Panacea

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Panacea

by SeptSapphire

Summary

It’s been one month since the events at the Starcourt Mall. Billy’s still adjusting to having a seemingly-permanent Mind Flayer inside his head, not to mention navigating this still-new relationship he finds himself in with Steve, and the sudden overabundance of fourteen year olds in his life. But ultimately things aren’t so bad. Maybe he could be happy like this.

If only he could figure out where exactly he fits into this weird family group he finds himself rapidly becoming a part of.

Or: Billy slowly learns that yes, a family can be two dads, their six adopted kids, a cool aunt, his new mom and dad, and the inter-dimensional Mind Flayer in his head.

Notes

This fic is a sequel, and will make the most sense having read Toxicant. That said, if you’re starting here, here’s a quick recap: Billy and his Mind Flayer (lovingly dubbed ‘Mind Fucker’) are more similar to Eddy Brock and Venom, and Mind Fucker ends up helping him out. There’s another Mind Flayer, which is the one in Will in s2, which instead takes
over Heather. Toxicant ends with both Billy and Hopper alive, and Harringrove as an established (if secret, except to Robin) pairing.
August in Hawkins, Indiana was a fucking nightmare.

If Billy thought the winters being cold enough to freeze his dick off was bad, he was entirely unprepared for the thick, humid air that practically defined late August. He’d assumed Hawkins wouldn’t even come close to the heat of the sunny beaches of California, and maybe that would have been true and he would have actually enjoyed the weather, if it hadn’t been for a certain heat-sensitive interdimensional asshole making the summer sun completely unbearable.

If there was one good thing about crashing at Steve’s place though (and to be sure, there were many, many good things), it was his pool. Hawkins’ community pool was fine, if you were a fan of crowds and screaming children and uncomfortably horny forty year old mothers, but Billy much preferred having an entire pool to himself to beat the heat. Plus he didn’t have to get the stink-eye from his old co-workers, who were still not thrilled he had not only pulled that disappearing stunt for a few days but also decided spending eight hour shifts out in the sun was no longer his idea of a fun time.

Unfortunately, at the given moment, Steve’s pool was not free of crowds or screaming children, though horny mothers had thankfully been left out of the scenario. Steve had called it an end of summer party, which was ridiculous because it was still August, and he had seen fit to invite everyone involved in the Starcourt incident. Which meant Billy was balancing his time between avoiding the brats, who generally only sought him out when they wanted something that Steve wouldn’t do, and avoiding basically everyone else because he really didn’t know what to say to them.

Well, everyone else except Robin, who was lounged next to him in a pool chair shifted slightly further into the sun, looking about as mystified by the activity in Steve’s backyard as Billy felt. It was almost surreal to see so many people back here when most days it went practically unused. The kids were over every few days or so, and Robin swung by once a week when her and Steve’s shifts ended at the same time, but mostly it was just Steve and Billy.

Hell, Billy had been living with Steve for a little over a month, and he still hadn’t even met Steve’s parents. Which was just as well, considering he wasn’t exactly looking forward to seeing if Steve’s bullshit excuse of ‘we’re roommates, see how financially responsible I’m being mom and dad’ held water. If he was a better boyfriend, he might have had the balls to ask about why Steve’s parents were never here. As it was, he didn’t know how to broach the silence Steve generally held concerning his parents, and he’d heard the old saying about people who lived in glass houses and didn’t want to open that particular can of worms.

Possibly noticing his shift to broodiness, Robin gave him a gentle shove with her elbow and peered over the top of her sunglasses at him. “You alright over there Hargrove? Didn’t know you could be quiet for this long.”

He huffed an easy laugh. “That’s rich, coming from you.” Billy and Robin had become fast friends, much to Steve’s chagrin when they teamed up to lob loving insults at him. He was comfortable with her, in a way that he could only be with someone who knew. It was probably this comfort that led him to broach the subject that had been occupying his head. “S’just strange to see so many people here. I mean, it’s usually just me and Steve.”
“Hey,” Mind Fucker grumbled in his head.

“And Mind Fucker,” he amended belatedly. He still felt a little odd remembering the passenger in his head. Everyone here knew about Mind Fucker of course, but there was a wide variety of opinions on whether the guy sticking around after the Starcourt incident was a good thing or not, ranging from ‘well he helped you save my ass a few times so he’s pretty okay’ to ‘kill it with fire’. Mind Fucker, of course, couldn’t care less what any of them thought about him. Billy was a little jealous of that level of self-confidence.

Robin nodded her head thoughtfully. “It’s definitely different,” she agreed, watching the kids in the pool. Mike was trying to teach El to swim while Max and Lucas looked like they were attempting to drown each other. Will sat on the pool’s edge with his feet dangling in the water, laughing at something Mike had said. “Plus I still feel weird in Steve’s house. His parents’ decorating style trends towards excessively fancy and breakable. They’d probably throw a fit if they saw all this.”

Among other things they’d almost certainly throw a fit about if they knew. Billy agreed with a grunt – despite having Max drop off the rest of the shit he’d left in his old bedroom, he still didn’t really feel like this was where he lived now, even with all Steve’s efforts to convince him he was totally welcome. He still thought of it as Steve’s house, and Steve’s stuff or Steve’s parents’ stuff; maybe it had something to do with how much had changed so quickly for him, and how they hadn’t even really been properly dating when Steve had extended the offer to cohabitate, but it still felt unreal. Like one day Steve was going to bust his ass for freeloading and he’d end up back on Neil’s doorstep.

The slap of wet feet against concrete was his only warning before Dustin’s mop of curly hair, damp and flattened against his head from the pool, was leaning over him and dripping stray beads of water onto his chest. “Billy, can you ask Steve to get the cheesy bread when he orders the pizza? El said Hopper never gets it for her and Mike’s insisting she has to try it now. Plus I want cheesy bread too.”

Billy shoved the kid backwards a step with an annoyed huff. “Could you drip somewhere else?” he groused, even as he pushed himself up from his chair in the shade. “Why can’t you ask Steve yourself?”

“Because Steve listens to you.” Dustin looked a little put-out about that admission, so Billy smothered the pleased grin that threatened to show itself. Dustin had, a little surprisingly to Billy, seemed to warm up to him pretty quickly after the Russian lab incident. Almost dying together seemed to be a great catalyst for the approval of fourteen year olds, if Billy’s and Steve’s experiences were anything to go by. The only time Dustin got a little defensive was when he thought Billy was encroaching on his friendship with Steve. Little did he know…

“Alright, but stay the fuck out of my chair.” He headed towards the house, feeling his lips creep up into a smile anyways now that he was mostly out of sight. He didn’t even mind when he spotted Dustin stealing his chair in the reflection of the sliding glass door. Almost. He wasn’t a saint.

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He made his way into the kitchen, where Steve was helping Joyce cut up vegetables for a salad. “Harrington, the twerps want you to get cheesy bread,” he called in lieu of a greeting, propping a hip against the kitchen counter.

”I also desire this cheesy bread.”

“Mind Fucker wants it too,” Billy added, because it seemed rude not to, even if he was pretty sure
Steve didn’t need the extra convincing.

Steve’s face twisted in annoyance that Billy knew was all show, even as he kept half his focus on the cucumber he was dicing so as not to lose a finger. “Jesus, what am I, made out of money? Don’t answer that,” he said to Billy’s pointed look around the house. He lifted the cutting board, scraping the cucumber pieces into the salad, and Billy’s stomach flipped with the pleasant domesticity of it all. A year ago – hell, a month ago – he never would have thought he could have this. There was something infinitely gratifying about seeing it now. “Yeah, alright, cheesy bread. Got it.”

Joyce thanked him for the help as she gave the salad a final stir and took it outside, leaving the two of them alone in the kitchen. Steve immediately crowded Billy against the countertop, grinning into a kiss. “Missed you,” he whispered against Billy’s lips.

“You have me to yourself all the time. I live here,” Billy said, a little incredulous.

“Missed you anyways,” Steve insisted, kissing Billy once more before pulling back to snatch the phone from the wall cradle and order the pizza. Billy watched him for a beat, knowing he was smiling like an idiot, until Steve waved him off with an embarrassed little hand. He wandered back outside, figuring he’d given Dustin long enough and he should probably reclaim his chair now if he had any hope of getting it back, but before he could do much more than open the door he spotted Nancy headed his way.

She didn’t look half as surprised as he did, which didn’t bode well for Billy’s chances of slipping away. He’d been largely avoiding everyone, but Nancy and Jonathan in particular, as he got the sense they were probably still the most displeased with his continued presence in their little group. Steve had shrugged when he’d mentioned it offhandedly one night, telling him that they hadn’t been so keen on Steve himself finding out about the Upside Down initially, and reasoning that they’d warm up to him eventually, but somehow Billy doubted it. Nancy, despite her insistence that what she’d had with Steve was all “bullshit,” still obviously cared about him a lot, as a friend if not romantically. And Billy wasn’t going to begrudge her that – he wasn’t unaware of the charms of Steve Harrington. He just wished all that protective concern didn’t manifest in suspicious glares and disapproval of Steve’s choice in roommates.

If she knew the truth, Billy imagined she’d be even less amenable to the idea, hard as that was to picture sometimes.

“Billy, can we talk?” she asked, and perfect, that was just what he’d been hoping she wouldn’t say. He shrugged casually and followed her as she led the way around the side of the house, probably so that when she killed him no one would have to say they’d been a witness.

“Listen,” she began in a tone that made Billy think to himself oh boy, “I’m not going to lie. I want Steve to be safe, and I just… don’t trust you.”

Billy bristled. He’d been living here for a month, if he was going to fuck Steve over, he would have done it long before now.

He opened his mouth to say as much, but she spoke again before he could. “But,” she said, hard and flat, then paused again. She glanced at the house, as if she could see Steve through the wall.

“But,” Billy prompted, absently noting that yet another conversation with Nancy was about to ultimately amount to him saying barely two words. It was sort of their rhythm by now.

Nancy frowned, like she was trying to puzzle something out, and wasn’t certain how she felt about
her results. “He’s been happier recently,” she said, like it bothered her to admit. “Like he hasn’t been since all this Upside Down stuff started. Maybe not being alone in this big stupid house is doing him some good.”

Billy thought to ask her about Steve’s parents, since surely if anyone had met them it had to be her, and either way she clearly knew the house was usually empty. So this last month hadn’t just been a one-off occurrence. But by the time he’d worked up the nerve to prolong his conversation with Nancy she was already giving him a decisive nod and walking away, and he couldn’t quite convince himself to call her back.

Later, when the pizza had arrived and Mind Fucker was sorting cheesy bread into his running hierarchy of human foods (far above salad, a bit above the pizza but not even in the same league as ice cream), Billy found himself cornered again, this time by Joyce and Hopper. Well, not cornered. He could leave at any time really. But he knew that disappointed look Steve would give him if he didn’t at least try to be civil. It really wasn’t ideal – Joyce’s attempts to mother him like she did with Steve usually left him feeling off-balance, and Billy was still shit at dealing with authority so most of his conversations with Hopper ended around when he tried to take an ‘I’m in charge’ tone that made Billy bristle on instinct.

At least the chief didn’t seem to be in one of those moods today. Hopper stood leaning against the fence, one hand holding a can of beer and the other swinging at his side, brushing the back of Joyce’s with every third pass. Billy had heard they were dating now, but for such an acceptable, straight couple, they had a weird tendency to still keep the relationship subtle. Billy knew if he could, he would have been all over Steve right now, not barely brushing hands with him. Maybe it was for the kids’ sakes – it had to be weird for them to think about, let alone see.

