and slipped back around the side. He couldn’t hear the conversation but not long after Tommy had gone in the house, both he and Steve came back out and headed down the road so he followed.

To his surprise, they stopped by a park where a bunch of his fellow high school buddies and other teens he didn’t know were hanging out. They all greeted Steve nicely and soon became apparent there was some kind of football game being planned as he saw two guys tossing around a football and someone else yelling out rules.

He strode up and Tommy yelled out to him, “Billy! Hey - we’re going to play some touch football. Want to join?”
“Touch football? That sounds like it’s for pussies,” Billy replied, looking at Harrington standing next to Tommy. “Can’t handle be tackled, Princess?” Steve rolled his eyes at him.

Tommy leaned closer “No - it’s for the pussies, Billy. The girls are playing, too.” Tommy looked over to where Carol and several other girls were. He couldn’t remember most of their names.

Billy just grinned. “Well, then why not? Might be the most action Harrington’s had in awhile since he was dumped.”

“I’m pretty sure Susan Underwood is going to try to get Steve to tackle her, if you know what I mean.” Tommy glanced over at a blonde snapping her gum and twirling her hair as she watched them.

“Well, then she’s on my team. I’d like to see a 90 pound girl take Steve out,” Billy said. “Oh...right, Wheeler already did that.” He laughed and wandered over towards the girls.

Truth be told, the game was more fun than Billy expected in this stupid town, even if he occasionally ‘forgot’ it was supposed to be touch football and tackled Steve several times just because he could. It was a nice reminder about who exactly could possibly put Harrington in his place if he felt like it. They never really settled it in the junkyard. Billy didn’t really want to anymore but he liked to feel like he could.

“Whoops - sorry Harrington. I forgot. Hope I didn’t hurt your boo-boos too much.”

He just laughed when Harrington glared at him and spat out, “It would take more than your lame ass to hurt me.”

It was even sweeter when Billy’s team won. Sure they cheated, but everyone did. And everyone laughed a lot. That was a nice change. Also, Carol turned out to be a surprisingly good receiver. It made up for the awful dinner at home later than night. Nothing new - just the usual rounds of fake family vibes and a depressingly sad turkey because Susan couldn’t cook worth a damn. At least the store bought pumpkin pie was good.


STEVE’S POV

That was the most he had laughed in some time. He hoped maybe the truce would stay in place after the holidays and things wouldn’t be so shitty in school anymore. Having some of the kids home from college helped. To them, he was still cool and the other kids took their cue from them. Billy wasn’t even as bad as usual - notwithstanding the number of times he ‘forgot’ it was touch football.

He quickly cleaned up and then went downstairs to help his mom finish dinner. Steve was pretty happy with how everything turned out - from the very moist turkey breast and oyster stuffing, to the cranberry orange compote, steamed white asparagus and sweet potato and ginger scones to the mulled wine served.

Dinner was followed with a movie that Steve had no interest in so he excused himself and went upstairs to listen to his own music. He took a moment to wish everyone on the walkie talkie “Happy Thanksgiving” and was happy to get a response from the whole party, even “You too, loser” from Mike which was surprisingly nice for him.
Hope you enjoyed. Next up we'll finally get to Barb's funeral.
Chapter 18 - Pathetique

Chapter Summary

Finally - Barb's funeral. Plus some past Steve & Jonathan bonding and some Steve/Nancy past and seemingly slight infidelity. Of course, not what it seems. Grieving can be weird.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay. Caught up in holiday stuff.

Finally we're to Barb's funeral so typical grieving stuff. Some discussion about religion (I'm viewing Jonathan as either atheist or agnostic.

The biggest warning is for some Steve/Nancy that seems like infidelity. Those of you who have kept up know it's not what it seems. Plus grieving can have weird coping mechanisms. Nothing too handsy. Strictly slight PG stuff here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 18 - Pathetique

NANCY’S POV

Saturday dawned chilly and partly sunny - which really meant mostly cloudy and overcast. It seemed weird that the weather people used that term but either way, it seemed sunnier than it should be for Barb’s funeral.

Thanksgiving had been as awkward as she had expected but Nancy realized her mom had been right in asking the Hollands to join them. She thinks Barb would have appreciated it. It had also given Nancy the chance to give Mrs. Holland a small photo album of pics of Barb and Nancy over the years to use at the funeral. It had almost been enjoyable going through the photos with her and sharing some of her memories of Barb.

They had laughed remembering Nancy’s 7th birthday party, looking at a picture of her surrounded by a bunch of balloons and another where everyone was trying to eat marshmallows hanging off strings tied to the laundry line without using their hands. Everyone looked pretty silly. Mrs. Holland finally confessed that at the time she had forgotten about the party and had not actually bought a present for Barb to give her which was how Nancy had ended up with an album of Glen Campbell. Mrs. Wheeler laughed about how often Nancy played Rhinestone Cowboy in the weeks that followed.

It had been a little cathartic she guessed. And tiring. She had pretty much napped Friday away so much that her mom thought she was sick. She had even taken Nancy’s temperature, but it was normal. In fact, a bit below normal. Today she felt a tad better, but still exhausted. She was glad
this would be over soon, but then felt guilty for feeling like that. She was tired of grieving.

“Are you about ready, honey?” Her mom stood in Nancy’s doorway watching Nancy in the mirror. Nancy felt like this was one too many times she’d had to dress for a funeral - but at least Will’s had turned out to be fake. Nancy wished that would be the case here too, but she knew too well it wasn’t.

“Yes. As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

“Is Jonathan going to be there?”

Nancy nodded. “I don’t think Joyce or Will are going, so is it ok if he sits with us?”

“Sure. Of course. It’s ok if you need to be with your friends. They all knew her. Will Steve be there, too?”

“I...uh...I don’t know. I haven’t seen him lately.” Nancy turned around and picked up her purse and didn’t look at her mom. “He wasn’t really friends with her.”

She felt the weight of her mom’s stare but didn’t know what else to say.

STEVE’S POV

Finally, not only was Thanksgiving over, but his parents and their guests were leaving. He hoped they left in time to give him time to get ready for Barb’s funeral. He hadn’t bothered to tell them about it, not wanting to lie and tell the cover story yet again. It felt wrong. Nancy had been right about that. It had never sat right with Steve but he had just tried not to think about it. That was not the best way to cope, he guessed.

He was tired of being on his best behavior. He guessed his dad was too and he had made a few sharp remarks on Friday about the lack of college acceptances Steve had so far not received. He gave Steve an ultimatum at dinner - if he didn’t get in anywhere that was acceptable before graduation, he was cutting off Steve’s allowance. If he wanted to continue living in the house, he’d have to find a job and pay rent and his own car insurance after graduation.

Steve knew that was his punishment because there was no way he’d hear back before March from anything his dad would consider acceptable by March. He’d already heard back from his early choices and they had all been a resounding no. Steve may be trying to get his grades up now, but it might already be too little, too late. He was going to try for State and for Tech but he wasn’t keeping his fingers crossed. The additional humiliation of hearing that in front of guests was just par for the course.

Flashback

“You know, it might be good for Steve to take a year off and travel,” Monica had suggested at dinner the night before. “I find that can often help you decide what’s important.”

Her husband nodded. “Indeed! I actually hiked across Europe for a few months just after college. Certainly changed my life.” He smiled at his wife. Steve knew what he meant as he had already heard the tale of how they met in Germany.
“Well, if he wants to travel, he’ll need to work for it. I’m not paying for that,” his dad said.

“You know, since the Mall will be opening soon. There will be plenty of new jobs there. We’ll be hiring starting in March for the April 1st opening.”

“How?” Steve asked, fork halfway to his mouth. This is the first he’d heard anything about them being involved in the mall outside of the general business of it. He thought they were just real estate investors.

“Sure. Most of the stores are chain stores like Sam Goody’s and the Gap - which must be quite exciting for you and your friends, but there are some local stores as well. We’ve decided to invest not just in the Mall itself, but in a few of the stores. You should apply.” Peter replied, his mouth half full of chicken.

Monica rolled her eyes. “Of course. What a great idea! He’d be perfect in Scoops Ahoy or in Candy Island.”

Steve paled. Retail? In the Mall? It sounded awful. Wouldn’t Tommy have a laugh at that one.

“I don’t think that’s the...right kind of job experience Steve needs,” his mom said, obviously trying to sound diplomatic.

“Sure it is,” Monica said. “It’ll teach him customer service, how to handle inventory and money. Plus, we’d have an in with having him keeping an eye on our investment.”

“You don’t need an ‘in.’ I assure you, everything in the mall is going according to plan. Nothing will go wrong,” his dad said, sounding a little strained. Steve knew his dad hated it when anyone doubted his abilities.

Peter swallowed a large bite of food before pointing at Steve’s dad with his fork. “No offense but you travel a lot. My wife is right. At least with Steve there, someone we know would be in Hawkins that could keep an eye on things and be available if we decide to drop in. He seems level-headed enough.”

His dad started coughing and grabbed some water. After a moment, he said, “Sorry. Pepper went the wrong way.” He glanced at Monica and Peter and then nodded. “Sure...I guess if Steve needs to work, there could be as useful as anywhere.”

“Plus, he’d look so adorable in the uniform we’ve chosen. All the girls will come in to see him.” Monica winked at Steve. “He’ll get over that heartbreak in no time.”

Now, Steve choked. Like hell he was going to take a job with some goofy uniform. Or if he did, it would be somewhere he could actually get an actual meal.

End Flashback

It had been a mad rush when they left, but finally - finally they were gone and Steve took a deep breath. He had never felt so relieved to be alone in the house.

As much as he wanted to clean the kitchen from breakfast, he was already running late. The funeral was at 11:00 and it was already going on 10:00. He ran upstairs to take a shower and get dressed.
Jonathan was uncomfortable. He appreciated that it was too hard for his mom and Will to attend Barb’s funeral. They had already been to too many and they never knew her. Honestly, Jonathan didn’t either. He only knew her through Nancy and as a fellow student he never interacted with much.

There was a small church service. Barb had never been popular to start with and now it had been over a year since she had gone missing. There had been more people at Will’s funeral but like Will’s. He thought some of the people were only there because of the news hoopla around it. He recognized a few faces: the choir director, Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair who he assumed knew the Hollands from living on the same street, a reporter from the paper, a few students he sort of vaguely recognized and oddly enough Carol...of ‘Tommy and Carol’ who had been awful to not only Jonathan, but to Barb as well according to Nancy. He wondered where her boyfriend was and why she was sitting quietly alone in the back looking pensive, biting her thumb.

Of course he knew Steve, who was also sitting alone in the row behind them. Jonathan himself was sat with Nancy and her parents - and wasn’t that awkward? He almost wished he was sitting with Steve.

He clutched Nancy’s hand to remind her he was there, but to also reassure himself he wasn’t alone either. He sort of felt bad. He wasn’t sure what to feel except lonely. It dawned on him that as small as the service was - it was still more than would probably show up for his own funeral. Sure his family would be there and probably Nancy but would anyone else? He’d lost track of what the minister was saying. His mom was never much of a church goer. Lonnie pushed it more than she did but only so he could show the community what an upstanding father and husband he pretended to be. As if one or two hours a week pretending to be a good man made up for actually being a crappy one the rest of the time. Hypocrite. That’s why Jonathan didn’t have much use for religion. Or at least organized religion. He supposed he had some thoughts about the general existence of God or whatever - the universal consciousness...but mostly when he got high which wasn’t often. Like cigarettes - it was too expensive of a habit to maintain. And too addicting, like alcohol - and he never wanted to become his father.

It’s been awhile since the last time he got high. It had been late summer. He had run into Steve late at night at the Quarry. He had been trying to do some late night photography of the full moon over the Quarry when Steve had stumbled out of the woods and scared the crap out of him. Seemed to scare Steve as well.

Flashback

“What the Hell?! What are you doing out here, Byers?” Steve asked, slightly winded.

Jonathan’s heart raced. He had never heard Steve. “Me? What are you doing?” Jonathan noticed the bat and his pulse raced a little faster. “And why are you carrying that? Is something...something going on?”
Steve looked around nervously, but Jonathan didn’t know for what. Steve ran his free hand through his hair. “Couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d take a walk - but with protection you know? Then I thought I heard something walking around the woods. Guess it was you.” Steve took a deep breath.

Jonathan thought he understood. He had nightmares about their experiences as well that left him unable to sleep at times but he never would just take a stroll through the woods at night to settle down. It hyped him up too much.

“What are you doing anyways?” Steve asked, lowering the bat beside him.

“Oh...I uh was trying to test taking some night shots. It’s so hard to get the moon to look right in photos.”

Steve laughed. “I should have guessed. Jonathan Byers and his camera. The most committed couple of Hawkins High - next to Nancy and me, of course.”

Jonathan blanched. Was Steve teasing him or making fun of him? Did he know how Jonathan felt about Nancy? Was he rubbing it in? Jonathan couldn’t help how he felt about her but she had made her choice and he was trying to stay away. It was easier than having his heart broken watching them together. Even harder now that Steve had obviously been trying to be a nicer person by ditching Tommy and Carol and trying to include Jonathan occasionally at lunch. And sometimes he wondered if Nancy wasn’t as interested in Steve as everyone thought based on how she’d look at Jonathan at times. Or was Jonathan just filled with wishful thinking.

The way he tensed must have been evident even in the dark. Steve grabbed his shoulder and said, “Relax. I’m kidding. I think it’s cool you do this. I wouldn’t have the first idea how to use a camera like that. I still use my mom’s Instamatic when I have to take a picture.”

Jonathan grimaced. Those things were the worst. He thought maybe they were worse than polaroids since at least those printed immediately.

“Try not to heave, dude.” Steve laughed. “I figured you wouldn’t be a fan.” Steve looked around and noticed Jonathan’s RC Cola sitting there. “Hey, would you mind if I had a sip? Didn’t really think about it when I left and I’ve been walking a while.”

“Uh...actually I have some more in the trunk if you want one,” Jonathan said, nodding over to where he had parked his car.

“Hey, that would be great, if you don’t mind,” Steve said.

Jonathan walked over to get the drink, leaving Steve staring out across the water. The moonlight really highlighted the profile of his hair and pale skin. Objectively speaking, Steve was a handsome guy. Could probably be a model if he wanted. He shook his head as he bent down to dig a drink out of the trunk. He always kept a few in there.

He closed the trunk and looked up to see Steve looking through the lens of his camera back at him.

“Hey, be careful with that. It was an expensive gift,” Jonathan said as he approached without thinking. He heard the tell tale click of the camera go off. That was probably going to be an awful shot since the camera was set up for a long exposure time and he was moving.

“You’re telling me,” Steve huffed as he traded the camera for the soda. He let out a satisfied “Ah” after taking a sip.
Jonathan flushed in embarrassment. Of course, Steve knew that. He had been the one to buy it after all. Jonathan had forgotten. In his head, he just remembered Nancy giving it to him and pretending Steve wasn’t just in the next room waiting for her return. He had figured out eventually. He knew Nancy didn’t have the money for it nor could she have asked her parents. It had to have been Steve.

“Thanks,” Jonathan said softly. He had never said it before.

“Not needed. I was a dick. I should be apologizing to you,” Steve said.

“Ok,” Jonathan sat next to him on the large boulder.

“Ok? Ok what?” Steve asked.

“Ok, you can apologize to me,” Jonathan said, slightly amused at the look on Steve’s face.

Steve laughed. “Ok, yeah...well I apologize for being a dick to you,” Steve said, slight humor in his voice. He looked over at Jonathan just in time for Jonathan to take a picture.

“What the hell?” Steve asked, still chuckling.

“I thought I should take a photo of this momentous occasion - King Steve apologizing to his lowly peasant,” Jonathan said with a grin that dropped when he saw Steve’s reaction.

“...uh was just teasing. You know I don’t really think of you that way anymore,” Jonathan said.

“No one does. Look how the mighty king has fallen.” Steve leaned back and pinched his nose.

“I think it’s better. I think you’re happier. At least you and Nancy seem happier than before. Besides ‘A crown it is, that seldom Kings enjoy,” Jonathan replied.

“You sound a little like Nancy. What is that from - some hoity toity writer?” Steve asked.

“Shakespeare. Henry VI,” Jonathan almost didn’t want to admit it. Being smart wasn’t always appreciated.

“I should have figured. Nancy likes all that shit. I can never really understand it. You and she would get along well.”

Jonathan blushed again. Steve said it so confidently, like he was sure Nancy would like Jonathan but not like, like Jonathan. Considering how jealous Steve had been in the fall, they must have come a long way for Steve to feel that sure about her. Jesus - Jonathan sounded like a ten year old to himself. “She’s in my English class. We just studied it.” He felt stupid saying it.

“You two are much smarter than me, that’s for sure. She’s always having to tutor me in something. Except French or Spanish. I’m pretty good at those.”

That took Jonathan by surprise. He wouldn’t have expected Steve to have a knack for languages based on everything he’s heard.

“Although - I don’t always need as much help as I claim. It’s fun getting her worked up to tutor me. She likes feeling needed. And when I’m a good boy, that’s even more fun.” Steve winked at Jonathan. “Don’t tell her I said that.”

Jonathan felt a flush of heat go through him as he thought about what that implied.
“So - uh - I guess she’s ok then? With everything that happened? And Barb? I haven’t really spoken to her in awhile but I kind of had the sense she resented me getting Will back but not her,” Jonathan asked.

Steve’s gaze drifted up and stared at the night sky. “I guess? I mean we don’t talk about it much. We’re just trying to move on. It’s behind us so there’s no point in dwelling on it is there?”

Jonathan thought that sounded wrong. Will was definitely struggling and he wasn’t talking about it except with the doctors. Jonathan was sure if Will talked, it would help. But Will refused to talk to him. He thought Nancy would almost need to talk about it but it seemed no one wanted to talk. Hell, his mom was dating a new guy named Bob as if nothing weird had happened the year before.

Maybe Steve was right. Maybe they just all needed to move on. But if he was right - why were they still having nightmares? Steve may not have admitted it, but it was clear that’s why he was out there. He’d had a nightmare and couldn’t stay in the house but couldn’t just not leave the bat behind because it was on his mind. He had been afraid.

He was about to turn to Steve to say something but Steve was pulling something out of his pocket. “What’s that?”

“Well, I guess since it’s quiet out, maybe we could relax?” He wangled the unlit joint up towards Jonathan. “Unless you’re still wanting to take moon pics.”

“No - you know what. Maybe you’re right. Let’s just relax.”

‘That’s what I’m talking about.” Steve lit the joint up and took a long drag.

Jonathan wasn’t sure where Steve got it from but it was definitely not his first time. Jonathan took a drag and coughed a bit. It had been awhile but even he could tell it was good stuff.

After that, Jonathan didn’t remember any specific conversation. Steve started getting a case of the sillies pointing out the illuminated clouds above them and what he thought they were shaped like.

Jonathan had never seen him so relaxed so he asked if he could take a few pictures ‘for practice’ of doing portraits in dim lighting to which Steve goofily agreed and then asked if he needed to take his pants off so Jonathan could take some other kind of “moon” pics.

They got downright silly after that - though Steve kept his pants on, thankfully.

End Flashback

The service was over and Jonathan had barely heard a word said. He felt terrible that basically he was remembering the time he got high with Steve Harrington at the quarry instead of actually paying attention to the last rites of Barb Holland’s life.

In some ways though - Steve had been right. They needed to move forward with their lives. It felt like too much had been put on hold for too long trying to deal with all of this. He didn’t mean pretending that it never happened, because that surely was not the way to go, but accepting it and moving on. He hoped Nancy could. Jonathan was tired of looking back. He wanted to go forward.

Still, he had to go to the graveside part of the service because Nancy wanted him to. That was strictly family and the Wheelers as well as Steve.
The service had been long and sad, as he expected. He was exhausted. It had been hard, particularly going alone and feeling a little out of place. He had checked in on the Hollands and with Nancy of course, and they had been polite and thanked him for coming but obviously weren’t focused on him. He had wished he had someone that could have just sat with him. It was too bad he had only noticed Carol in the back after the church service was over. He’d have even liked her company, particularly since Tommy wasn’t with her. She did not go over to the grave service.

It was weird being one of the pallbearers. He and Jonathan had both offered and took the center of each side. It felt like the least he could do and he could tell it meant something to both Mrs. Holland and Nancy. The weight of the casket, even if Barb wasn’t physically in it seemed to match the weight on his heart and he welcomed it in a weird way.

Now that it was over though, he didn’t know what to do with himself. Mrs. Holland invited him over for the after funeral brunch but he just couldn’t do anymore. He thanked her politely but said he needed to do some other things.

The house felt emptier than ever before. A combination of the flurry of activity from just before he left and from the last few weeks of having company - wanted and not - had made Steve gotten used to other voices.