“Can I ask you a question, kid?” Hopper asked him. Billy frowned a little at ‘kid,’ but didn’t voice his annoyance; he doubted it would have done much to deter him from saying it. Billy’s eyes subconsciously flicked to where Steve stood at the edge of his pool, preoccupied with bitching at the kids to not get any pizza grease in the water. No rescue there, then.

“Ask away,” he said instead, slapping an easygoing grin on his face that sat at odds with the tension in his body.

“That thing inside you, MF or whatever the kids are calling it-” right, the kids had abbreviated Mind Fucker to MF around their parents, which was just as well because Billy did not want to be on the receiving end of Hopper hearing his daughter say fuck, “-are you sure it’s… safe?”

"If I were you, I would be less concerned about the children’s safety and more about your own. Calling me a thing!” Mind Fucker huffed, offended. Billy wasn’t repeating that, true as it may have been. Mind Fucker seemed to actually like the kids, despite how unendingly obnoxious they were all the time. Which was more than Billy could say about himself.

“He’s fine,” Billy said instead, feeling the strain of his smile. “Nothing to worry about here.”

Joyce attempted to save him the trouble. “Hop,” she chastised gently. “I’ll admit I wasn’t sure what to think about having another one of those Mind Flayers around, not after what the last one did. Not after Will…” Her gaze grew a little shadowed, but as soon as it had come it was gone again. “But MF and Billy protected the kids. So if he’s sticking around, then I’m okay with that.” Hopper didn’t look like he quite agreed, but if he had any arguments, he chose to just take a sip of his beer instead.
For a second of panic Billy wanted to shake her, wanted to panic and ask how she could be so sure when Billy himself didn’t even know, remind her that he was dangerous, he’d hurt Steve who was practically her surrogate son and he’d threatened the kids and he wasn’t a good person like she seemed to think and how could she look at him like that when she knew what he’d done? He far preferred Hopper’s cool, judging gazes; as least he was used to that. He crossed his arms instead, gaze skittering away, and he almost missed El approaching them until she was right there.

El tugged at the edge of Hopper’s shirt, putting on the big puppy eyes and asking, “Watch me swim?”

The kid was a natural. All the stiffness left Hopper immediately, replaced by a smile and a “Sure, kiddo,” and before Billy knew it Hopper and Joyce were headed towards the pool and El was tossing a secret smile over her shoulder at him. El was… hard for him to understand sometimes, especially when she did things like that, going out of her way to help him like they’d done more than survive a really shitty night at the mall together. He felt like he barely knew her, yet she could look at him and see right through him. It gave him and Mind Fucker the creeps, honestly.

Still, he couldn’t bring himself to be anything but thankful as she led Hopper and Joyce away.

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The party had stretched long into the evening, but finally everyone had said their goodbyes and headed home, leaving Billy and Steve to take one look at the strewn solo cups and pool floats, shrug, and decide cleanup was a problem for tomorrow. They settled on the couch, leaned against each other while some made for TV movie neither of them were paying attention to played in the background.

”How sweet. You are cuddling.” Mind Fucker’s voice was saccharine and teasing.

“We are not cuddling,” Billy grumbled back, ignoring the amused twitch of Steve’s lips. Sure, Steve had his head leaned against Billy’s shoulder, and Billy had slung an arm around Steve’s middle. But that didn’t make it cuddling. Billy Hargrove didn’t cuddle, a fact which neither Steve nor Mind Fucker seemed inclined to learn any time soon.

“Tell me about California?” Steve asked, voice barely loud enough to be heard over the movie. He’d asked before, dozens of times – sometimes as they were screwing around in the kitchen making dinner, others when the kids were playing their nerd shit downstairs, and every once and a while soft and quiet, like this. Billy didn’t mind; he liked talking about California. Hell, maybe Steve knew that. Maybe that was why he asked so often.

The corners of Billy’s mouth lifted in a grin. “It was gorgeous,” he said, thinking of summer sun and surfing and crashing waves, “hot like you wouldn’t believe, but with just the right wind coming in over the ocean. The sand on the beaches stretched out for miles.” He glanced back at Steve, who listened with a content little smile. And then, because he knew he could, he added, “and the girls…”

Steve laughed, elbowed him in the ribs with no force behind the movement. “Shut it, asshole.” He draped his arm more firmly across Billy’s chest. “You know I’m prettier than any California girl.”

Billy’s laugh was caustic but his smile was genuine. “Yeah, you sure are.” Steve’s cheeks, illuminated by the light from the TV, took on a soft flush.

They continued ignoring the movie for a while, and Billy felt his eyes half-closing as their conversation slowly lapsed into longer and longer pauses. Steve was limp and boneless against his
side, and Billy was struck with the sense-memory of Steve when he’d been drugged and had thrown himself over Billy in the back of the motorized cart in the Russian lab. It was weird to think that anything good had come out of that lab, but seeing Steve like this, not-cuddling with him like a big sissy while fully sober, Billy couldn’t bring himself to regret getting stuck down there either.

Eventually their subdued conversation worked back around to the pool party. Billy had just finished mentioning how he’d fumbled his way through a conversation with Hopper until El had come to his rescue.

“See, El likes you already. They’ll be all over you in no time,” Steve promised. “Trust me, before you know it you’ll be ferrying the kids around and helping Joyce put out kitchen fires – that woman is so amazing but cooking is not one of her strong suits.”

Billy considered the soft smile in Steve’s tone as he talked about Joyce and the little brats, and again thought about mentioning Steve’s parents, but didn’t want to disturb that warm, easy affection. Steve gave it out so easily – to the kids, to Nancy after all that had gone down between them, hell, to Billy. Steve seemed convinced that Billy would be the same way given time, but he just didn’t think he was cut out for this family shit.

For now, he just let himself be happy he had Steve.

Chapter End Notes

Steve: We’re roommates
The entire party: Oh my god they’re roommates

I’m rested and recharged and excited to start writing again! If you read Toxicant and you’re sticking with this as well, huge hugs from me to you <3 Updates should be fairly frequent, though I can’t promise quite as fast as Toxicant updated (I’m high-key looking for a job rn so that may slow things down).

Also. Me doing actual thematic set-up?? Who's this bitch I don't know her
Of all the places in town Robin and Steve’s admittedly limited resumes might have qualified them to work at, Family Video wasn’t such a bad choice. Sure, it was boring and customers were shitty, like every other retail job Robin had ever had, and three bucks an hour was hardly enough money to be worth the time she spent in it. But it was inside and air conditioned and enough cute girls came in to rent movies that she could pretend she had half a chance with any of them.

Plus she got to watch Steve and Billy fumble around not-quite-flirting with each other in public. So there was certainly entertainment.

Billy didn’t drop by every day, usually just on especially busy days at the repair shop, where the promise of peace and quiet led him to take his lunch break at Family Video. Steve seemed to have some sort of ESP where Billy was concerned, because around noon always on the right days he’d have this dorky little smile on his face a good half hour before Billy even showed up. Jesus, how had she ever been tricked into thinking he was cool in high school when he was so clearly a total dingus?

Keith seemed to be of the same mindset, though he obviously hadn’t made the same connection between the behavior and Billy’s appearances. He and Robin were ostensibly stocking shelves, but Robin kept stifling laughter every time Billy interjected some absolutely ridiculous innuendo or Steve clearly had no idea what movie Billy was attempting to reference, and Keith kept glancing over at them, so not a ton of shelf shocking was getting done between the two of them.

“You know, when you said I should hire Harrington, I did it because you said he’d bring in girls. Billy Hargrove is not a girl,” Keith groused, dropping the pretense of working. It wasn’t really a fair complaint, and they both knew it; Steve had certainly unknowingly held up his end of the bargain, and plenty of girls still came by the store to ogle Steve now that he wasn’t wearing a sailor suit, if they didn’t come to catch a glance of Billy too. And clearly Steve wasn’t going to take any of those girls up on their offers, as he was a little preoccupied. Keith was probably just grumpy that despite the increase in female clientele, that didn’t mean the women who came in were looking to flirt with Keith.

Well, she hadn’t technically promised him that anyway. So there.

“Since when are those two even friends,” Keith continued, “wasn’t Hargrove always fucking with him?” Robin raised an eyebrow. She hadn’t known Keith had been so invested in Hawkins High’s celebrity gossip, especially when he spent the whole time Billy was in the store hiding from his notice.

Robin couldn’t exactly say Russians, but she deflected with something equally truthful. “Guess they’ve changed since high school.” She stacked copies of Ghostbusters together on the shelf. “You have to admit, Steve’s not the idiot douchebag he was two years ago.”

Keith gave a dismissive grimace, but still seemed to consider her point. He glanced over at Steve and Billy again. “Less of a douchebag, maybe. More of an idiot.”

Robin was about to defend her friend, because maybe Steve was a dingus but he was her dingus and only she got to say that, but when she followed Keith’s gaze she saw Billy was playing keep-
away and raising a tape high in the air with his elbow resting on the top of Steve’s head, and Steve was yelping something about messing up his hair as a flailing arm scrabbled ineffectually for the tape, and there wasn’t much she could say to defend *that*.

“Hey dinguses!” she called, a little gratified when they both turned to look at her. Steve looked a little embarrassed, while Billy was entirely unrepentant. “You break anything over there and it’s coming out of your paycheck. And I *know* you can’t afford that because you’re still buying Erica ice cream.” Steve rolled his eyes at the reminder, but flashed a begrudging smile at her anyway.

“I can’t believe you just called Billy Hargrove a *dingus*.” Keith was gaping at her a little bit.

“Huh? Oh yeah, we’re cool.” It was a little hard to see Billy as particularly threatening anymore, despite knowing far better than Keith how dangerous he could actually be with Mind Fucker. She’d just seen him look at Steve like a complete sap one too many times. Keith looked completely enraptured by her casual dismissal of her own awesomeness. Internally she grimaced. She *really* didn’t want to experience the clusterfuck that would be turning down her boss at a shitty VHS store.

Thankfully Keith saved her the trouble, at least for today. “Badass,” he said instead, returning to stocking shelves, and Robin thought of Russian codes and sneaking through secret bases and interrogations and wondered how *this* was the way in which her badassery was acknowledged.

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Billy hummed along with the radio as he pulled out of the Family Video parking lot, fingers drumming out the rhythm as he coasted back to the repair shop. He’d only gotten the job a week or two ago, when he’d gone a little too stir crazy in the house while Steve was at work all day and figured things had gone back to as normal as they were ever going to be and it was about time he quit freeloading. He liked it well enough for the most part. The shop usually had the AC blasting to combat the smell of sweat the mechanics would otherwise produce, so he didn’t have to worry much about running hotter than the other guys, and he got nice half hour lunch breaks he could take to visit Steve when he wanted.

He’d worked on cars a few times back in California, mostly his own but every once in a while someone else’s; he’d done Susan’s timing belt, been the go-to guy for oil changes for his friends, mostly minor shit, but in a town like Hawkins where there wasn’t much competition it was enough experience to get his foot in the door. It wasn’t a career or anything he thought he’d be doing for the rest of his life, but for now it was nice to actually fix shit rather than breaking it, and feel like there was at least one constant in his life right now.

His car swung back into the lot with two minutes to spare, and he fought the urge to fill those two minutes with a quick smoke. He’d been a much bigger smoker a mere month ago, but Mind Fucker bitched about the taste and ultimately he was a lot less stressed nowadays than he had been under Neil’s roof so he didn’t find himself hunting for his cigarettes quite as often. Stifling the lingering urge, he headed inside, figuring that he’d trade his last two minutes of free time for the air conditioning.

As he entered the shop he felt eyes on him instantly, quickly followed by the usual ribbing from Tony after he came back from his lunch breaks. “Hey, there he is!” Tony called out, emerging from the underbelly of a car and wiping grease off his fingers. “Lookin pleased as punch, you see your girlfriend again Hargrove?”

It wasn’t the first time they’d asked. Billy was always in a better mood after seeing Steve (which wasn’t hard, considering he usually started the day in a pretty shitty one), and the guys at the shop
had pretty quickly latched on to the idea that when he left for lunch it was to see some chick. Not
that Billy was going to correct them, of course – he liked the guys well enough, but he had no
disillusions about what their response would be to the truth.

“Yeah, your mom said hi,” Billy snarked back without missing a beat, to howls from the other
guys and a good-natured middle finger from Tony himself.

“Watch your mouth, tough guy,” Tony laughed. “Hey, that Corvette that got in a wreck is finally
patched up the best we could do. Owner’s gonna drop by soon to get it – I hear she’s hot stuff
herself. Don’t let your girl see you with her.”

Billy couldn’t believe the thing hadn’t been scrapped. Whatever had hit that car had gotten it pretty
damn good; the side had been crumpled in and the engine sputtered a slow death rattle, or at least it
had before fixing. Though he figured he should be grateful someone had wanted to keep that thing
around, since the mechanics had been in the middle of fixing it when he’d come looking for a job
and knew they could use an extra set of hands to take care of other jobs that came in.

At least, Billy was feeling grateful, until an hour rolled by and he caught sight of just whose car it
had been. Standing at the front of the shop, talking to Tony too far away for him to hear, was
Heather. Billy immediately cursed himself for being an idiot and not recognizing the car – hell, not
recognizing the damage he and Steve had been the ones to do.

He hadn’t seen Heather since that night at the mall, and seeing her now made him stiffen and
something like fear pool in his gut. "It’s just the girl,” Mind Fucker reminded him, "the Mind
Flayer inside her is gone.” He was embarrassingly thankful for the reassurance; he hadn’t been
actively thinking about that night at Starcourt or anything, but it was, understandably he thought,
hard to put the sight of his coworker trying to feed him to a three story tall flesh monster out of his
mind. For the most part, Heather looked okay now, better than he had expected even. The dark
veins of rot that had shown through her skin when she was possessed were no longer visible, even
if she’d gotten a little paler than Billy remembered her from the pool. She seemed comfortable
enough talking to Tony too, but when her gaze flicked over and caught Billy’s, there was
something changed in her eyes, something dark and deep-set that he recognized from the Byers kid
on off days.

Tony left to grab the Corvette’s keys, and Billy was content to leave Heather alone, but she didn’t
seem content to do the same. Actually, the determined look in her eyes as she approached reminded
him a little bit of Nancy at the pool party, and wasn’t that a scary thought. But once she got to him
she didn’t say anything for a beat. She just watched him, before offering a quiet, uncertain, “Hey.”

“Hey.” Billy’s grease-flecked hand drummed against his jeans, twitching with nervous energy. It
was hard to look at Heather, unnaturally subdued, and see what the Mind Flayer had made her
barely a month ago; it was even harder to see his old coworker, all perfect confidence and winning
smile. Yet the two versions were there in his mind, like shitty copies of the girl that stood in front
of him now, quiet, waiting. “Are you, uh, are you okay?”

She smiled a little, a pained twist of her lips. “Not really,” she admitted, raising a hand to grip the
opposite arm. “But it’s… better. Getting better, at least.”

Billy nodded, not entirely sure how to respond. Because even though they’d both had Mind Flayers
inside of them, Mind Fucker hadn’t possessed him like Heather, hadn’t taken control for longer
than a few minutes and even that had scared the shit out of Billy. He couldn’t imagine the fucking
nightmare that being stuck inside your own body, powerless, for days while you watched people
die in front of you, because of you, would have been. Selfishly, he didn’t want to imagine it.
“That’s… good,” he settled on, and felt like a jackass even as he said it. Talking with Heather used to be so easy, so casual because he could grin and flirt and know it would never go anywhere and there was nothing serious about being a damn public pool lifeguard, but all the ease between them had been swallowed up by monsters and Upside Down dimensions.

Tony brought the keys back out and gave Billy a not-so-covert eyebrow waggle which he rolled his eyes at and ignored. Jesus, wasn’t the guy convinced he had a girlfriend anyway? He really should not be encouraging Billy to flirt with other chicks. Not that Tony knew what the fuck he was talking about anyway.

Despite his mild resentment, when Heather took her keys and her car and left the shop without another glance back, Billy still mentally thanked Tony for the interruption.

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“I just don’t get it, you know? Why wouldn’t he tell us?”

Nancy knew by the look Jonathan gave her in response that he wasn’t nearly as invested in the question as she was. But he hadn’t been interested in the rats either until they’d watched one literally explode, so clearly Jonathan’s interest was not a flawless indicator of how concerned she should be.

“I don’t know Nance,” Jonathan sighed from the Byers’ living room couch, watching her pace a little bemusedly. “For Steve to be seeing someone and keep it a secret? It just doesn’t seem like his style.”

Well, that was true at least. When she’d been dating Steve, she was sure half the school had known day one – hell, they’d probably known weeks in advance. Steve wasn’t the most subtle guy out there, or at least he hadn’t been. But they’d all gotten better at hiding things since the Upside Down entered their lives. And she knew how Steve looked when he was in love. She wasn’t wrong. She just had to figure out why in the world Steve had decided it wasn’t public knowledge.

…And it didn’t escape her how odd it was that she was talking to her current boyfriend about her ex-boyfriend’s love life. Maybe she shouldn’t be so invested in it; after all, Steve wasn’t her boyfriend anymore, hadn’t been for a while, so was it really her business to know anyway? But it was just… strange. Strange that after all their group had been through together that Steve of all people could be keeping a secret.

“I don’t know,” she sighed, finally flopping down into the armchair and worrying at her lower lip. “But I know what I saw. I just don’t understand it.” Who would it even be? That Robin girl seemed friendly enough with Steve, but when Nancy had mentioned it in passing to Steve he’d looked caught off-guard and fumbled out an awkward refusal. His startled look at her question was a little suspicious, but what reason would he have had to hide that he and Robin were dating? Or even that he liked her? Steve Harrington, known all across Hawkins High as a relentless flirt, had certainly never been shy around girls before, and anyone could understand how surviving near-certain death with someone might lead to more romantic feelings. Hell, it had worked for her and Jonathan.

Besides Robin and Billy, Steve hadn’t exactly been around anyone different than usual. Was it someone she didn’t know then? But if so, why had she never seen them around? The possibilities made Nancy’s head spin a little, but also filled her with the sort of invigoration she’d felt when she’d gotten the initial call from Mrs. Driscoll.

So she loved mysteries. Sue her, okay? In a town like Hawkins, she could appreciate a mystery where the solution didn’t involve putting herself in mortal peril or having her worldview
irrevocably altered for once. And she still felt guilty for how things had ended with Steve, and she was sure that if she understood what was going on she could help. And then maybe she could stop remembering how Steve’s smile had looked so brittle when he’d seen her with Jonathan that first time, because he’d have someone better for him this time around, a girl who really loved him back.

Plus, after the mess at Hawkins Post, maybe she was just dying for something to investigate again. Maybe. Nancy had never been able to resist a good puzzle. And one way or another she was sure she’d get to the bottom of things.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were curious what Billy and Steve’s conversation in the VHS store was…

Billy: is that a lightsaber in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?
Steve: a lightwhat

I was so close to having Billy quote Rocky Horror in this chapter but then I considered the likelihood that Billy could have realistically gotten away with seeing that movie at any point while living with Neil and decided against it. Don’t worry, I’m sure he and Steve watch it at some point.

Also, I'm headed on a weekend trip, so I may be a bit slower than usual with replies/the next chapter. Never fear though, it is certainly coming ^^

Also also! (Unrelated to this series) I'm interested in doing this year's Harringrove Big Bang but I'm not quite sure what I want to write, so I've taken to popular fic tropes for inspiration, especially those I haven't really read in Stranger Things/Harringrove fics before. I set up a little strawpoll with some of the tropes I'm considering, leaning towards the more unusual ones so I don't repeat anybody's work. It would help me out a ton to know what people might be interested in reading! I can't guarantee I'll pick the winner, but I think I could get a pretty good plot out of any of those options, so it's pretty likely that whatever's popular is what I'll end up doing.
Steve was standing in the center of the Starcourt Mall, and Billy was about to die.

They’d run out of fireworks, and Billy was standing over El with something horribly resigned in his eyes as the Mind Flayer towered over him, and Steve had scrambled down the flight of stairs but it wasn’t enough, he wasn’t fast enough to get there, he wasn’t moving at all.

His hands were empty, he knew he should have his bat with him but he didn’t, he just felt its absence like a phantom limb. He didn’t have anything to fend the Mind Flayer off with, nothing but his own body, and he would gladly take Billy’s place, God he would, but he wasn’t moving and he couldn’t do anything but struggle and watch as the Mind Flayer’s clawed limbs flew towards Billy.

Steve shot up in bed, eyes wide and unseeing and breath coming in short pants. The room around him was dark, darker than the Starcourt Mall had been but not as dark as the black blood that had leaked out of Billy, and oh God, Billy was-

Billy was currently fisting a hand in Steve’s shirt and asking him something with wide eyes, and shit, Steve should probably be listening but he couldn’t calm down, he couldn’t get a breath in and there was a dull buzzing noise that drowned out everything but the point of contact of Billy’s hand in his shirt.

Slowly the buzzing faded, and Steve’s breaths got a little less ragged around the edges, and he could actually hear what Billy was saying. “-okay, it’s alright, just a nightmare, Steve c’mon you’re scaring the shit out of me-”

Steve swallowed thickly before answering. “M’okay,” he finally forced out once his breathing calmed to something reasonable. Steve raised a trembling arm to grasp at Billy’s hand, pressing it a little closer against his chest. “Nightmare?” he asked in a voice that sounded distressingly thin to his own ears.

Steve didn’t know what he wanted. It should have been easy to talk about, hell, Billy had already seen the embarrassing panic so the explanation shouldn’t have been much harder, but he and Billy didn’t do this, not really, not often. They’d only been dating for a month, and things had still felt a little casual, easy, or at least as easy as secretly dating a guy in Hawkins could be. Sure, they’d seen some shit together, but ‘emotional vulnerability’ wasn’t really either of their strong suits. Not that they couldn’t see right through each other anyway; Steve knew Billy always got a little cagey when parents came up in a conversation, and Steve wasn’t exactly looking forward to whenever Billy really questioned where the hell Steve’s parents were, just like Billy probably hoped Steve had forgotten about old bruises that looked more suspicious in retrospect than they had at the time. But it was the pretense of the thing – they each pretended the other didn’t know what they clearly knew, because damn it, it had only been a month and he didn’t know if he was ready to admit how much watching Billy die in a dream fucking terrified him.

But Billy had asked, even if he had looked a little like he didn’t want to. He’d asked, and Steve
thought that if he didn’t say anything he’d just shake apart at the seams, so he forced himself to answer. “We were in the Starcourt Mall. And you… I didn’t have the bat. I couldn’t get to you.” Steve met his eyes, if only so Billy knew what he meant without him having to say it, and everything trapped there wouldn’t spill out at once and wash him away in the tide.

Billy’s hand tightened in Steve’s shirt, as the other came up to wrap around his shoulders, and Steve noted distantly that Billy had been hesitant to touch him further until Steve had explained the dream, but he appreciated the grounding contact now. “Just a nightmare,” Billy repeated, “I’m okay. Honest. I had a raincheck to cash in, remember?” A bare smile crossed Billy’s face at ‘raincheck,’ like a secret code they’d unknowingly written.