He stopped at the door when he saw a small envelope in the mail from the Hollands. Great timing on the post office’s part,

Looking at what he supposed was a thank you note, he sat it down not wanting to read it just yet. He made sure his family sent a large donation to the local humane society in her name. Her mom had talked about how much Barb had loved cats and they had been considering getting a new one just before Barb disappeared.

He wondered if Barb had even seen Steve’s cat, Penny, the night she died. He hoped she had and that maybe she had had at least a couple of pleasant moments petting the siamese his mom bought and then promptly forgot about. The cat became Steve’s purely on the basis that he was the only one ever there. Thinking back, she never even came out when Nancy was around so he doubted Barb even had that moment of enjoyment at the party. That was just fucking depressing.

He wished, yet another time, that he had made more of an effort to get to know her as a person and not just tolerate her as Nancy’s best friend. Seeing Barb through not only Nancy’s eyes but her parents over the past year had been part of what made Steve realize he needed to be a better person. To not just take people at face value or make snap judgements based on others’ opinions.

He changed out of his nice clothes into something he could relax in. He dug in the fridge to get some leftovers to eat. He tried turning on the tv but the noise was annoying him. Any games seemed pointless, the holiday specials and movies seemed trite, and anything else just seemed like a waste of time and effort to watch. He ate half his meal and threw the rest out. Walking past, he spied the piano and decided to sit down and noodle around for a bit. He played the things he had been playing lately - they were becoming a sort of comfort food for him. **Clair de Lune, Moonlight Sonata**, even the stuff from Cats. He had dug out some sheet music and was halfway through playing Beethoven’s **Sonata Pathetique** when the doorbell rang.

Surprised was an understatement when he saw Nancy standing on his porch, hugging herself
tightly and biting her lip.

“Nance..what are you doing here?” Steve looked around to see if she was alone, but her mom’s car was in the driveway and there was no sign of anyone else (Jonathan?). “Are you okay?”

“Can I come in?” Nancy asked, her voice small and trembling.

Steve had rarely seen her this way and mostly at the beginning of all of this. He stepped back and opened the door wider to let her in. “Sure. Uh where’s Jonathan?” He looked one more time outside just in case he missed him. “And where’s your coat?” He just noticed she wasn’t wearing it.

“Jonathan went home a while ago.” Steve’s eyes widened. That didn’t seem like Jonathan who had stuck with Nancy through everything. Seeing his look, she shook her head. “I sent him home. It was obvious he was uncomfortable hanging around the Hollands after everything. You can probably understand,” she half-smiled at him and Steve felt a tad guilty for not going.

“Nance, I’m sorry I didn’t go but…”

She waved him off and stepped towards the kitchen. “Can I get some tea? It’s cold out there. I forgot my coat at the Hollands. I hope my mom finds it.”

“Uh - sure.” Steve ran his hand through his hair before stepping around her to put the kettle on. She sat at the counter as he pulled a cup down from the cupboard and pulled out the tin of her favorite orange spice tea, Constant Comment.

“You remembered?” Nancy asked picking up the distinctive orange and black tin. She gazed at it for a minute before removing a bag.

“It hasn’t really been that long.” Without thinking, he also brought out a box of Walker shortbread cookies and slid them to her. They were also her favorite when she was feeling down. His mom always wanted some on hand as she ate them on mornings after having a bit too much wine.

She smiled fondly at him and at the cookies. He kept himself busy pulling spoons and sugar and milk out trying to not look at her. She was still one of the most beautiful girls he knew. And he still cared about her. He was still heart-broken she chose Jonathan but even he could see Jonathan had been good for her. Understood her in a way Steve hadn’t. It hurt.

Still…

“So what is this about? Are you okay? I guess today was hard.” Steve sounded dumb to himself. Of course it was. The kettle whistled and he poured the water for her and into his own cup that he had put some instant Folgers into. It was gross but Steve wasn’t much of a tea person and there wasn’t time to brew a real pot of coffee. He kept Folgers on hand for mornings he ran late.

“It was...but it was also kind of okay? I guess. I mean - it’s not really the truth but at least it’s some closure.” She dunked her bag into the hot water as if it would steep it faster.

Steve sat next to her and took a sip of coffee and grabbed a cookie. It filled the awkward silence as Nancy sank into her thoughts. Steve wasn’t great with the silence but he obviously wasn’t great at talking about the things Nancy wanted to talk about. He imagined that’s why he liked Dustin. Dustin talked about anything and everything.

“I understand why you didn’t come to the Hollands. I’m just grateful you came to the service.”
“You thought I wouldn’t?” Steve felt slightly offended.

“She smiled. “No, I knew you’d see it through even if it was hard. I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciated it.”

Steve frowned. A little too little, too late he supposed.

“I needed to get out though. I was going to help Mrs. Holland and my mom afterwards but it got too hot in there. I felt like I was choking on smoke or something. I had to get out but I didn’t want to be alone. Is that stupid?”

“No - I’m just wondering why you didn’t go to the Byers.”

“Because honestly - you understand. You may not have been Barb’s friend but you were there through it all.”

“Not as much as I should have been,” Steve said.

“Looking back - I think we all did the best we could. I’m just sorry I was so tangled up in my own stuff that I didn’t appreciate how hard you were trying. We just have different - and I guess slightly incompatible - methods of coping.” Nancy took a drink and bit into her own cookie. “I forgot how much I liked these,” she smiled softly at him. She put a hand on his arm - and it was freezing. “But you didn’t. You remembered.” She squeezed his arm slightly.

Steve knew that look on her face. That fond look look like when they first started dating. He was afraid of what that might mean but he didn’t know why. So of course, he changed the subject. Pretended he wasn’t seeing what he thought he was seeing.

“Jesus, Nancy, you are freezing. How long were you outside?” Steve asked.

“Awhile. You had some music playing loudly so you probably missed the doorbell. I didn’t take you for a classical music fan. It was really nice though. What was it?”

“Oh...I uh...doesn’t matter. Let me get you a blanket to wrap yourself up in. And drink your tea!” He said as he went to the linen closet to get a small wrap his mom liked to use when the house got chilly.

When he came back out to the kitchen though, Nancy and her tea were missing. “Nancy? Where are you?” He yelled out, thinking she went to the powder room.

She didn’t answer so he walked around and then noticed her by the piano. She was flipping through the sheet music. “Uh, Nance?”

“Was that you playing?” she asked. He didn’t need to answer because he flushed red with embarrassment and he knew she had already guessed it before she came into the house. There was no way his live playing sounded like a recording.

“Uh - yeah…”

She frowned and then looked over at the shelf with the photos and awards. She perused it and then picked up on the photos of Steve playing at one of his last recitals. “Is this why I was never allowed in here? You said this was just your dad’s studio and you weren’t allowed in here. Why wouldn’t you tell me about this?”

“I was...embarrassed. I never told anyone I played. Not even Tommy knew.”
She sat the photo down and walked over to him. “Embarrassed? Why? If that was you playing, you’re really good.”

“Not according to my dad. I was never good enough.”

Nancy humphed. “Your dad...has no idea what the hell he is talking about. And I’m sorry I never had the chance before to say that. No one knows you play?”

“Well...some of the kids do now. Dustin, El and Will,” Steve admitted.

“Will knows.” She laughed lightly. “I guess that explains his sudden interest in NPR and ‘Moonlight Sonata’. I was wondering where it came from. Did you know he made Jonathan buy him an album.”

Steve smiled. “I didn’t know he liked it that much. I haven’t really seen much of him since then.”

She came up to him and took the offered blanket from his hand. “Would you play for me now? I think I should have a chance to hear what’s gotten Will so worked up about myself.”

“Uh - ok. Just what...”

“What were you playing when I came? Play that. It would be nice to hear it without the walls in the way.” She snuggled onto the couch, with the blanket wrapped around her and her tea cooling in her hand.

Steve sat down and started over. The sound was sad and morose - much like the day had been. He couldn’t really see how Nancy was reacting since he still needed the sheet music to guide him. When he finished, he looked over and there was a sense of awe on her face as well as tears.

“That was amazing, Steve. I can’t believe I never knew you could do this.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

She stood up and walked over to him. She kissed him on the cheek. “I mean it. I’ve never felt anything more moving. Would you play something else. ‘Moonlight Sonata’ maybe?”

“Ok.” Steve closed his eyes and pictured playing it in his head as he usually did. He could feel Nancy sitting next to him, warmer now than before - seeping into his side a bit, her Sweet Honesty perfume settling into his nose reminding him of long nights of snuggling in his car or her room. She never actually came to Steve’s house that often. He didn’t want her there when his parents were away and he thinks she wasn’t comfortable there after Barb’s disappearance.

He lost himself in the music and her scent and warmth and could feel her swaying gently next to him, clearly enjoying herself. He smiled. He loved finally being able to do something that made her feel better. He should have never doubted that she wouldn’t have understood his reluctance to make his skills known. They could have had private concerts like this all the time.

Before he knew it, he was into ‘Clair de Lune’ and he felt her slip off the bench. When he looked, she was dancing with a smile on her face. Clearly she hadn’t done ballet in some time, but she was still graceful and charming as she stretched and spun slowly. When he finished he turned to say something, but she just looked at him and asked sweetly “Play more?” He nodded and dug out some other sheet music. He hadn’t played it in some time but it was easy enough and would let her dance so he slid into the ‘Waltz of the Flowers’ from the Nutcracker.

He didn’t really need the sheet music and he was slightly entranced watching her. She almost
seemed to glow. She was slightly giggling and spinning and he hated that the song ended. She yelled, “Again - and laughed and swung down to take his hand and spun him around once. “Again - please!”

Steve almost said yes, but it was going on 9:00 already. How long had they been in there? Even his fingers were beginning to cramp.

“Nancy - I’m so glad you liked it, but your mom’s going to get worried. You probably should go home, or at least call. But I need to take a break. My fingers are starting to lock up.” He waggled them at her.

“No, please! I need more. I want more of these fingers playing.” She then took his hand and started petting them. Her face softened and she looked melancholy. “I always loved your fingers. They knew just how to touch me.”

To Steve’s shock, she kissed his hand gently and then placed it on her face. He would have pulled them back but he was stunned at the look of bliss on her face as she cupped her own cheek with his hand and turned to press another kiss to the palm of his hand. “You loved touching me, too. I remember,” she whispered. “I want more.”

He tried to pull back, but she held on to his hand with more strength than he expected.

“Nance, I think you’re overtired and mourning. I don’t think you’re thinking right.”

“Please, just play one more...just one more. And then I’ll give you what you want. What we both want,” she said quietly.

“What...?” He stared at her not comprehending what she was telling him.