Billy tipped his head to the side, like a dog listening to a whistle above human range. “And Mind Fucker said I am, his words not mine, ‘too much of a stubborn jackass to die, which you should know by now.’ So it looks like you’re stuck with me.”

Despite himself, Steve laughed a little, just out of relief that his own blind panic hadn’t fucked things up. They were still okay, and maybe if they each had things they weren’t saying it was alright because someday they’d be able to say them.

He didn’t think he’d be able to fall back asleep tonight, but laying there in the darkness with Billy leaned against him, alive and whole, that was okay too.

~~

Steve was usually happy to have babysitting duty. Even though the kids were old enough that they could really be left alone now, he knew Hopper never really liked to leave El without one of them around, and Joyce still got a strained look in her eyes thinking about Will going off on his own. If he could let the brats play their B&B nerd game or whatever it was called in his living room and keep half an eye on them while remaining relatively free in the meantime, then he was glad to help. Usually, at least.

Today was a rare mid-week day off from Family Video, and while hanging out with the kids was typically just as good of a use of his time as anything else, his shitty sleep after last night’s nightmare wasn’t doing him any favors in the temperament department. He’d left the kids to their own devices, despite Dustin’s whining, and figured maybe the echoes of voices in the house might let him get in a short nap, but the voices downstairs kept turning to shouting and all it was doing was giving Steve a damn headache.

Resigning himself to an afternoon of caffeinated struggle, Steve tossed the comforter off himself in a dramatic huff that no one was present to witness and ran a hand through his pillow-flattened hair. He was gonna kill those kids. Or at least have a strongly-worded discussion with them about volume levels. Same difference.

Before he could do much more than rise from the bed, he heard a set of footsteps coming upstairs. He rolled his eyes, figuring it was Dustin coming to drag him downstairs so he could mediate whatever dispute had interrupted the game, but the knocking on his bedroom door sounded a lot more subdued and polite than Dustin’s. Just as he suspected, when he swung the door open the kid on the other side was not Dustin but Will.

It was a little weird to see Will looking so annoyed, to be honest. Steve was used to his quiet periods, and he was getting more used to seeing him energetically putting on some ‘campaign’ for the rest of the nerds, but annoyance and frustration was something Steve had almost doubted he’d
ever see Will express, as stupid as that sounded. So whatever argument the kids had been having must have escalated quite a bit.

“Taking a break?” Steve offered when Will didn’t speak.

Will nodded quickly. “They’re talking to their girlfriends,” he explained with a touch of bitterness, and Steve thought oh, okay, things were starting to make sense now. “Who are apparently more important than D&D now. It’s like they’re sacrificing the Party for… for girls! And I like Max and El, sure, but not like Mike and Lucas like them, and now Dustin has Suzy and then there’s just… me.”

Steve was pretty sure this was the most Will had ever said to him at once without prompting. Poor kid must have been pretty worked up about everything. Admittedly it wasn’t a position Steve was too familiar with, since he’d probably been the one sneaking off with girls at Will’s age, but feeling like he was getting left behind? Yeah, Steve could relate to that one.

Will continued, “Jonathan has Nancy now,” and he cast a little guilty look at Steve but powered through, “and even Hopper’s dating my mom!” And yeah, that one had to be weird. Will huffed an exasperated breath and said, “at least you don’t have a girlfriend, Steve,” and Steve choked because, well, the kid wasn’t wrong.

Technically.

But aside from the very obvious reason why pointing out the technicality would be very bad, Steve was pretty sure reminding Will of his own loneliness wouldn’t exactly help either, so he recovered with a mock-offended yelp and a hair toss that finally got Will to crack a bit of a smile. “Listen kid,” he said, “Don’t rush this stuff. Someday the right girl will come along, but it’s okay if that’s not now – hell, it’s probably better that it’s not. I did some embarrassing shit with girls when I was your age.” And boy wasn’t that the truth. “Until then? It might suck a little, but the guys will come around and things will be back to normal before you know it. They’re your friends, and that won’t change just because they like to suck face with girls now.”

Will had started to brighten a little, but there was something tense in the slump of his shoulders that hadn’t been there before. Shit, what had he said wrong? “What if…” Will started, stopped, frowned a little to himself and looked away from Steve before trying again, “…what if it did change things? What if I never find a girl I like, and what if they… what if they’re not…” Will’s voice softened until it was barely there, and he looked a little paler than usual, maybe only just realizing what he’d said.

Oh, Steve thought, and then, fuck. He was a little quicker on the uptake than he might have been a few weeks ago about this sort of thing, but what was he supposed to say to that? It wasn’t like Steve could say anything about Billy, and talking about Robin without her here just felt wrong. Jesus, why him? Why out of all the people Will could have talked to did it have to be him?

Steve took a deep breath, and reminded himself that he was in charge of these kids, whatever that entailed. And he was the best fucking babysitter in the world, so he was going to handle this. Somehow.

Feeling like he was tip-toeing across a minefield, Steve started a little hesitantly. “If- that’s uh, if you never find the right girl… I mean…” He ran a hand through his hair, blew out another breath, and started over. “It’s okay you know,” he said instead, and watched the little twitch of Will’s shoulders, “if you don’t like girls after all. It doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you. And I…” Steve considered, reconsidered, then switched directions again. “I don’t think they’d think any differently of you if they knew that. Not that you have to tell them, not unless you want to. But
if you did, they’d understand. And if someone doesn’t, anyone at all, you tell me. I’ve still got a nail bat.” He nudged Will’s shoulder with his own, getting a fragile but genuine smile for his troubles. Oh geez, Will wasn’t going to cry, was he? Steve didn’t know if he was equipped to handle that right now.

“Thanks Steve,” Will said, face ducking behind his bangs in pleased embarrassment. “Can I stay up here for a little while though? I think I still need a break.”

“Yeah kiddo, of course.”

~~

Billy hated babysitting duty. When he came home from a long day of work, the last thing he wanted to deal with was the gaggle of kids that had invaded Steve’s house and made it impossible to get any privacy. So of course, that was the sight that greeted him today as he walked in the door.

He sighed tiredly at seeing them all, but also noticed a distinct lack of Steve. “You guys break in again or did Steve get sick of dealing with you?”

“It’s not breaking in if Steve told us where the spare key is,” Dustin pointed out, like that was what mattered. “He’s upstairs though.” Perfect, maybe he and Steve could have some alone time after all.

Billy took the stairs two at a time, hearing faint sounds of music slowly getting stronger as he walked down the hallway. He thought he could make out Tina Turner, and Billy snorted a little. Only Steve would waste tape space with songs you could hear on the radio at any damn minute. It was dumb, but endearing in a way that made Billy’s hand absently tap against his leg as he walked.

”It’s okay, you can admit it. You like Steve’s music.”

Billy’s arm immediately stilled. “I do not. Steve’s taste is shit.”

Mind Fucker laughed at him. ”You cannot lie to me. I’m in your head.” And that was completely unfair, really. ”It is not all bad. And I know you enjoy the one about the holiday.”

Like an inter-dimensional monster would know what good music was anyway. “I am so glad I don’t have to worry about you telling Steve that.” If Steve ever caught wind that he didn’t hate a Madonna song, he’d never live that shit down.

”I will find a way,” Mind Fucker promised, and if Billy had learned anything about the guy by now it was that he should take that threat seriously.

“Steve?” Billy called, swinging the bedroom door open. “the kids said you were up- oh.” No privacy then. Will was seated at the edge of Steve’s bed, legs swinging with the music, and Steve was seated on the floor in front of his closet across from him. Both of them looked over at Billy as he entered. “Am I interrupting?”

Will shook his head, already sliding off the bed. “No, that’s okay. I was just heading back downstairs.” Billy raised an eyebrow, feeling like there was something going on he wasn’t quite getting, but Steve didn’t look concerned so he just shrugged and stepped further into the room so he wasn’t blocking the door. He offered Steve a hand up which Steve took, leveraging himself to his feet, but didn’t quite let go of, standing close and shifting their hands behind their backs.

Will paused and looked between the two of them, considering. Billy didn’t know what he was
looking for, but there was a little crease between his brows and it looked like there was something he wanted to say. But Will only offered another shy smile and a “Thanks, Steve” before heading downstairs, so Billy let it go too.

“Corrupting the youth with your awful music taste?” he asked instead, delighting in the resulting affronted look in Steve’s eyes.

“Tina Turner is a legend!” Steve defended, aghast. “Just because you think Dead Panther is the height of music-”

“It’s Def Leppard and you know that, don’t try to be cute.” Billy rolled his eyes at the telling smirk at the corner of Steve’s mouth.

“Is it working?”

Billy kissed him, if only to wipe that dumb smile off his face. “A little.”

Chapter End Notes

Will: I don't... like girls
Steve: OH WE STAN

I know I have a title theme already going on but I just came out of a Mountain Goats concert and the desire to call this chapter Clemency for the Wizard King was nearly insurmountable.

Also tysm for voting in the strawpoll!! Don't feel disheartened if you picked a less popular option, it may not be my big bang but I might still write the others as shorter fics because goddamnit this fandom WILL get the ridiculous 'Steve gets turned into a cat' and 'Billy randomly sprouts wings' fics it deserves!
Chapter Notes

Popping in to say there are some brief allusions to future sex in this chapter, but nothing explicit or at all past the T rating

See the end of the chapter for more notes

About once a week, Billy and Steve told the kids’ parents they were busy and couldn’t babysit, hopped in the car, and drove a few towns over for what they’d dubbed ‘date night.’ It wasn’t like they didn’t hang out publically in Hawkins or anything – their roommates excuse usually gave them enough leeway that grabbing lunch or seeing a movie together didn’t raise any eyebrows – but it wasn’t like they could go somewhere nice and actually almost act like a couple anywhere they might be recognized. Being in another town didn’t fully protect them from side-eyes and suspicious raised eyebrows either, but it did make it pretty easy to deflect any questions for long enough to eat if they didn’t have to see anybody they actually knew.

And Billy really liked being able to laugh with Steve over dinner and hold hands under the table when no one was looking. When had he gotten so sappy?

They were at a semi-fancy Italian place in Westfield tonight, something Billy couldn’t remember the name of because they never hit the same place twice. Mind Fucker was discovering the joys of penne vodka (and admittedly Billy hadn’t had it often himself) and Steve was relaying a story about the time he’d tried to give Dustin tips on picking up girls when his voice suddenly dropped to half its volume and he interrupted himself with an “oh, shit.”

Billy tried to turn to see what Steve was staring at behind him, but the hand grabbing his under the table squeezed once and then moved away so Billy stilled as well. “Don’t look now,” Steve said, “but Hopper and Joyce just showed up.”

Billy swallowed thickly, hunching down in his seat and trying to fight the rising tide of panic. “The fuck? Don’t they only go out on Tuesdays?” Billy knew because the kids always ended up at Steve’s place on Tuesdays, so they’d scheduled their own date nights for Thursdays because Joyce always worked double shifts and the kids usually found their way to the Wheelers’ so they wouldn’t be missed. And yet, here Joyce was, decidedly not on a double shift, and had somehow ended up at the same restaurant despite all the miles they’d put between themselves and Hawkins.

To say he was stressed was an understatement. It wasn’t impossible to play off dinner as just something between friends, obviously, but Billy still had that persistent fear that Joyce and Hopper knew too much, that they’d be able to see right through them and know and then everything that had happened this last month would go to shit just like that.

Steve looked similarly thrown off balance, leg tapping a jittery dance under the table. “Alright, maybe they won’t notice us. It’s fine, it’s a big restaurant, and they probably won’t-”

“Oh, Steve and Billy! I didn’t expect to see you here.” And that was Joyce, and she was already on her way over to their table, and shit they’d better come up with something quick.

Steve slapped a smile on his face, and it wasn’t perfect but if no one looked too hard it sure did
seem like he was completely relaxed and perfectly pleased to see Joyce and Hopper. If Billy didn’t know better he’d have thought Steve really wasn’t panicking at all. And wasn’t it funny that Steve was terrible when actually coming up with a lie, yet he was able to near-flawlessly project total calm with his body language. Billy was sure his own face was downright terrified in comparison, so he tried to school it into something approaching regular surprise.

“Oh hey! I had no idea you two were going on a date tonight.” Steve gave a little half-wave to the two of them.

Hopper, a half-step behind Joyce, fidgeted with the tight collar of his shirt. “Didn’t think we’d see you two here either.”

“Oh, well we uh–” And yeah, there was the more typical Steve floundering for a lie that Billy had seen before. It was really difficult to keep up a secret relationship when Steve couldn’t come up with a lie for shit and Billy could lie, sure, but he couldn’t quite make his expression match.

“We wanted to get out of Hawkins for the night,” Billy supplied, “After everything that’s happened. Just for the night. And it was a good excuse to make Steve finally pay me and Mind- er, MF – back for saving his ass.” Let them believe what they would about Billy jumping at shadows and Steve not wanting to embarrass him, it was better than the truth.

Joyce nodded like she could sympathize, and Billy wondered if those rumors about the Byers’ house being put up for sale, all but gone now, had actually had some truth to them at one point.

Hopper, on the other hand, ginned a little. “Guess that explains why you picked such a fancy place. Steve, if he orders dessert you let me know, I think that legally counts as a shakedown.” Hopper clapped a hand down on Billy’s shoulder and Billy stiffened, tense and waiting, but there was only teasing in Hopper’s tone, no real anger or strength to his grip, so Billy tried to relax at what should have been casual contact. Hopper’s grin remained on his face but he caught Billy’s eye and it suddenly looked a little forced, like he’d picked up on something Billy would really rather he hadn’t, and his hand slipped discreetly off his shoulder.

“Yeah, will do, Hop,” Steve said, watching Joyce and Hopper head to their own table and gently nudging Billy’s foot with his own. “You good?” he asked, barely audible.

Billy nodded. “Wasn’t expecting that.” He cast a glance over at their table, where a waiter was pouring wine and Joyce and Hopper seemed to only have eyes for each other once again. “I think it went okay though.”

”See, that wasn’t so bad. You humans are so cute when you are flustered.” Billy wouldn’t exactly have described it as cute himself, but now that the threat had passed he was appreciating the too-bright of Steve’s eyes and the racing pulse he could feel in his own chest. Steve seemed to feel the same nervous excitement, if his slow-creeping flush at Billy’s stare was any indicator.

”Look at him. He has no idea we are absolutely going to make him order dessert.” One track minded as always. Billy figured that he and Steve could wait until after cheesecake.

~~

The thing was.

It was a little surprising, considering how much experience each of them had and how they’d never been especially shy before, but he and Steve hadn’t really done anything yet. They’d kissed, obviously, but for whatever reason everything past that had been under an unspoken agreement to
take things slow. While he was pretty sure it would have been Steve’s first time with a guy, it
certainly wouldn’t have been Billy’s. But those had all been quick, spur-of-the-moment things with
guys he’d never seen again. What he and Steve were doing was… different. Billy didn’t want to
fuck it up.

That said, Steve was making sticking to the plan of taking things slow very
difficult. Slow kisses before bed turned a little more heated as they progressed, but before anything else developed Steve
was pressing a staying hand to Billy’s chest. Billy practically threw himself backwards, flushed
with guilt. “Shit, didn’t mean to-”

“No, no, it’s not that,” Steve insisted, and Billy hissed a quiet breath of relief between his teeth. He
really didn’t want to have fucked this up. “I was just thinking, uh, well… Mind Fucker’s like, not
looking right?” A soft flush overtook Steve’s cheeks, but Billy was frowning in thought, because
he... honestly hadn’t thought about that.

“Dunno,” he said to Steve, then directed at Mind Fucker, “are you?”

The reply was slow to come, to the point where Billy was starting to think maybe he’d tuned them
out already, but eventually Mind Fucker said, “Yes. Is that a problem?”

“Yes that’s a problem!” Billy snapped impatiently. “That’s creepy.”

Mind Fucker huffed. “Humans have such strange hang-ups. I am inside your head – compared
to what I have seen in there, this is nothing.”

Then Billy was the one flushing, ducking his head in embarrassment and avoiding Steve’s eye,
even if Steve had no idea what had just been said. “Jesus,” he muttered, dragging a hand over his
face. “Can’t you just like, close your eyes?”

"Close my eyes,” Mind Fucker repeated flatly. "Your eyes are my eyes. So unless you are willing
to blindfold yourself, no. And even if I said yes, how would you know whether I was telling the
truth or not?”

“I will get one of those Russian cattle prods again, I swear to God.”

"That might work actually.”

Billy blinked. “Kinky.”

Mind Fucker gave an impatient grumble. "I meant the heat. Perhaps if it was warm enough,
though not so hot it posed a threat, my presence might slip enough to, ah, ‘close my eyes’
effectively.”

Great. There was nothing sexier than being drenched in sweat. Though Billy had to admit it was
mildly less off-putting than having Mind Fucker creep on them.

“Figure something out?” Steve must have picked up on his considering look. “Cause the suspense
is killing me.”

Billy held up a staying finger to Steve as he backed off the bed and out of the room, but in a few
minutes he was forced to return with a sheepish wince. “How exactly do you work your
thermostat?” He asked, rubbing the back of his neck. Look, Steve had one of those fancy ones that
had too many buttons on it for its own good, and forgive him if he was a little too impatient to
stand there and figure it out okay?
“You’ve got a strange taste in foreplay Hargrove,” Steve laughed, but followed him out of the room.

~~

Steve slept without nightmares that night, or at least Billy hadn’t awoken to anything like the night before, but it was only another day before Steve was jolting awake again, shivering as cold sweat dried against his skin and taking deep breaths that were drowned out by the hum of the air conditioning. As he waited for Steve to calm back down, Billy’s eyes flicked over to the soft red glow of the little digital clock on the side table, which informed him it was a quarter past two in the morning and definitely far too early to stay awake for the day.

Something about the time made him frown. It shouldn’t have bothered him, it wasn’t like he minded being awake to help his boyfriend or anything, but something about the way the numbers glowed red against the darkness of the room hit like déjà vu, scratched at the back of his mind, almost like he’d… seen them before. Recently. Huh.

“Steve, have your nightmares ever been, uh… routine before?”

Steve frowned, confused. “Well they’ve been pretty common since all the Demogorgon shit started up, maybe once a week or so right after that first one in the Byers’ living room I guess, but they haven’t been so bad recently. Until now, I guess.”

“Not exactly what I meant. Look at what time it is.”

Steve twisted over his shoulder to read the clock. “Sorry, I know it’s late—”

Billy sighed in frustration. “Don’t apologize, that’s not- Look, it’s 2:15 now, right?” Steve nodded, now thoroughly confused at where Billy was going with this. “And two nights ago, when you told me about the dream in the mall? It was 2:15 then, too. Like, exactly 2:15.”

Steve’s response, when it came, was slow and uncertain. “And that means… what, exactly?”

“I don’t know.” Because he really didn’t. He didn’t have a single clue what it was supposed to mean, if it meant anything at all. “It... could just be a coincidence.” It could, couldn’t it? Just because they’d tangled with monsters and Upside Down shit before didn’t mean it always had to be some freaky demon shit, right?

“I don’t think it is.” Billy didn’t either, admittedly, but he was a little surprised by the conviction in Steve’s voice, until he continued, “Because it was the same dream. But this time the Mind Flayer in the mall was looking right at me.”

Well. Screw the early hour, because it looked like neither of them were going back to bed tonight after all.

~~

If Robin had ever been thankful for her job before, she took it all back now. Being the only one around for a whole day at Family Video was not worth the overtime Keith was paying her.

Keith had fucked off to Michigan for the next few days on some sort of family trip. She hadn’t really asked the details at the time, much less interested in why he wouldn’t be around for a few days than she had been in trying not to stare at Holly Steinbeck as she bent down to rummage through their bargain bin. Keith had tossed her the keys and proclaimed her in charge, and she had been greatly looking forward to lording her newfound and ill-begotten power over Steve in a
glorious yet brief reign of tyrannical rule.

Except Steve had called in sick, all heartfelt apologies and offers to make it up to her, and he really had sounded like shit over the phone, and suddenly the prospect of a Keith-less day at work didn’t sound quite so appealing after all. Damn Harrington. She couldn’t even really be mad, because as much as she would have been pissed at him for ditching her to fuck around with Billy all day instead, she really couldn’t imagine him doing that unless there was a real issue. She really hoped it was a mundane illness and not the other kind of issue.

Goodwill towards Steve or no, Robin was getting increasingly tired of customers. She was just recovering from a pair of barely-thirteen year old boys trying to rent Nightmare on Elm Street when, joy of joys, Nancy Wheeler approached the counter with a VHS tucked under her arm. Robin mindlessly fiddled with a pen as she drew near.

“Hey Robin, is Steve here?”

Was it weird Nancy came to Steve’s work asking after him despite being his ex? Well, maybe it would have been, if they hadn’t been monster hunting together. It was probably no weirder than the gaggle of children that came looking for him far more frequently. “Nah, he called out sick today.”

Nancy’s brows drew down into a concerned frown. “Oh, I hope he’s alright… but actually, there was something I was meaning to ask you?”

Her tone made it seem like a question, but Robin was no stranger to Nancy’s determination. If she wanted to ask, she’d find a way to ask; it was easier to just agree. “Shoot.”

“Are you and Steve, uh…” Her eyes flicked away for a beat, before she visibly steeled her nerve and continued on full force, “Are you and Steve dating?”

The pen she’d been bouncing abruptly flew out of Robin’s grip and clattered to the floor. Nancy’s eyes tracked it, but she made no comment. Robin tried not to laugh, she really did, but she couldn’t help the snort that escaped her. Her and Steve? Yeah right. There were quite a few barriers of entry to that.

Nancy didn’t seem like she knew what to make of Robin’s amusement. “Is that a no…?”

Robin got herself under control, reminding herself that Nancy didn’t know any of the reasons her and Steve dating was definitely off the table, so she probably just looked like a lunatic. “Me, date ‘The Hair’ himself? I don’t think so.”

Nancy looked a little annoyed, maybe a little defensive, it was hard to tell. She brushed a stray strand of dark hair from her face. “Oh. Well, have you… seen him around any other girls lately?”

Jesus, was she jealous or just nosey? “Sure, if you count half the customers in the store.”

“You know what I mean,” Nancy said, a hard edge to her voice which near-immediately softened back into concern. “Maybe I shouldn’t pry, but it’s just… he’s been acting so different lately. And I don’t mean in a bad way — just the opposite. I want him to be happy, I really do, but I can’t figure out why he’d hide something like that from us. What if something’s wrong? If I noticed and I didn’t do anything about it, and Steve got hurt, I don’t think I could live with myself.”

Robin wasn’t entirely certain exactly what danger Nancy foresaw from this supposed mystery girlfriend, but with what she’d been exposed to lately, she couldn’t completely rule it out as a valid concern either. Not when Nancy had no clue about the real reason Steve looked like a big smitten
dork. Plus she didn’t mind someone else watching out for Steve, because God knew the dingus couldn’t be trusted to take care of himself. But she also knew just why Nancy prying was such a bad idea – though at least Nancy’s apparent concern for Steve gave her a little bit of hope that her reaction, should she ever find out, might not be all bad. “Sorry, I don’t know. I’ll let you know if I see anything,” she said, not unkindly. “You want me to ring you up for that?” she asked, gesturing to the tape that had been all but forgotten under Nancy’s arm.