The doorbell rang and broke the staggering silence between them. Steve quickly pulled away and went to answer the door.

Jonathan.

Steve’s pulse raced. Did he know? Could he tell?

“Hey, man...uh...what brings you here?” Steve sounded nervous to his own ears.

“Is she still here? I saw the car out front and wanted to be sure she was okay. Her mom asked me to look for her when she didn’t come home and left her coat at the Hollands.”

Steve was about to answer when Nancy came around the corner. “Hi Jonathan, I was just getting ready to leave. Sorry if I worried you. I just - well you know Steve was there and I just wanted to check on him.” She kissed Jonathan lightly on the lips which was slightly infuriating to Steve.

Jonathan looked between them. Steve knew his red face was probably a dead give away that something weird had happened but Nancy seemed as composed and cool as ever - as if she hadn’t just been dancing around and giggling like she had been high and drunk a few minutes before.

“I’m really glad you came to the service, Steve. I know Barb would have appreciated it. And thanks for the tea.”

Jonathan held her coat out for her and they left.

Steve knew grief did weird things to people but he stood there and wondered what the hell just
happened.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed. So sorry for the long wait. Got caught up in the holidays. Also, heads up - I'm starting a new job so I have no idea what that will do to my writing schedule but I promise I am finishing this story.
Chapter 19 - Girls, Girls, Girls

Chapter Summary

A little Jancy smut, Steve feeling a bit awkward in general, a little adorable pre-Snow Ball preparation and Billy still being a bit of a jerk.

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the long delay in updates. See end notes if you want to see explanations. I'm not overly happy with this but want to get it posted since it's been too long.

Warnings for this chapter: Some Jancy smut and Billy, Tommy and Carol being jerks (what else is new). Nothing really major in warnings. There is some naval gazing from Jonathan's point of view about his reasons for his overall lack of connections with people prior to the show.

On the plus side: Steve and Dustin bonding and Dustin's mom makes an appearance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 19 - Girls, Girls, Girls

Jonathan's POV

Jonathan was exhilarated but exhausted after the last round. Nancy still seemed energized but opted to take a shower since her Mom and Holly were due home soon from their “Mommy & Me” workout at Elaine Powers. They’d had the Wheeler house to themselves for a change and Nancy had wanted to take advantage of it.

Jonathan had to admit, he was curious a little about what had happened between Steve and Nancy that night two weeks ago after Barb’s funeral. But only a little, because whatever had happened, it had been like a switch for Nancy. In a good way.

Nancy had seemed happier, lighter - and certainly hornier. Jonathan had always enjoyed sex with Nancy. She was his first true girlfriend, which meant she had been his first in most things. Sure he had had an awkward fumble or two with girls at the parties he hated attended...which had been part of the reason he hated attending them. He realized he didn’t enjoy kissing and touching people he didn’t really know or like very much. Truthfully, for awhile, he thought all he would ever enjoy was watching because, outside of his family, he had a hard time connecting with people in any meaningful way.

He could lie to others, but he couldn’t lie to himself. He was a bit of a voyeur. He had enjoyed watching other people hook up at parties. It wasn’t actually about the sex but more about how they found themselves doing those things with those people. He found himself fascinated with the hows
and whys some people chose their partners - for either one night or something more. He liked seeing how they interacted - not just sexually but just in general. In some small pocket of himself, he wondered if he was trying to understand how that happened or why is the reason he picked up a camera in the first place.

He had rarely attended parties because he had rarely been invited. But those times he did go, he found himself people watching more than attempting to interact with people. He supposed that’s where his reputation came from, long before the “peeping tom photo” incident. He had become aware of how people thought he was a bit of a creep because he had a tendency to stare without even realizing he was doing it. He wasn’t sure if his tendency to ‘people watch’ was more because he was interested in the people around him, or because he was uninterested in interacting with those same people.

It was also where he had developed a habit of observing Steve Harrington originally. The first party he had attended as a sophomore, he watched as Steve commanded the attention of everyone at the party. Sure, he had seen it in school but never in an atmosphere of just their peers with no adult supervision. And he had only been a junior that even the seniors wanted the attention of.

He’d been almost jealous at the ease with which Steve had with everyone - not just the girls who flirted with him but the boys who just wanted to hang out. Steve had seemed so comfortable in his own skin and never seemed to have to work at it. The girls basically offered themselves up to him. Even in middle school, while he was sure Steve wasn’t actually having sex that young, there were always girls who were willing to “go steady” with him, whatever that meant to them at that age.

In the few times he observed Steve, he never saw Steve promise anyone anything, but he seemed to have a knack for making people feel good about themselves if he wanted to. He also had an ability of making people feel small by just not acknowledging them. As Jonathan thought about it, it was never anything outward Steve had done - it was the way he watched as Tommy took on the role of bully as if commanded by Steve to do so and Steve never stopped them until recently.

Until the incident with Nancy, Jonathan had mostly been invisible to them which had worked in Jonathan’s favor. It led to him being able to watch how Steve and, in turn, Tommy, made people want their attention.

Mostly Tommy and Carol had been together, and truthfully, watching them swap spit was not attractive. Watching most people swap spit was not interesting unless the people themselves were interesting. It’s why Jonathan thought most porn was boring - not that he’d seen a lot of it. He had found some that his dad left behind when he moved out (thankfully, Jonathan found it before his mother did). He watched it a few times but the people were boring because he didn’t know them. The only thing he did enjoy about it was seeing the lines of the people - their jawlines, their necks, the way they flushed, but truthfully he preferred seeing human-study photographs. Life magazine or National Geographic portrayed the beauty and ugliness of the human body in more interesting ways.

But Jonathan couldn’t deny the attraction of watching people he found interesting in person. Tommy and Carol were interesting, if not likable, because they had basically been together longer than anyone Jonathan knew in their peer group. Something was working for them. He couldn’t understand what they saw in each other but it was clear they did. There was an obvious affection, not just a “best we can do” scenario. But while he enjoyed watching them interact with each other, he didn’t enjoy when the groping started. They were sloppy kissers and made sounds like a broken vacuum cleaner that didn’t have enough suction. Jonathan was well familiar with that sound having an old, barely functioning Hoover at home. It made him completely interested in seeing more of them.
There were few he actually enjoyed watching when the making out sessions started. Probably because most of his peers lacked experience so they were all ungainly to watch, like Tommy and Carol.

He realized Steve had been the one to learn from according to the rumors he overheard in the halls when no one paid him any attention. Watching how Steve kissed was so different than Tommy or so many others who seemed intent on either showing off, swallowing their girl’s faces or getting to the “good stuff”. Steve always seemed to just enjoy kissing and often let the girl take charge and opened himself up to them. It was rarely frantic but, Jonathan admitted, Steve kissed in a very sensual way that seemed oddly mature for his age.

Clearly the girls enjoyed it. The way Tammy Thompson would go on to some other band girl he couldn’t name about hoping to one day be the recipient of those attentions had been nauseating. Still, he noticed how Steve paid close attention to whatever girl he was with, his focus completely on her, unlike how most of the other boys acted, was interesting. It was clear he really wasn’t just showing off. Obviously Jonathan could never hear what Steve whispered during those make-out sessions but he saw the girls’ responses and how they blushed and smiled and then often took his hand and led Steve away to somewhere private as if it were all their idea. The way they smiled when they finally came out from doing whatever they did was a little different than others. It made Jonathan want to watch more, to see how Steve had sex, to see what he was doing that seemed different...even if he recognized the immorality of doing so without their knowledge. Up until that fateful party, he had refrained from that - not that it ever got that far.

He shook his head. He didn’t want to think about that night. He went back to thinking about how Steve had inadvertently taught Jonathan how to treat girls in a romantic way - maybe even Nancy because he did learn from him. As far as Jonathan knew, Steve never broke their hearts then. He never heard Steve spread rumors or talk ugly about them afterwards. Sometimes Tommy did which was how those rumors spread, but that seemed to have been the one line Steve had with Tommy. He’d always smack Tommy and tell him to stop talking about the girls.

That’s what had surprised him the most with the whole theater marquee situation. The fact that Steve had let Tommy do it at all. Jonathan was not at all surprised Steve said shit about his family, but that he let that kind of thing happen about Nancy. He realizes now that Steve must have been tremendously hurt at the thought of Nancy cheating on him - but that didn’t excuse Steve’s behavior. Looking back, Jonathan should have stepped in sooner. He should have been more offended and acted on Nancy’s part instead of waiting until Steve baited him about his own family.

And he had been shocked when she went back to Steve after that. Obviously, Steve had apologized adequately enough for Nancy to forgive him, but Jonathan had looked on from the outside wondering how that worked between people. He found himself alternatively watching and avoiding them as a couple. Nancy tried to be friendly and spent more effort than he thought she would and Steve, oddly, had seemed to let it go but they hadn’t been close by any means that whole year.

Thinking about his relationship with her now was such a surprise. Once they had gotten over themselves, being with each other had generally been easy. He knew why Steve loved her because he did, too. He’s just still surprised that Steve seems to be so accepting.

Even if now Steve didn’t have the same clout as he had before Billy came steam-rolling in, he knew so many of his fellow students would probably still choose Steve. And definitely over Jonathan. Maybe not Billy because apparently Billy had the same knack as commanding and
satisfying as Steve, if in a completely different manner. Jonathan suspected it was mostly due to the shininess of just being new and from somewhere like California. But - yeah, Steve could have been dating any number of girls by now he was sure and yet he wasn’t. If he was honest with himself, he knew that Steve probably still loved Nancy. After all, it really hadn’t been that long. Not that Jonathan knew how long it took to get over something like that but he imagined if Nancy left him now, even though they’d only been seeing each for about a month or so, it would take three or four times that to get over her.

Jonathan had resented Steve at one point for his ease with people and the general good fortune he seemed to have so he thought he should probably have been jealous about how giddy Nancy was when she left Steve’s that night. In fact, he should have been jealous over the fact that she went to him in the first place. Yeah, Steve still loved her so of course he would let her in if she needed help. But it should have rankled more that Nancy felt like she needed Steve more than Jonathan that night.

Somehow he hadn’t been. Maybe because it happened so fast they never really spoke about it. Nancy had gotten in the car and suggested they go somewhere private. Not really having anywhere to go, they ended up at the Quarry in the backseat with his car running to keep it heated, but she had been delighted and enthusiastic and almost giddy. It had been such a surreal change from the morose mourning earlier in the day, it had given Jonathan emotional whiplash, but after assuring himself that she meant every word she was saying. That when she said, in her words, “now time to live, move on and celebrate life” he eagerly followed.