Nancy startled a little at the reminder, but handed it over with an embarrassed smile and an “Oh yeah, thanks.” Robin glanced down at the cover. Huh, *Children of Paradise*. Well, say what you would about Nancy Wheeler, at least she had good taste in movies.

“Listen Nancy,” she said as she handed the VHS back, “I know you’re worried, but give Steve a little credit. Despite everything I used to think about him, he’s not someone who only values a pretty face.” Had she actually sort of complimented once-queen-priss Nancy Wheeler? Wow, today certainly was strange. ‘I’m sure that if he’s really dating someone, he’ll tell you when he’s ready.’

Nancy offered a little smile, not quite convinced but at least willing to concede that point. “I hope you’re right.”

Robin watched her retreating form until the door swung shut behind her. “Yeah, me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Billy: *looks at clock*
Clock: 2:15
Billy’s brain: DÉJÀ VU, I’VE JUST BEEN IN THIS PLACE BEFORE-

(Also yes, *Children of Paradise* is one of the movies Robin lists in her top three at the end of s3)

Optional bonus meta but the ‘Steve being really good at pretending to be calm’ is a headcanon I developed from about three different reasons. In part, it’s because Steve literally never discusses his parents or the issues that come with them apparently never being around (this is obvs also a popular headcanon since Steve is basically the ONLY main cast char whose parents we don’t see besides Robin) which, y’know, would really suck yet clearly Steve plays off or acts like it doesn’t bother him. Plus I really doubt it would help his (past) popularity if he talked about his parents not being around as anything other than an excuse to throw parties. Second, this boy bounces tf back in canon. Like yeah he freaks out at the first Demogorgon (who wouldn’t) but then he comes back?? And s2 Dustin is like ‘forget the flowers we’re searching for my demon pet it ate my cat’ and Steve’s response is essentially ‘alright’ and not ‘what the fuck dude Nancy dumped me I am reasonably UPSET’. And finally the s3 Russian interrogation really cemented this headcanon for me because while Steve’s lie game is weak his relative calmness after being kidnapped and beat and potentially facing death by Russians is?? Really damn weird for an 18-at-best year old kid?? Anyway the boy clearly knows how to pack that panic away which is 0/10 on healthy behaviors but 10/10 on causing me to write an entire paragraph of Steve meta in the chapter notes oops.
Dustin was pretty sure Steve was ignoring him.

It wasn’t obvious, not to anyone who didn’t know Steve as well as Dustin did. Steve had been busy Tuesday night, which was okay because Steve was always busy Tuesdays even though he never told Dustin what the hell he was doing. On Thursday they went to Steve’s like usual, but he’d looked tired and had barely said two words to Dustin the whole time. Rude, but not suspicious on its own, not until Dustin paired it with the past Monday, when Steve had disappeared upstairs with Will of all people for like, hours. But today was the last straw. It was a Friday, and Friday always meant Steve took them to the arcade after work, and usually ended up hanging out and even playing a game or two and sometimes bought them food at the diner. It was a sacred ritual. Steve had never acknowledged it as one, but he’d never missed a Friday yet, so Dustin knew that Steve had accepted its sacredness. Except this morning, an hour before they were supposed to leave for the arcade, Steve had muttered something about not being able to take them into the walkie and then switched it off before Dustin could even ask why. And Steve knew he wasn’t supposed to switch off the walkie under any circumstances.

So Steve had to be ignoring him, or all of them, or something. But what Dustin didn’t understand was why.

He glared at the walkie where it lay on his desk like it would give up Steve’s secrets if he could just intimidate it enough. This didn’t feel like that time he’d used Steve’s fancy hairspray to make a flamethrower that had almost set the curtains on fire and Steve hadn’t given him quarters for the arcade for a week. At least that time Dustin knew what he did (and he still said it was worth it, because flamethrowers were perfectly viable makeshift weapons against the Upside Down and he was just staying prepared and besides, flamethrowers were badass). This time, he couldn’t even figure out what he’d done wrong.

Making a snap decision, Dustin reached for the discarded walkie. “Party, do you copy? I repeat, Party, do you copy?” One by one each of their voices crackled an affirmative, save for Steve of course. It hadn’t taken long; maybe he hadn’t been the only one bothered by the abrupt cancellation. “I think something’s up with Steve. He never cancels on Fridays!”

Mike’s voice crackled through the speaker. “Yeah, what gives? He always takes us.” Though impatient, Dustin thought he could hear a little concern in Mike’s voice too. Even though Mike tried to play it cool, Dustin hadn’t missed the way he’d definitely gotten less vocally opposed to Steve hanging around when they played D&D, even though he still rolled his eyes at the idea of needing a babysitter.

Max’s voice was equally brash, but her worry was more evident. “Do you think something’s wrong? Like, that he’s not telling us about?”

“What if it’s Code Red stuff?” Lucas chimed in, and shit Dustin hadn’t even thought of that because if it was Upside Down stuff Steve would have told them, right? Or would he have not mentioned it because he didn’t think they could handle it? Steve was stupid like that sometimes.

“ Monsters? Hurting Steve?” El asked, and Dustin jumped a little because he had no idea she’d been listening.
“We should do something,” Dustin decided. “We’ve got to figure out what’s up with him.” He didn’t know exactly what that something was, but they’d figure it out as they went. They always did.

“Maybe he’s just busy,” Will suggested, but it was quickly drowned out in the rest of their excitement. They squabbled back and forth for a bit before deciding to just meet at Mike’s, hoping it would at least let them argue without people purposefully holding down the talk button to mute everyone. El had even convinced Hopper to let her go, made easier because she’d already been cleared to go to the arcade today.

Unfortunately, they didn’t make much headway in Mike’s basement either. Dustin preferred a full-frontal assault – or, more specifically, showing up at Steve’s door and pounding on it until they were let in and given answers. It was an idea shared only by Max, who didn’t have the patience for Mike and Lucas’s suggested recon and subterfuge or Will and El’s uncertainty that they should be intervening at all.

Midway through another impassioned speech about tying Steve to a chair to make him talk, the basement door opened to reveal Nancy precariously balancing a pitcher of lemonade and a stack of cups as she came down the stairs. “Mom said to bring you this, and also to tell you to keep it down,” she directed towards Mike.

Really, Dustin doubted that last part had come from Mrs. Wheeler at all. “We can’t keep it down, Steve’s in danger and they won’t listen to me when I-”

“Steve’s in danger?” Nancy asked, pausing halfway to setting the pitcher on the table.

“Yes!” half of them shouted, just as the other half yelled “No!”

Mike huffed a frustrated sigh. “We don’t know that,” he pointed out, which was technically true even though Dustin didn’t need to know anything when his Steve radar was telling him something was off. “He just hasn’t been around as much.”

“And that could mean something is wrong,” Dustin argued.

Nancy looked like she debated something in her head for a brief moment, but seemed to reach a decision. “Look, as weird as it is to say, you’re probably around Steve more than any of us-”

“That’s exactly the problem-”

“-So you might know if Steve’s been around anyone different lately?”

Dustin had no idea what she was getting at, but the look in Nancy’s eyes was so intense he wracked his brain for a minute before answering. “Uh, not really. Not unless you count Robin or Billy. … Why? You think that’s why he’s acting so weird?”

“It’s not just weird,” Nancy said, pursing her lips in thought. “He’s acting like he did when we dated. Like he’s in love with somebody.”

Dustin gaped like a fish, and by the beat of silence before pandemonium broke out he was pretty sure the rest of the group did too.

“Steve’s got a secret girlfriend?”

“Why wouldn’t he tell us?”
“You’re not dating again, are you?”

“Obviously, she wouldn’t be asking if she was the one.”

But… it sort of made sense, didn’t it? At least a little bit. It would explain why Steve was so busy all of the sudden, and why he might have blown them off today. It might also be whatever Steve was doing on Tuesdays too. What if that was when he met up with her? But also, why hadn’t Steve told any of them?

El was frowning, even in the midst of the chaos the Wheelers’ basement had become. “But Steve and I are friends. And friends don’t lie.”

Nancy looked a little uncomfortable – like she knew just as well as any of the rest of them that friends did lie to one another for any number of reasons – but before she could reply to El, Lucas cut in with, “Wait, who would it even be?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out,” Nancy admitted a little self-consciously, as she’d been less than successful so far.

“Well, it’s definitely not Robin,” Dustin said, still a little annoyed about Steve’s continual refusal to tell him why he wouldn’t ask out the super cool amazing girl who’d cracked a freakin Russian code. “Steve kept telling me she just wasn’t his type, which is ridiculous, because how could she not be his type?”

Nancy winced. “Yeah, I uh… might have asked her? She said no. But that’s why I wanted to ask if any of you had noticed Steve with anyone else.”

Dustin and the rest of the party just shook their heads. Despite their attempted brainstorming session, they still weren’t sure what to do about Steve, and even though Nancy’s theory held water it still didn’t explain the reason for secrecy. They each agreed to keep an eye out for any clues when they saw Steve next, and the rest of the afternoon devolved into board games in the Wheelers’ basement, but as Dustin finally biked home and got inside just in time for dinner he couldn’t help staring at the wall where the phone hung.

He knew Steve might have a reason for keeping this girl secret from the others, but Steve wouldn’t lie to him. He wouldn’t. All he had to do was call and ask. But why did that feel so hard to do right now?

With an impatient sigh directed at himself, Dustin walked pointedly over to the phone and punched in Steve’s number. He was being stupid – Steve would tell him. Unfortunately, the voice that snapped a grumpy, “What” on the other end of the line after three rings was decidedly not Steve’s. Dustin sighed; just his luck.

“Billy, is Steve there? I’ve got to talk to him.”

“Thought he told you this morning he was sick.” Billy’s voice sounded a little deeper than usual, almost like he’d been… sleeping?

“Dude, were you asleep? It’s like, six pm.”

An impatient breath crackled through the phone line. “Is that what you really called to ask?”

And no, it hadn’t been, but Dustin didn’t exactly relish the idea of trying to explain to Billy that he was going to ask Steve if he had a secret girlfriend. Plus, even if Billy knew anything about it since
he lived with Steve, he wasn’t likely to tell Dustin jack shit. “No, just-” Dustin cut himself off. If
he couldn’t get Steve on the phone, he only really had one plan left, right? Mike and Lucas had
disagreed, but Mike and Lucas weren’t here now. “Never mind, just tell Steve I’ll talk to him
soon,” he said instead, and then hung up.

He had a plan to set into motion. And step one of the plan was eating dinner, because all this
secretive business had left him starving and he couldn’t be sneaky on an empty stomach.

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Billy raised a bemused eyebrow at the abrupt dial tone. What had that been all about exactly?
Dustin was always a little weird, like the rest of the little nerds, but that was pretty damn weird
even for his standards. He shook his head as he returned upstairs, heading back to the bedroom.

Steve cracked an eyelid open but made no other move. “S’tat?” he asked, voice muffled where his
face was half-pressed into the pillow.

“Dustin,” Billy answered, itching idly at his bare stomach. He hadn’t bothered to put on clothes
just to answer a phone, so he was standing just in boxer shorts. It still made him a little amused that
he could wander around this big McMansion in nothing but boxers – it felt taboo when compared
to the prim, stuffy decorating.

Steve sat up a little more at that, lifting his head and leaning back against the pillows to face Billy
more fully, the left side of his hair flattened comically to his face. “Was he alright?”

Billy sat at the edge of the bed. “He sounded fine, as far as I could tell. He wouldn’t tell me what
he was calling about though.”

“Maybe I should-” Steve started, already making movements to get out of bed, but Billy stopped
him with a hand on his shoulder.

“It can wait till tomorrow,” he insisted. Steve still looked exhausted; he figured a few nights of
panic attack-inducing nightmares that may or may not have been supernaturally connected, paired
with their attempts to strategically rework their sleep schedule so that they were awake for 2:15,
would do that to a guy. Billy was certainly feeling the effects himself; it had taken a few rings for
him to hear the phone through the haze of his own sleep, even though he was usually such a light
sleeper. It had been required, living with Neil. He’d started to sleep a little deeper nowadays.

The new schedule had been draining to switch to all at once, but it had been working at least. Steve
didn’t seem to get the nightmares as long as he was awake for the time instead of asleep. It meant
they were right after all about the time not being a coincidence, even as it gave them a way to avoid
the dream. But it had also led to an increase in mid-day naps, or mid-evening as the current case
may be, as Steve had insisted on going back to work tomorrow and not leaving Robin alone again,
and for that he had to get at least some sleep.

Steve, though he looked tired enough not to put up much of an argument, had an uncertain frown
on his face. “I’ve been thinking, I know we’ve been trying to avoid the nightmares, but what if
that’s not the right call?”

Billy stared at him incredulously. “You want the nightmares?”

“Well no, not really. But it’s been two days since we noticed the pattern and we still haven’t
figured out anything about the nightmares – why I’m getting them, who’s making them happen, or
even what they’re trying to do with them. Maybe… well, maybe we could learn a little more if I
actually had them."

"This is a terrible idea," Mind Fucker said, and Billy had to agree. "Whatever the dreams are trying to accomplish, we are better off not knowing than letting them accomplish it. Plus I do not enjoy when he panics."

Yeah, neither did Billy. "I don’t want you to have to do that. If we know a way to stop them from happening at all, isn’t that enough?"

"For how long?" Steve waved a hand to the dark circles under his eyes. "I can’t keep this schedule forever. I’ve got eighteen years of experience that say when 2 in the morning rolls around I should be asleep, and they’re not easy to ignore. I’m gonna slip up at some point, and I’d rather it be on purpose now than by total surprise later. And what if the dreams are just… a warning for something worse? And ignoring them ends up fucking us? If everyone was put in danger because I couldn’t handle a stupid dream…"

Billy didn’t like it, and Mind Fucker certainly didn’t either, but Steve had a point. How long could they keep this up for? And what if it really did mean something much worse was coming? Without any information, they’d never know how to stop the dreams for good.

"This is still a bad idea."

Steve reached out for Billy’s hand, covering it with his own. "The last time, the Mind Flayer looked at me. Like it knew I was there, and it was there too. If I can figure out anything about this, anything at all, then it has to be in the dream."

Billy sighed, his shoulders slumping at Steve’s determined look. "Tomorrow," he offered. "No offense, but you still look like shit, and you’ve got work in the morning. We’ll try it tomorrow."

Billy broke their contact only to scoot up to the head of the bed himself and lay down properly. "In the meantime, we should get some sleep while we can. We’ve still got a while before we have to be awake."

He hardly needed much persuasion there. Steve’s eyes were already starting to close again as he gave a contented hum and slung an arm across Billy’s waist. Maybe, after they slept, Billy could convince Steve this was a stupid plan and it wasn’t worth the risk. Then again, he thought as he considered the amazing amounts of stubbornness Steve could exhibit when he was worried about someone else, probably not.

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The plan was in motion. Dustin had not-so-subtly dropped hints to his mom over dinner about how Steve was sick, and probably couldn’t even get up to make food for himself, and how sad and tragic was that, poor sick Steve, foodless? Mom had made the appropriate gasps of sympathy for Steve, who’d practically become a fixture in their lives over the last year, and had packaged up the rest of the casserole leftovers in Tupperware (their nice one too, since she knew it would make Steve return it soon and she’d get to make sure he was feeling better for herself) and let Dustin take it right over after dinner on his bike.

Dustin hoped Steve was grateful, because it had been a good casserole. The things Dustin did in the name of brotherhood.

It was only around 8 pm when Dustin slowed to a stop in front of Steve’s house. The lights were on, but that didn’t mean much because Steve liked to leave the lights on even in the middle of the night, so Dustin tried knocking first before giving up and grabbing the key from the big potted
plant by the door. Like he’d told Billy before, it wasn’t technically breaking and entering if Steve had all but given him the spare key, right?

Unlocking the door and heading inside, casserole in hand, Dustin noted the house was still suspiciously quiet. Steve and Billy’s cars were both parked in the driveway, so the chances of them not being in the house were slim, though he couldn’t entirely rule it out. He set the Tupperware down on the kitchen counter, considering his options. Maybe Steve was just in his room? That could explain why he hadn’t heard the knocking. He could just run upstairs for a quick check; it seemed like a missed opportunity to have come all the way here and have his perfectly laid plan, complete with a believable reason he’d come over that wasn’t just interrogation, go to waste.

He’d just poke his head in. If Steve wasn’t there, he’d have to come back tomorrow, but if he was then he could get this whole business over with and he would know for sure that there was no way Steve was lying to him.

Now committed, he took the stairs in twos, heading down the hallway to Steve’s door. The Harringtons had so many extra rooms that, now that he thought about it, he wasn’t totally sure which one Billy’s was. But it was fine because he really did not want to run into Billy right now anyway, and he knew enough to know which one was Steve’s room despite the relatively few times he’d actually been up here.

Dustin pushed the door open a crack and stuck his head in, just enough to see that Steve was in fact in bed at only 8 pm. It must have been some sickness he’d picked up, which in retrospect Dustin really didn’t want to catch now that it looked like it was real, so he should probably go –

Except, now that he looked, was there someone else in Steve’s bed?

There was another lump in the blankets next to Steve, and the lamp in the corner of the room kept things just bright enough Dustin thought he could make out blonde hair peeking out from the covers. Had Nancy actually been right? Was this the secret girlfriend? She had to be – why else could he see the edge of a bare calf sticking out of the blankets?

He knew he should just close the door and go. He’d wanted to give Steve a chance to tell him the truth, and he’d just ruin that if he looked. But he also couldn’t deny he was a little curious to see just why Steve hadn’t wanted to tell any of them. And, if he was being honest with himself, his faith in Steve’s truthfulness was a little shaken when confronted with evidence like this.

A quick peek couldn’t hurt. Then at least he would know Steve was telling the truth when he told his old pal Dustin about his new girlfriend. Not wanting to wake them, Dustin crept closer to the bed so he could get a better look at her face, which was turned towards Steve. She had an arm slung across Steve’s chest, an arm that was sort of muscular, almost a little masculine actually, and when Dustin followed the path from the arm up to the face-

Holy shit. Holy shit holy shit holy SHIT.

Billy fucking Hargrove was in Steve’s bed. Sleeping with him. Cuddling.

A yelp of surprise tore free from Dustin despite his best efforts to back away silently, and his scramble backwards left him overbalancing and hitting the wall with a resounding thud. Steve’s eyes flew open, startled and then confused as he took in Dustin, pressed against his wall and not moving like an idiot. And then Billy sat up behind him and Steve must have made the realization at that moment because both their eyes went wide. It would have been funny if Dustin wasn’t sporting the same look on his own face.
“…Dustin?” Steve asked, voice thin.

“Steve,” Dustin said, for lack of anything better coming to mind.

“…This isn’t what it looks like?”

Chapter End Notes

Dustin, bursting into the room: Wake up sleepyhead!!
Steve: Dustin-
Billy, in bed behind him: What the fuck, man
Dustin: :0

There’s a certain irony to writing about Steve not being able to adapt to a new sleep schedule of being up at 2 am, and then looking down at my own clock and it’s 3 am. Maybe I should take Steve’s advice lol.
“How can this not be what it looks like?”

Okay, that wasn’t the response Steve had been hoping for, but it was probably fair. Even he could admit it was a little… compromising… to be caught in bed with the guy you were supposed to be having a secret relationship with. What a secret – they’d made it what, a month and a half? He doubted all the deflection in the world was going to save him this time.

Dustin took Steve’s lack of an answer as an opportunity to continue. “Because what it looks like,” he said, gesturing to the bed at large, “is your mystery girlfriend is actually a boyfriend, and it’s Billy!”

He thought I had a girlfriend? was Steve’s immediate first thought, which he quickly discarded as not the most pressing concern right now. Billy hadn’t said a word, and was a frozen line of tension against Steve’s back; Steve covertly slid a hand backwards until it brushed against Billy’s fingertips. “Listen, just – shit, just calm down a minute okay? Because I get it if you want to leave or you never want to see me again or whatever but you can’t tell anyone, alright? I know that’s a lot to ask, but I’m serious man, just-”

“Never see you again?” Dustin repeated, and Steve cringed in expectation of anger, or disgust, or anything he’d really hoped Dustin would never look at him with, but Dustin just looked a little dumbstruck. “I… Steve, I don’t hate you or anything, Jesus.”

Steve was a little embarrassed to admit that the relief of those words felt like a ton of bricks being lifted from his chest. “You don’t?”

Dustin shook his head adamantly. “I’m surprised, yeah, of course I’m surprised. Who wouldn’t be? And I have to admit that I don’t really get your taste – I mean, Billy? You didn’t ask Robin out and you went from Nancy to Billy?” If Billy had been at all able to respond, he probably would have had something snarky to say about that. Steve kind of missed it when it went unsaid. “But I don’t hate you Steve. You’re like my brother. And even if you weren’t, that’s not, like, bad or anything. I know some people think so, but they’re idiots.”

Steve mentally kicked himself a little for doubting Dustin; he wasn’t like that, he was a good kid, Steve knew that, and maybe he shouldn’t have been so worried. He couldn’t exactly be blamed for worrying about what a small town like Hawkins was imparting on the youth, of course, but it was nice to know that the kid he’d come to really care about wasn’t going anywhere. He smiled, something that was still tinged with surprise but was mostly just relieved and happy he had Dustin in his life now.

Finally Billy spoke. “So you won’t tell anyone?” It was probably as soft as Dustin had ever heard Billy sound. Even Steve, who’d long since discovered the big softie Billy liked to pretend he wasn’t, was still caught off-guard by its hesitance and uncertainty.

“Of course not. …Not that I really like keeping secrets from my friends.” Dustin gave a pointed stare at Steve as he said this. Steve rubbed the back of his neck a little sheepishly by way of apology, but really, what had Dustin expected? That Steve wasn’t going to keep it as quiet as possible that he was dating a guy in Hawkins, Indiana? “But… I get why you didn’t want people to
know. Even me. And I’m sorry for butting in, okay?”

And yeah, the dejected tone Dustin said ‘even me’ with was really making Steve feel like a bit of an ass, even as he knew he wouldn’t have endangered himself and Billy like that before he knew for sure how Dustin would react. “I’m sorry, for the secrecy. We just couldn’t tell anyone, and that included you too man. …Speaking of which, what did you come over here for anyway? And what were you saying about the secret girlfriend I supposedly have?”

Dustin sighed, but didn’t look quite so forlorn. “Oh yeah, there’s casserole leftovers downstairs for you from my Mom – I told her you were sick. I was… kind of using it as an excuse to come over because we were all worried that you seemed like you were avoiding us and we were afraid it was Upside Down stuff but then we thought you might be spending time with a girlfriend instead and so I was just gonna ask you but now… well…” Dustin’s sudden flurry of information tapered off into uncertainty as he indicated the room at large.