And for two weeks she had been generally much more energized and happier. It seemed like whatever had happened at Steve’s house that night had been a catalyst and Jonathan wanted to be grateful for it even if he didn’t want to look at it too closely.

Jonathan still had a niggling doubt, but since Steve had been unexpectedly calm and accepting of Nancy’s decisions, Jonathan felt he had to have that same maturity and trust, but it was hard sometimes knowing all Nancy had to do was change her mind again and Steve would be there.

He hoped that didn’t happen. He was like 90% sure it wouldn’t but honestly he sometimes wondered if it wouldn’t be the appropriate payback. He knew Nancy and he had jumped the gun at Murray’s place and made decisions that - in hindsight - wasn’t that most respectable to others. Not just Steve - but the fact they just left without telling anyone. What if they had stayed an extra day? What could have happened?

His weird, rambling train of thought derailed as the door opened and Nancy walked in with a smile on her face and nothing else. She crawled over to him and straddled him over the sheet.

“Good shower?” he asked her. Her skin was still damp, her eyes sparkling and her smile deep and satisfied.

“MMM, the best.” She kissed him soundly and she straddled him and bent to his face. He expected to feel her body heat through the sheet, but oddly, she wasn’t warm. He reached up to touch her face and she was cool. She took his hand from her face and began kissing his fingers before placing them on her breasts, which were peaked - but honestly Jonathan wasn’t sure if it was because she was cold or turned on.

“Run out of hot water or something,” he smiled as he rubbed a nipple between his fingers to warm it up. He knew he didn’t have anything left in him but clearly Nancy was ready to go again.

“Well, I’m still hot here,” she grinned at him and took his hand and placed it between her legs and sure enough, she was still wet.
“Isn’t your mom coming home soon?” he asked, even as he rubbed her clit a bit.

As if on cue, they heard the garage door open. They both jumped up laughing and scrambling to put clothes on. Jonathan finished first.

“Why don’t you go downstairs to the kitchen and act like we’ve been doing homework?” Nancy suggested, shoving some books in his hands. “Maybe we can go over to your house tonight?”

Jonathan shook his head in amusement. Who knew Nancy Wheeler could be so insatiable? Maybe Steve Harrington...and Jonathan found he just couldn’t be jealous about it anymore. In fact, he was kind of grateful. The last two weeks had been phenomenal.

**ST EVES POV**

The last two weeks had been awkward. He had been avoiding Nancy and Jonathan as best he could. It was weird seeing them demonstrably affectionate, almost as much as he had been with Nancy when they dated, but even weirder knowing she had kissed him that night. He was trying to put it out of his mind. He convinced himself it had something to do with Barb’s funeral finally being over, something to do with grief. He had no idea. He was no psychiatrist.

At first he had thought (hoped, maybe?) that she was actually interested in getting back with him but it was clear she was still into Jonathan, if the way he kept finding them in secluded corners kissing was any indication. She’d just grin at Steve as he’d go pass them as if acting like they had.

Now he wondered if it was some kind of game - like she was teasing him or making fun of him, but he just couldn’t rectify that with the Nancy he knew. It was like she had just forgotten that they ever dated and that somehow he was just fine and dandy seeing her with someone else. Hell, she’d even cornered him a couple of times to see if she could come over for him to play piano again as if that night hadn’t ended awkwardly.

He couldn’t fault Jonathan for it. The guy never seemed to realize Steve was there. His focus was on her. And who could fault him for that? Still, it surprised him that Jonathan allowed such public displays.

It didn’t help that Billy seemed to egg him on, rubbing it in.

The longer it went, the weirder it got. Lunch had been a disaster. He had been trying to eat quietly alone while trying to cram for a test for 7th period. Until Billy, Tommy and Carol plunked their trays down next to him.

“Can’t believe I have to eat in this shit hole,” Billy said.

“Thought you were going to eat lunch in your car, Billy?” Carol asked, sorting through her salad as if it contained bugs.

Tommy snickered. “If lunch was Tammy Thompson, then yeah, I thought you were eating “lunch” in your car. What happened?”

“Yeah...well - we were going to go out there - but the view made us nauseous.” The smugness in Billy’s voice rankled him.

Steve could feel their eyes on him. It was a set-up. He knew they wanted him to ask or look up or
react. He took another bite of overcooked and cold chicken nuggets.

“Really? I can’t imagine what view that could have been,” Carol said, almost innocently, as if she didn’t know already. Steve wondered what happened to the girl who seemed like she was turning a new leaf not that long ago.

“Picture it. There I was, one hand already starting to slide up Tammy’s skirt when - bam, I heard a loud thump. It startled Thompson enough that she slapped my hand away.”

“That’s too bad, man. What was it?” Tommy pried. Steve knew that tone too well, too.

“I guess I didn’t realize what shitty car was parked next to me, but sure enough, there’s the freak’s piece of junk taking up space like it belonged there and suddenly I see that Wheeler chick sit up and hit the window with her hand with the biggest smile on her face - her moans could probably be heard downtown.”

“Where was Byers?” Tommy asked as if he didn’t already know.

“Couldn’t see him, but pretty sure he was up and under that little plaid skirt of hers having his own lunch.”

“Eww….just the thought. Gross,” Tommy overenunciated and stretched the words out..

“Yeah - grossed Thompson out too. She just left me there - high and dry. And that Wheeler chick just smiled at me and waved.”

That surprised Steve as that seemed unlikely for Nancy to do that. Sure, she had seemed to enjoy sex but she was still private about it. Of course, Billy could be lying. He probably was.

“Yeah...well we all knew she was a slut last year, didn’t we, Stevie Boy?” Tommy said as if they were still friends.

Steve now felt nauseous. Not so much about Jonathan and Nancy. He didn’t really want to know the details but it was their business. Billy, Tommy and Carol had no right to talk about them. Not considering the kinds of shit they did.

“Shut your fucking mouths,” Steve hissed and grabbed his tray. “The only gross people I see are sitting right here.” He tried to walk away but there was a hand on his arm, clasping it gently.

“Steve, you had to know. You can’t keep pining for her,” Carol said quietly, as if she had been doing him a favor and didn’t want the boys to overhear.

“Like that? What the hell is wrong with you, Carol? Besides, it’s not your issue if I pine or not. I thought you were trying to be better, Carol. I don’t expect those two idiots to ever treat anyone well - but you? I thought you had a chance. You need to get the hell away from Tommy if you ever want to be a good person.”

He left them and stormed off.

By the end of the day, he just wanted to go home so he was almost annoyed when Dustin approached him, but he tried to swallow it down.
“Hey, can you give me a lift home?”

Steve almost said no except for the tone in Dustin’s voice. It seemed oddly soft.

“Uh, sure. I guess. Where’s everyone else?” He looked around but saw no one.

“Will is staying late to do some catch-up since he missed so much school and Mike is staying with him.”

“Uh huh. And Lucas and Max?”

Dustin pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. They went off somewhere together.”

Uh oh, Steve knew that face. Dustin was feeling like a third wheel. Steve could relate.

“Well, come on then. I was thinking of going to McDonalds. I didn’t get to eat a lot of lunch.”

And that put a smile on Dustin’s face.

They decided to eat there instead of going home. Dustin had a project to work on and needed to get home, but taking a half hour to have a quarter pounder with cheese, fries and a shake (chocolate for him, vanilla for Dustin), seemed to do the trick, although watching Dustin dunk his fries into the milkshake seemed a bit nauseating no matter how much Dustin proclaimed it was the perfect blend of sweet and salty.

A couple of kids Dustin’s age came in and Dustin looked away quickly.

“Who’s that?” Steve asked.

“Uh, no one,” Dustin replied, clearly lying since his face was turning red. “I’m done. Are you done? We can go now.” Dustin got up and started clearing away his tray before Steve could respond.

Steve said, “Sure, ok...why not,” anyways to himself.

Once in the car though, he decided to push it.

“So - who was that? Obviously someone you know,” Steve said as he put the car in drive. He always found it easier to have these conversations in a car, not looking at the other person.

“Stacy. She’s goes to school with me,” Dustin muttered.

“OK. I kind of assumed that. Do you like her?” Steve asked, making a concerted effort to not sound like he was teasing Dustin.

“NO! No...I mean...she’s ok. I guess. I mean she’s kind of pretty. I think she is at least.”

“Yeah, she seemed cute - I mean for someone her age. Maybe you should ask her to the Show Ball?”

From the corner of Steve’s eye he saw Dustin’s jaw dropped and he just stared at Steve before launching into hystericls. “Are you nuts? Are you crazy? She’s never even said hello to me. She’s like the most popular girl in our class! Everyone wants to go out with her!”

“You sure about that? I can remember when people thought I was the most popular guy in school.
Didn’t mean everyone, or anyone for that matter, really wanted to go out with me. Still doesn’t.”

Dustin frowned. “But...I mean, sure you dated Nancy for a long time - everyone’s probably just giving you room before they all start clamoring for your attention.”

“Clamoring? What kind of a word is that?” Steve kind of hated that his vocabulary wasn’t as good as a middle schooler - but he consoled himself with the fact he knew more languages in general.

“Oh--it means they all want your attention. Because like you’re cool and all...” Dustin replied.

Steve huffed in amusement. If Dustin only knew how far down the ladder Steve had fallen. “No man. I don’t think that’s it but thanks for the morale boost.”

“Besides - she’d never say yes. I’ve already heard her tell her friends she wasn’t going with anyone because she wanted to be able to pick and choose there.” Dustin shrugged his shoulders like it didn’t matter but Steve could tell it did.

“Well then - I guess we just have to make sure you are the one she picks, isn’t that right? I believe you asked me for some dancing lessons? Maybe we can spruce you up a bit too so no girl could resist you.” Dammit, if Steve couldn’t get himself a date, he was going to do his damndest to get a girl to look twice at Dustin. The kid deserved it.

For the second time in five minutes, Dustin’s jaw dropped. “Really? You mean that? I mean - I know you said it before but I thought you kind of forgot it?”

“No man. I know you’re busy tonight, but come over tomorrow night. We’ll start dance lessons. Hate to waste those Fred Astaire Dance classes my mom sent me to as a kid.”

They pulled into Dustin’s driveway. Steve almost wished he could come over tonight but the boy had homework and Steve wasn’t quite willing to admit out loud he was lonely for some real company.

He really needed to find some friends his own age.

**DUSTIN’S POV**

Steve was so awesome, Dustin thought to himself. He felt so much better. He couldn’t deny feeling left out sometimes. Mike clearly preferred El or Will and well - Lucas and Max had whatever it was they were doing going on.

And Dustin was going to admit to no one he had actually asked Melody Piper to go to the dance, who turned him down flat, if politely. At least she hadn’t laughed at him.

Anyways - Steve would know how to help him. No matter how down Steve seemed to be on himself since breaking up with Nancy, Dustin could see other girls eyeing Steve up. Steve might be blind to it and Dustin may be new to the whole figuring out girls things - but he was pretty sure some of those girls lit up like a Christmas Tree when Steve acknowledged them. Wasn’t that kind of the electricity Steve had talked about? He’d get Dustin looking sharp and being smooth on his feet and he’d show Stacy and all of them.

In the meantime, he’d get his homework finished and then review at the materials for the Science Fair that he had brought home. That was the other reason he was annoyed with the party. They
were supposed to be working on this together this afternoon but once Will had to stay late and Mike went with him, Lucas bugged out to be with Max.

Instead, he sat down and tried to figure out how to create the experiment to test how sound travelled in water. He knew they wanted to include fresh versus salt water, but should they also include clean versus dirty water - and how would they make it dirty - like just muddy, or put stuff in it? Maybe they should do a temperature control - hot water versus cold water? He started writing down variables they could include.

He lost track of time trying to imagine how to conduct the experiment and going through his old Popular Science magazines trying to find related articles. He really needed to do a better job of indexing important articles. He only looked up when he heard his mom come home and smelled the Kentucky Fried Chicken she must have picked up on her way home.

He looked at the clock - it was already going on 7:00 p.m.

“DUSTY! I’M HOME. SORRY I RAN LATE BUT I BROUGHT DINNER!” His mom’s voice carried down the hall easily.

“COMING MOM!”

He got out to see her wrestling groceries in the house so he went out to help her bring them in.

“Did you get my message I was going to be late, Dusty,” his mom asked as he sat the last of the bags home. He looked over to see the light flashing on the answering machine.

“Uh no, Mom. I forgot to check but it’s ok.”

“Dusty, what have I told you about checking the machine? What if it had been an emergency?”

“Sorry mom. Got caught up in my studies. The Science Fair is coming up.”

He helped his mom put the groceries away and then they set the table and sat to eat as he tried to explain his plans for the experiment. He knew she didn’t really understand what he was talking about but he appreciated the effort she took to listen to him about it.

“I know tomorrow night’s a school night and it’s your early night but can I go to Steve’s after school?”

“Is he helping to tutor you or something?” She asked, seeming more interested in the change of topic.

“Well...kind of. The uh...school dance is coming up? Remember, I mentioned something about it?”

“Oh sure...I guess you’ve probably outgrown your old suit, haven’t you? You’re growing so fast. I supposed we should go this weekend to see if we can find a new one for you.”

“Oh...uh yeah - that’d be great but I kind of asked Steve for some help. He’s kind of popular and ...”

“He is a nice looking young man. Is he still with Nancy Wheeler? I think they make such a cute couple. I used to see them holding hands around town. Good families, both of them.”

“Ah...I uh think they broke up.”
“What a shame. Oh well, that’s how high school goes sometimes,” she said lightly. “I’m sure you’ll find out soon enough.”

“Well, in the hopes that maybe I could find out a bit sooner, Steve offered to teach me to dance. That’s why I want to go over tomorrow night. I know it’s usually our movie night but he hasn’t had a lot of time lately and…”

“That’s awfully sweet of him. Oh wait - did you say the dance was on the 16th?”

“Yes…”

“Shoot. I just signed up for an extra shift that night. Maryann just had her baby so we’re all taking some extra shifts to cover for her for awhile. I’m not sure I’ll be able to drive you there.”

Dustin just stared at her, his heart sinking. How was he supposed to get to the dance? But before he could ask his mom piped up, “Maybe Steve could drive you? Tell him I’ll pay him if he could.”

Dustin felt relieved. He was pretty sure Steve would drive him. ‘So that means I can go over tomorrow night?’

“Sure. He’s probably a better dance teacher than I would be. I always kind of had two left feet.”

Dustin couldn’t disagree. He just hoped he didn’t inherit her inability to keep a rhythm.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the long delay. The holidays had been crazy then I started a new job and just RL things going on including my laptop dying and having to replace it and of course what's going on in the world in general. I hope all of you are safe and sound.

Although, at this point I'm one of the fortunate ones who can work at home right now so I'm incredibly grateful but it has kept me from being able to indulge in this very much. I'm not overly happy with this chapter but I wanted to get it out. Next two or three chapters should see a bit more softness with Steve and the kids involving preparations for the Snow Ball including teaching Dustin and Will to dance - mostly because I want some comfort writing just about now - then we'll ramp back up into major plot territory.

Take care everyone.
Chapter 20 - The Second Hand Unwinds

Chapter Summary

Finally - Steve teaches Dustin and Will how to dance. And some other weird stuff happens.

Chapter Notes

Ok...no new general warning in the tags but this chapter has some attempted slut-shaming (but no one really cares), Billy is still being stalkerish and Nancy may still be up to something and Jonathan is starting to notice. We also deal a bit more with Will's crush on Steve.

Also warnings for potential use of semi-colons for apostrophes. For some reason, I seem to hit that key wrong a lot. I've tried to catch them but apparently that's something spell-check doesn't find and my eyes aren't always good enough to see it.

As always - I own nothing here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 20 - The Second Hand Unwinds

WILL'S POV

Will wasn’t sure what it was about Nancy, but lately she had been giving him the heebie jeebies. One - it didn’t help that clearly Jonathan and her were doing whatever it was boyfriends and girlfriends did in private. Well - ok he knew in theory what they did but he just didn’t want to think about it - particularly not his brother. The whole idea seemed kind of gross. He'd caught them more than once swapping spit and it was even grosser than Mike and El or Lucas and Max. They seemed to use their tongues to eat each other’s face off. At least his friends weren’t all slurpy about it. Those slurping noises and other, moaning type sounds that sometimes came from Jonathan’s room when Will came home earlier than expected left him trying to find reasons not to come home at all.

Also, Nancy seemed giddier than usual. Not that he knew her all that well. Sure there were times when she had played with the party early on but as she grew older, she grew distant and acted like Mike was just an annoyance. Something Jonathan never did to him until SHE came along.

OK - he knew that was a little unfair. Jonathan deserved to have a girlfriend but it sometimes seemed like he no longer had time to spend with Will. And Nancy tried to include Will in their conversation when she was over, she just seemed a tad overeager at times to make sure that Will
liked her. It was like having an overzealous aunt or grandmother that wanted to pinch your cheeks and make up for lost time. And whenever she got physically close to Will, he felt a shudder go up his spine that was a little too reminiscent of his recent issues. He didn't understand why it only seemed to happen with her. And once with Max's brother - but given his reputation, Will had no reason to be confused about his reaction to him. But his reaction to Nancy lately seemed weird even to himself.

He knew he didn’t care for how she treated Steve. Will thought Steve deserved better. But he couldn’t pinpoint that as the exact issue. Something about Nancy was just off putting to him. He just couldn’t see what either Steve or his brother saw in her. Although, he didn’t see the charm in girls in general - although he thought Max seemed kinda cool but he didn’t know her very well yet. And El was OK except, again, he still didn't really know her outside of her superhero actions. He didn’t really know any girls that well except his mom. Maybe that was it. He just wasn't used to being around girls - and moms don’t really count, right?

Fortunately Mike had been agreeable to have Will over a lot if Nancy was with Jonathan at his house. But Mike too was getting a bit alternately overprotective about something happening to Will or moping about not getting to see El again. Will sympathized but he didn’t really understand it.

Well - except for the fact he really wanted to see Steve again. He wanted to have another fun evening like they had the last time - Steve playing the piano, Dustin singing, and no one acting like Will was about to break apart.

So, when he saw Steve standing by his car, now parked in the middle school lot, apparently waiting for Dustin, he had to rush over before Mike saw them. He, Lucas and Max were still in with Mr. Clarke discussing the lack of progress on their plans for the science fair. Dustin had given him some notes but it was clear that Dustin had been the only one working on it so Will guessed Mr. Clarke was having a few words about teamwork with the rest of the party that he asked to speak with. Will assumed he was exempt from the “talk” since he was behind in general on all his schoolwork.

“Hey, guys! What’s going on?” Will asked.

“Uh...Steve was just giving me a lift to the library...to keep researching about…” Dustin blurted out, racing through his words so fast that Will almost didn’t understand them.

“What are you talking about Henderson? I’m teaching you how to dance for the Snow Ball, remember?”

“STEVE!” Dustin yelped, and smacked Steve on the arm.

“WHAT?! We just planned it yesterday. I swear you have the attention span of a gnat.”

“Me! You’re the one that can’t…”

Steve just continued on as if Dustin wasn’t trying to cut him off. “I’m going to help your hair and your dance moves so you can smooth your way into a dance with STAC...Y.” Steve winked at him. “Maybe even get a little kiss.”

Will almost laughed to see how red Dustin got. “You like Stacy?” Will asked sheepishly. How had he not known that? Everyone liked someone it seemed. He felt so left behind.

Dustin huffed. “STEVE...why would you tell him that? It’s…”
“Don’t be embarrassed, kid. I’m teasing you.” Steve reassured him. He threw an arm around Will. “Besides, Will would never make fun of you for that, right?”

“Are you really going to teach him to dance?” Will asked Steve. Will tried to sound calm, but the idea of Steve teaching Dustin how to dance was doing funny things to his stomach. His hands were getting a bit sweaty.

“Sure am. Four years of Fred Astaire dance classes can’t have been for nothing,” Steve smiled looking down at Will. “Why, you want to join us? Want to learn how to waltz or fox trot and charm the girls at the Snow Ball?”

“Yes!” Will answered enthusiastically. “I mean, not for the girls...I mean I’m not sure anyone would dance with me anyways but we have to be prepared, right? That is, if you don’t mind, Dustin?” Will left the question hanging as he could see Dustin was looking a bit perturbed.

Dustin threw his bags into the back of Steve’s car. Yes, he was clearly annoyed. “Sure, why not.” After a pause, he hissed quietly, “First Mike, now Steve,” as he sat down in the passenger seat, thinking he was not overheard, but Will winced as he got in the backseat as he heard Steve mutter to Dustin, ”Hey! What’s that about?”

Will almost bounced right back out of the car. “I don’t have to go…”

Dustin sighed. “Sorry, Will. I didn’t mean it. I’m just a little out of sorts I guess. Come on. But Steve - you are not backing out of this and making me dance with Will. No offense Will - I just need the expert to lead me through this.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Will said. “No offense Dustin, but neither of us are very graceful. I think we’ll be lucky if we don’t trip over our own feet.”

Steve laughed. “It’ll happen if you think too much about it. Listen, the best thing to do if something like that happens is to laugh it off before anyone else does. Yell something like ‘It’s my first day with my new feet or something stupid like that.’ If you don’t act like it’s a big deal, most other people won’t either.”

Steve turned the car on and headed out of the parking lot. Dustin was asking Steve about other dances like the Hustle or the Tango.

“Yeah, I don’t think you’ll need the Tango or Rumba at a middle school dance,” Steve chuckled. “And the Hustle is a bit outdated. Where did you even get that?”

“I watched Saturday Night Fever last night. My mom rented it. She has a thing for John Travolta ever since Grease came out,” Dustin said. “Thought maybe I could learn some dances like that.”

“Whoa, there Mr. Boogie Shoes...I think that’s a little much for your first dance. Besides which disco is dead. It would be just as useful as you learning the Lindy Hop,” Steve laughed.

“But you do know how to dance like that?” Dustin asked.

Will was curious, too. He was letting Steve’s voice wash over him as he watched the street go by.

“Honestly, no. Fred Astaire School of Dance stuck to the Ballroom classics - like I said. The Waltz, the Viennese Waltz, the Fox Trot, the Quickstep, the Merengue, and yes the Tango.

“See! I knew it. You can teach me the tango. I think the ladies would love that,” Dustin said excitedly.
“You’d think wrong, then.” Steve ran his hands through his hair as they stopped at a red light. “The girls in the class hated it and I’ve never been to any dance where someone did that for fun.”

Will was watching out the window, trying to settle his nerves thinking about dancing with Steve. He noticed his brother’s car at the 7/11 at the gas pump, but he didn’t see Jonathan. He did see Nancy standing next to the car talking to someone that wasn’t Jonathan. He was pretty sure it was Max’s brother - and looking to the left he confirmed the familiar blue Camaro that he knew on sight better than he did Billy Hargrove. He wondered if he should be concerned but, while he was aware that Max thought her brother was an ass, Jonathan never said much about him. Nancy and Billy just seemed to be having a normal conversation but they suddenly both looked towards Steve’s car and Will felt a tingle up the back of his neck as they watched Steve pull away when the light turned green. They suddenly seemed very wrong to him, but he couldn’t figure out why.

Billy had a reputation as a bully so that was a no brainer. And Will had been uneasy around Nancy lately. She seemed to be trying too hard to get Will to like her, although he assumed it was because of dating Jonathan even though Nancy had known Will for years because of Mike. There was no need to go out of her way. He just didn’t know what to think of them but he was interrupted out of his thoughts when Dustin asked

“You think we should learn the tango, right, Will? We should be prepared for any eventuality.”

“Uh, sure,” Will replied.

“Let’s just see how you do with a basic Waltz first,” Steve said. “If you do that well - and not try to do the Worm or the Robot on the dance floor, you’ll be ok.”

**BILLY’S POV**

“So, had a nice lunch, Wheeler?” He had pulled in when he saw Wheeler stretching outside of the trash heap Byers called a car. “Or should I ask if your boy toy had a nice lunch?”

“Shut up,” Nancy said, but she didn’t even seem really irritated by it. “At least I got to finish lunch. Seems like yours got up and walked away.”

Billy had to laugh. He never knew what to expect from Wheeler. She was a unique character - which was saying something for Hawkins and the general populace therein.

“I just don’t get how someone like you gave up Harrington for milquetoast in there,” Billy quipped, nodding towards the store where he could see Byers waiting in line to pay for gas with a few other things in his hands.

“No, I don’t suppose you do. And who’s to say I gave him up? Maybe I just want to play the field a little. Isn’t that what all the boys do?”

“Nancy Wheeler, you are your mother’s daughter, aren’t you?”

“What the hell does that mean?” Nancy said, still calmer than Billy expected.

“Nevermind. Still think you have a chance of Harrington taking you back?”

“If I wanted to, I’d certainly have more of a chance than you have of ever getting him to notice you,” Nancy shot back.
“What the hell does THAT mean?” echoing Nancy’s earlier question.

Just then, speaking of the devil, a familiar car pulled up to the light and stopped. Both he and Nancy turned to look towards it. Steve’s profile was clear and he was having an animated discussion with whoever was in the front seat. Had to be one of the moppets considering the Byers munchkin was in the back seat looking at them.

He felt a chill go through him and he blanked for a moment.

“Hey, you guys ok?” Jonathan appeared out of seemingly nowhere, handing a large Slurpee to Nancy and then put a small bag into the back seat.

“Just fine. Billy had a question about homework,” She took a big slurp. “Yum, cherry’s my favorite. Thanks, Jonathan.” She kissed his cheek as he stood back up from dropping the bag in.

“Sure.” Jonathan headed around to the driver’s side as Billy tried to shake off whatever it was that went over him. “See you around, Billy.” Jonathan said as he got into the car. Nancy rolled down the window and said “Yeah, see you later, Billy.”

They took off and Billy was left feeling confused and hankering for a Cherry Slurpee.

**JONATHAN’S POV**

“What was that about?” Jonathan asked Nancy as she uncharacteristically slurped her drink. It’s not like it was hot outside but Nancy was acting like it was summer at 85 degrees the way she was drinking. And she had taken off her coat while she was outside. The thing with Billy was probably the least weird thing about it but it was the one he was going to ask about.

“Nothing. Like I said. He had a homework question,” Nancy replied.

“Uh, huh. You have like one class together right?” Jonathan asked.

“Yup,” Nancy replied. “He forgot what we were supposed to read,” she added by way of explanation.

And that really confused Jonathan because he was in that same class with both of them - and not only was Billy’s best buddy, Tommy in it as well and he surely could have asked him, but the kicker was there was no reading assigned.

Why did she just lie to him?

He had seen them talking while he stood in line, Billy’s waggling tongue ever present. He assumed that Billy was taking the piss out of her about Steve or some other insult. Billy sure liked to ride her about the whole cheating angle, which honestly made Jonathan squirm just a little. Technically, it really hadn’t been but - as the old phrase goes - it was close enough for horseshoes.

Billy never bothered Jonathan directly much, but he knew he still antagonized Steve on occasion, regardless of the truce he thought had been made a month ago. And he seemed a bit bothered by Nancy. If Nancy had ever expressed anything other than general disdain for Billy, Jonathan might have felt jealous. Or if Jonathan didn’t have his own suspicions about Billy’s overbearing attentions to Steve. He knew Billy played the part of a womanizer, but it felt like overkill sometimes. And the way Billy watched Steve at times when he thought no one was looking made
Jonathan wondered. Not that he’d ever said anything to anyone about it - not even Nancy. He had lived with enough issues about people thinking he was gay, he wasn’t going to ever start rumors about someone else. He had the sense from Will, through being Max’s friend, that Billy’s dad was much worse than Lonnie ever was.

Still - he hadn’t thought anything about it. Nancy could handle herself whatever happened and he’d have left it drop if she had just said he was being his usual dickish self - but to lie? Why?

“So, you’re working tonight, right?” Nancy asked, breaking the awkward silence that had settled in the car. Well, awkward to Jonathan at least. Nancy didn’t seem like anything was wrong.

“No. I thought we were going to watch a movie tonight?” Jonathan replied. They had just talked about this at lunch...before their other activities started. Just thinking about how public that was made Jonathan feel flushed. They could have been seen.

He had to admit though it had been kind of a turn on thinking about “what if”. Usually it was him watching - not actually watching, watching, but the idea that someone like Nicole, who had blabbered the whole thing in the first place about the photos, could have seen them was a bit thrilling. Or maybe Tommy and Carol after all the hours he’d had to watch them slobber over each other, it would serve them right..

Or even Steve...that was, well that was a bit of a twist in his stomach. What if Steve had seen them? Not that Steve cared about kissing Nancy in front of Jonathan but that was a really different situation, wasn’t it? Just a year ago he would have probably revelled in rubbing it in Steve’s face. That was before Steve had jumped in to save them the first time, before he had helped kids he had no relation to while Nancy and Jonathan were off on their own, before Steve had graciously accepted Nancy’s decision and backed off and it must have hurt. Jonathan grimaced thinking about the possibility that Steve could have seen them.

Nancy hummed. “That’s right. I guess I forgot,” she said distractedly. “Is that why Will was with Steve? Did you make arrangements for us to be alone? You want a little return favor from lunch?” She smirked at him.

“What do you mean Will was with Steve?” He was confused. He hadn’t actually made any plans except for them to hang out and watch a movie before dinner.

“Oh, it’s just I saw Steve drive by with Will and, um...Dustin I think - it was hard to see the passenger side. I figured you got Steve to babysit or something. Mike hadn’t said anything about there being a game night or anything. Not that he would necessarily tell me.”

“No, I didn’t ask Steve...but maybe Mom did,” Jonathan answered. He knew Steve was hanging with the kids more but it did seem a little odd that he wouldn’t have known unless his mom had to work late at the last minute.

“Oh maybe he just needed a ride home?” Nancy asked. “Guess we’ll see when we get there. By the way, I can’t stay too late. I actually do have some homework to get done after dinner. I kind of hope he did go to Steve’s. It would be nice to be alone for awhile.”

Jonathan nodded and tried to put the weirdness to the side because the hand on sliding on his thigh was telling him Nancy was feeling a bit...energetic.
Once they got in the house, Steve realized he wasn’t exactly sure how he was going to teach them to dance. He was saved by the need for Dustin to get an afternoon snack before the started, because “we’re going to need energy, Steve! I can’t dance on an empty stomach!”

In class, the instructors demonstrated then had the kids pair up to emulate them. He was having flashbacks of Mrs. Nichols and her extremely thin hands grasping his hands as he tried to remember how to not step on her foot when she chose him to demonstrate. He also remembered her the strong smell of perfume and the pinched look on her face as she counted the steps. He was just glad she was a short woman and he had been a tall, lanky kid because it would have been awkward since he’d only been 12. It was embarrassing enough without having to avoid looking at her chest.

“How do you even ask a girl to dance?” Will asked quietly, but loud enough to break Steve out of his thoughts. “Not that I plan to, but I’d have no idea how to do it?”

“Oooh hust ave to bee confident,” Dustin replied unintelligibly, almost spitting potato chip crumbs out.

“First, don’t ask her with your mouth full,” Steve replied and rolled his eyes. “Dustin, swallow. Did you forget to eat lunch or something?”

“Actually, I didn’t get to eat it all. I had stopped by the school library to check a book out and ran late.”

“What book was that important?”

“Just something for the science fair. I wanted to do some more research.”

“Isn’t that why Mr. Clark was talking to Mike and Lucas - you’re doing all the work? Why are you looking for more?” Steve asked.

“Well...yeah but I still want to learn it. I think I have a cool idea that they’ll like but I kinda have to figure it out a bit more.”

“Dustin, group projects always suck because one person usually always does all the work. Believe me, I know. Don’t be that person.”

Both Will and Dustin stared at him until Dustin laughed. “You want me to believe you did all the work on your group projects?”

Steve raised his eyebrows and pretended to be shocked at the accusation. “What! No - I was the douche that stuck someone else with the work. I’ve learned my lesson - but I don't want to see you doing everything and Mike getting the credit.”

“Mike?” Will asked.

“Yeah - not Lucas?”

“Ok...honestly I think Lucas will come around. He’s too smart and nice to let you do all the work, even if his head is filled with...uh…”

“Max.” Dustin and Will said flatly at the same time, looking at each other. Suddenly they both
started laughing.

“I can’t believe you forgot her name. You only see her dipshit brother every day.”

“Yeah. I didn’t forget. Just didn’t want to...um...” Steve looked between Dustin and Will.

“Oh...OH!” Dustin exclaimed, obviously realizing what Steve meant. “Yeah...Will knows but like I’m over her. And you know I kind of have my eye on another lady,” Dustin said, waggling his eyebrows.

“Yeah...don’t do that again, please.”

“But I appreciate that you didn’t want to rub it in,” Dustin continued, right over Steve’s comment.

“So, uh, why do you think Mike would make him do the work,” Will asked softly.

“I know he’s your best friend and all - but honestly, I’ve noticed he’s kind of a dick. Has a tendency to do whatever he wants without thinking about others.”

“Really? He did a lot for me and for El,” Will said, apparently standing up for his friend and Steve admired that. He wasn't sure how to phrase what he wanted to say.

“I don’t mean...I think if it’s something he cares about very much - like you or El, he’d do anything. But I mean I think he can be very single-focused and anything not within that focus won’t get much of his attention. I think it might be a Wheeler trait, actually,” Steve sighed knowing he wasn’t getting his meaning across and he didn’t want to upset anyone.

“Just because you and Nancy aren’t together anymore doesn’t mean you should insult Mike,” Dustin said. “I know she hurt you but that’s not his fault.”

“What was that about not rubbing it in?” Steve muttered and then stood up. “Well, this has been awkward so why don't we just go get this over with then?”

“Should we clean up?” Will asked. He was the sweetest one of all of them.

“No. I’ll take care of it later. Come on. Let’s get your dancing shoes on,” Steve said and headed downstairs.

“No piano tonight, Steve!?” Dustin yelled after him.

“No! If you shitheads trip over your own feet, I don't want you falling into it. And besides, I can’t dance if I’m playing, can I?”

Once they got into the room and shoved the couch to the side, Steve had them watch his feet and he went through the basic box step.

“First - as guys, you will take the lead. For tonight’s purpose, that means you step forward first and the girl steps back. Start with your feet hip distance apart. In formal dancing, you hold your arms like this.” He put his left arm out straight to the side and pretended to hold a hand that wasn’t there, the right arm curved and hand held flat as if resting on his invisible partner’s back. “Whatever you do, do not let your arm slide too low on your partner.”

Both Dustin and Will giggled.

“Now, once your arms are in place, you don’t really need to think of them again. Just focus on your feet. Watch mine.”
He moved his left leg forward and landed softly on the ball of his foot. Then he brought his right up to match it, about a hip distance away, swiftly then bringing them together before stepping back with his right foot the same distance. The left foot moved back about a foot apart again and then moved his right foot so they were next to each other.

It was definitely harder to do it slowly without music. Thinking about it made it harder.

“That’s basically it. You just repeat those movements, g -r-a-c-e-f-u-l-l-y and within rhythm to the music.

“That sounds too easy,” Dustin said.

“Show us again,” Will said.

Steve demonstrated twice more, each time speeding up.

“That can’t be it?” Dustin said. “Where are all the fancy moves, the flare, the spice?”

“This is a middle school dance, Dustin. There will be no spice. To be honest, I doubt there would actually be a real waltz.” Steve laughed.

“You think we can’t get girls to dance with us?” Dustin seemed affronted and if that’s what Steve had meant, he wouldn’t blame him.

“That’s not what I mean. It’s just most girls don’t even do these dances. Truthfully, at best you’ll just hang off each other’s shoulders and sway. But we’re here so may as well teach you the real thing. You can spice it up on your own time. So if you think it’s easy, get up and show me.”

Both Will and Dustin stood and Steve sat.

“Aren’t you going to do it with us?” Will asked.

“Dustin thinks it’s easy. I want to see it. Just the box step.”

“At least do it once with us, Steve. Come on!” Dustin said.

“Ok.” Steve stood and turned his back to them. “Follow me,” He repeated the steps several times but had no idea if they were doing them. “Okay, show me,” he said.

It took everything in Steve not to laugh. Technically, they were doing the steps but they were both so rigid and STEP - STEP - STEP.

“Let’s try with some music,” he said after a minute. He had thought about this on the way home and determined what the most likely slow songs might be played at the dance. He figured maybe Time After Time. And, not that he’d tell anyone in his class, but yes, he had the She’s So Unusual Album. So he really enjoyed Girls Just Want to Have Fun and She-Bop (particularly after he learned what that was really about).

He put the needle onto Time After Time and Cyndi Lauper’s voice rang through the room. He started moving with it, letting the lyrics flow through him and trying not to think of Nancy, which was impossible.

“Lying in my bed, I hear the clock tick and think of you…”
WILL’S POV

It felt awkward just moving his feet in a big circle, but once the music started it seemed a little easier. He knew the song at least but he had never really thought about the lyrics before. It seemed a little too close to home to be comfortable.

“If you’re lost you can look and you will find me, time after time…”

Mike’s face appeared in his head. His friend did come to find him when he was lost. He knew Mike would again even if he was still wrapped up in El.

Will looked over to Dustin who seemed to be concentrating really hard. He wondered if Dustin really had someone he was interested in the way Mike was with El, the way Lucas was with Mike, the way Jonathan (and Steve before him) was with Nancy. And there was no one Will really thought of like that at all. The closest was Mike as his friend but he never really wanted to swap spit the way he saw Lucas and Max starting to do or how Jonathan and Nancy always seemed to. Holding hands maybe…

Suddenly Steve turned around and took Will’s hands like the way he demonstrated and Will almost stopped.

“Keep going. You’re leading,” Steve said as he practically dragged Will backwards with him. It was a bit overwhelming trying to follow Steve’s lead while trying to lead him. Will tried hard to think about the steps, but only managed to step on Steve’s feet. Steve started counting quietly 1,2,3 and 4 which helped but it felt stilted because he was too aware of Steve’s closeness. He felt safe. It felt nice.

“Stand on my feet for a second,” Steve finally said. Will felt like he was blushing three shades of red and was grateful the room wasn’t too brightly lit. It was still daylight, but the sun would go down soon and some of the low rays came in through the small basement windows near the ceiling, casting a warm glow in the room along with the lamps.

“If you fall, I will catch you. I will be waiting…:” Will wasn’t thinking of Mike now. Now he thought of how Steve protected them all.

Steve swirled him around for a bit until the song ended, but just as Steve was slowing, Dustin dropped the needle again and it restarted. “Hey, do that with me. I need to get this right,” Dustin said, grabbing Steve’s arm.

Steve laughed. “Ok - but take your shoes off first. At least Will remembered to take his off upstairs.”

Dustin kicked his sneakers off and Steve gracefully bowed and held out his hand, “May I have this dance, sir?” he said with a laugh.

Will could still feel the heat from Steve and suddenly missed that warmth as he watched Dustin get swirled around by Steve. He felt a shiver go up his neck. And looked up just as he saw a shadow go by the cellar window.

BILLY’S POV

It was early, he knew. He felt like he had to stop by. There’s seemed to be no movement in the
house, but he heard some kind of music. Wandering around into the backyard, he finally saw a light in the basement of all places. He could see Steve and the two kids moving around. It looked like Harrington was trying to teach the losers how to dance. He knew Max had that stupid dance coming up so he guessed that’s what was going on.

Honestly, the whole thing seemed creepy to him, the irony of him watching them did not escape him. He didn’t know why he seemed to want to keep an eye on Harrington. He tried to tell himself he was still worried about what had happened that night but then why just Harrington? Even if he acknowledged his own little...crush...it wasn’t like him to stalk - and yet it was like he was ordered to keep vigil on the man and couldn’t disobey orders.

The tinny sound echoed outside and he recognized the song from MTV. The video repeated endlessly sometimes. The song irritated him. He really wanted to hear Harrington play that piano again. Why couldn’t he have just done that?

Still, it was entertaining to watch. Not much else in the town was. He tried not to laugh when he saw Harrington pick up the tiny kid to dance. It was even harder not to laugh when the curly-haired doofus talked. He ducked quickly back when he saw little Byers turn towards the window. He didn’t think he had been seen. He didn’t want to be caught spying on them. The moment broke the hold on him though and suddenly he felt like he could leave.

“Watching through windows, you’re wondering if I’m ok.”

Chapter End Notes

OK - I know that was a really, really, really long wait for an update and it's only around 5,000 words so it doesn't seem fair. I'm not even sure I am that happy with this chapter. I wanted the dancing to be longer and more charming but it just wasn't flowing the way I wanted it to. I have been struggling with writing since I am still working (and grateful to be) but by the time I'm done with the day, I'm sick of my PC (and my own health issues - which includes some vision issues) so I get the frustration. I also apologize for not responding to comments in a timely fashion. I deeply appreciate them but I don't actually see them until I come in for an update as I don't tend to be logged in at any other time.

I will certainly try my best to be a little faster on the next update. Until then, stay safe out there.

I haven't given up on this story and generally know where it's going. This part of the story I think will wrap up in about 5-7 chapters as the action will ramp up after the Snow Ball.

End Notes
OK - hope that's a good start. I apologize up front for making Mike responsible for how they got Steve to go - but quite frankly he's the only one I could see doing something like that in his desperate need to get to EL. Let's face it, he tends to be a little too focused on her at the expense of others and himself. Next up - the time between the gate closing and the SnowBall as the new plot begins ever so slowly to build.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!