Billy, who’d moved so he was no longer half-hidden by Steve’s shoulder but was now probably making Dustin very aware of his shirtlessness judging by the kid’s sudden interest in the carpet, processed the jumble of words a bit faster than Steve. “So your whole nerd gang is convinced the reason Steve’s been missing in action is because of a girlfriend?” He hissed a considering breath through his teeth.

“But they thought it was Upside Down stuff first,” Steve pointed out, and while he’d always been shit at lying, he was pretty sure he had a mystery that would keep the kids distracted enough that they wouldn’t look into Steve’s love life any further. “So what if we just tell them it is?” Steve looked over and caught Billy’s eye, and saw his reluctant agreement.

Dustin raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “That stuff is serious. We can’t just lie about it.”

“We wouldn’t be lying.” Briefly, Steve explained the strange nightmares, the specific time, and his worries that the other Mind Flayer might be trying to communicate something in the dreams. “We don’t really know what’s causing them, but some nights I get them and some nights I don’t. We’ve been avoiding them by not sleeping normal hours… hence why we were asleep in the middle of the evening.” Steve left out his idea about purposefully facing the nightmare tomorrow night – he knew Dustin wouldn’t like it, but it was the best plan they had.

“Yeah, that’s a little more of a pressing concern than who you’re dating,” Dustin said once Steve had explained. “I’m sure if you told them that, they’d chalk the disappearing act up to the dreams and weird sleep and would forget all about the girlfriend idea. But Steve has to go back to hanging out with us again to sell this. No more ditching Fridays, or they’ll realize something else is up.”

Steve laughed a little. “If I had known I was signing away all rights to privacy when I started taking you little shits to the arcade, I would have dropped your asses at the side of the road.” It wasn’t true of course, wasn’t even close – even if they were obnoxiously nosey, it was nice knowing that people would actually care if he disappeared now, that somebody would actually even notice when he stopped showing up. “Alright, I’ll tell them to come over here Sunday when I’m off from work, and we’ll tell everyone about the dreams then.”

By then, he’d hopefully have a better idea of what they were dealing with.

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When Steve entered Family Video the next morning, Robin took one look at him, grabbed his arm, and hauled him towards the break room. “We have to talk,” she insisted, pushing him down into a shitty plastic chair and shutting the door firmly behind her.
“Uh,” Steve managed dumbly, still a little in shock at the abrupt handling.

“Nancy is on to you. She came looking for you the other day, and she asked me if we were dating, and when I said no she got all interested about if you had some secret girlfriend and I told her to let it go but we both knew she’s not going to. Also,” she added, giving him a quick once-over, “you look like shit. Why do you look like shit?”

“Would you believe me if I said I was sick?” Steve asked, still trying to process the first part of her statement.

“Considering I’ve never seen your hair look this flat? Yeah, I probably would, if I didn’t know better.”

“Know better? Dude, you’ve known me for like, three months.”

“Yeah, and in those three months I saw Russians beat the shit out of you and you were still on your feet and swinging bats at mall-sized monsters. So no, I don’t think any sickness short of the bubonic plague would keep you out of work for two days on its own.”

“…Fair point,” Steve allowed begrudgingly. Plus he was starting to process what she’d said about Nancy. “Fuck,” he moaned, “we’re the worst secret couple, like, ever. Nancy’s suspicious, the damn kids are all suspicious, and – Jesus – Dustin knows.”

Robin’s eyes widened. “No shit? How’d that go?”

“It was an accident, of course, and that kid’s never been able to leave well enough alone – just look at the Russian broadcast – but he took it… surprisingly well.” Steve couldn’t help the surprised yet pleased smile from breaking out on his face again. It had been messy, and not his ideal circumstances, but it was also nice to know Dustin was okay with him, even if he still questioned his judgment in boyfriends.

Robin didn’t look particularly surprised, but she did seem happy for him nonetheless. “So, circling back to why you look like shit…?”

“Long story,” Steve sighed, peeking out the break room window to see the first customers trickling into the store. “Come over Sunday? With any luck it’ll keep everyone distracted and we won’t have to worry about anyone else getting too nosy. That said, it’s… well, we think it might be more monster shit. If, you know, you don’t want to get wrapped up in that again, I’d get it.” He’d very much miss having her around, but he wasn’t going to get her tangled up in Hawkins’ weird supernatural business again if she wasn’t up for it.

“And how long do you think you’ll make it without my indispensable help? I don’t think so.” Robin flashed a cocky smirk at him as they got up to return to the front of the store, and Steve let relief win out over the guilt of dragging her back into Upside Down stuff. It was nice to know she had his back, whether they were facing down monsters or disgruntled movie renters.

Two hours into his shift later, Steve was legitimately debating which was worse.

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As tired as he had been, it was a little hard for Steve to fall asleep that night. His eyes kept slipping over to the clock, watching 11:30 become 11:45 which became 12:25 before he knew it. As ready as he’d been to commit to finding out more about these nightmares tonight, the nervousness he felt and the hard line of tension that was Billy beside him were really making it hard to actually fall asleep. But he had to do this, because being completely blind about whatever was going on was
worse than whatever he might learn. When he finally felt his eyes starting to close of their own volition, it was nearly 2 am, and Steve had just a brief blurry moment to be thankful he hadn’t accidentally stayed awake this night.

He was back in the Starcourt Mall again, and the repetition was enough that this time he was at least distantly conscious of the fact that he was dreaming. The Mind Flayer towered over Billy once again, and again Steve was locked in place, but this time he had the presence of mind to shout at the thing in the hopes that he wasn’t wrong, and that maybe he could learn something from this after all. “Why are you doing this?” he yelled, furious gaze turned towards the Mind Flayer, which paused and turned to regard him.

The scene around them seemed to freeze in time, blurring at the edges, until it felt like just Steve and the Mind Flayer in the chasm of the half-busted mall. He clenched his fists against the empty air where his bat should have been, trying vainly to quell the rabbit-like beating of his own heart as the Mind Flayer rumbled nearer.

The voice it spoke with was entirely foreign, a deep and sonorous growl that dripped with malice, tinged with the odd reverb he’d heard, just once, in Billy’s voice when Mind Fucker had seemed to speak through him. “Aren’t you a curious one,” it said, voice seeming to echo against the walls of Steve’s head. ”I can certainly see what he found so special in you and that friend of yours.”

Steve’s arms involuntarily trembled; he crossed them over his chest, digging his nails into his skin to ground himself. “He – you mean, the other one of you. The one inside Billy.”

“Yes… and my plans had been going so well too. No matter, I have only been… delayed.” The Mind Flayer was practically on top of him now, the smell of its rotting flesh skin making Steve recoil. ”As for your question, I will tell you what I told your young friend, the one who let us in. Doors are opening once again. We are going to stay. We’re going to end you, and then we’re going to end everything.”

It paused, and seemed to look almost like it was considering Steve. ”I was overconfident last time. I overlooked you. I will not make the same mistake again.” The Mind Flayer’s clawed appendages reached out as if to gut him like he’d seen happen to Billy in these dreams, but something yanked at his shoulder and sent him stumbling backwards, a half-step of distance between himself and where the limb had slammed into the floor, cracking the tiles. He didn’t know for sure if the Mind Flayer could hurt him here, but looking at the damage, he wasn’t willing to take that risk if he didn’t have to. When someone behind him kept pulling on his arm, he didn’t think twice about it before he turned and ran.

He kept half his brain on keeping his feet under him and the Mind Flayer behind him, and half looking at who his mystery rescuer was. They were turned away from him, but Steve could make out long dark hair, long enough he was pretty sure she was a girl. It didn’t make sense, not if the Mind Flayer was responsible for these dreams, that someone else would have been here to save him, right? Not unless –

The girl turned back to judge the Mind Flayer’s progress, and at once Steve thought he could recognize the profile of her face. “Heather?” he asked, nearly missing a step but recovering well enough to dive behind cover with her. “What are you doing here?” And that was, maybe, a stupid question to ask considering it was his dream and if anything he had probably thought her up, right? How did dreams work anyway? Jesus, he didn’t know.

“I could ask you the same question. These dreams suck, but it’s usually Billy dying, not you.”
Steve blinked in surprise, because that didn’t make any sense. This was his dream, right? And he really thought that any Heather he would have dreamed up in the mall would have been Mind Flayer-possessed, or at least not actively confusing him. But what she said wasn’t adding up, because it was him who had to watch Billy die, but Heather was talking like this was her dream… “Are you… real? Like, actually here?”

Realization lit her eyes, but before he could get his answer, Steve noticed they’d been spotted; the Mind Flayer lumbered over to them once again, but before it could move to attack the mall suddenly fell away and he was slamming up in bed once again.

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Billy was woken abruptly from his admittedly already light slumber for the second night in a row, and really, he was starting to doubt which night was worse. Because while waking up to discover they’d been found out had absolutely sucked and nearly left him struck dumb with panic, seeing Steve barely able to breathe while he calmed down was really fighting for that number one spot of worst things to wake up to.

He still felt like he hadn’t fully processed what had happened last night. It was terrifying, to know his and Steve’s safety was now entrusted to a fourteen year old, when any slip up could really fuck them over. But at the same time, Dustin hadn’t run screaming for the hills or, as far as he could tell, went spreading it all around town. While he’d gotten a stink eye or two from the kid, he had felt like they were more because he could never be good enough for his precious Steve (and damn if Billy didn’t think the same thing) rather than because what they were doing was wrong or disgusting to Dustin. And that, at least, had been a little nice. Dustin, and Robin for that matter, had made him reconsider his own paranoia – not that he was likely to run around Hawkins proclaiming he had a boyfriend or anything, but that maybe certain people would… understand.

It was likely this confusing jumble of reactions that had ultimately let Steve win their disagreement about facing these nightmares again. But as he watched the panic slowly ebb from the tense line of Steve’s shoulders, he regretted not pushing his side harder.

“It’s… it’s coming back. Or at least it’s trying to.” Billy didn’t have to ask who it was. “Billy, it’s coming after you. After us. I don’t know when, I don’t know how to stop it or what to do about it, but whatever closing the gate last month did, it wasn’t permanent.”

“Well fuck,” Billy sighed, just as Mind Fucker gave an angry growl.

”As far as I can tell, the gate that was under the mall is closed. If it is seeking a way into this world, it must be finding another path.” That wasn’t particularly comforting. While it was at least good to know that their actions to close the gate hadn’t been entirely in vain, it also meant they had no idea what door it was trying to use, which made it a lot harder to stop.

He opened his mouth to relay Mind Fucker’s message to Steve, but before he could the shrill ringing of the phone cut him off. “Who the hell is calling at two in the morning?” Billy asked, a little dumbfounded and a touch worried. Because if Steve was getting a call at this time, it couldn’t be anything good, and there was nobody out of the pool of people who had Steve’s number that he wanted to hear were in some kind of danger. Damn, but being with Steve really had turned him soft.

Speaking of, Steve was already getting out of bed and heading for the phone with a mumbled, “I think I might have an idea.” Billy followed a few steps behind, if only because he had no idea who Steve was talking about, and hit the lower floor just as Steve was saying “Harrington residence” into the receiver. Polite as always, even at 2 am – it would have been amusing, if Billy wasn’t
listening so hard to make out the other side of the phone call.

There was a pause before Steve spoke again, listening to the voice that Billy could only identify as female, though the actual words were too quiet to be made out. “Yeah, that was – that was me. In the dream. I don’t know what’s going on, not completely, but I’m trying to figure it out too.” Another pause. “Heather, listen, I think… I think you should come over tomorrow afternoon. We’re going to figure this out, but we can’t do it alone.”

If he was understanding this right, Heather had… been in Steve’s dream? Or more than that, she and Steve had been in the same dream with the Mind Flayer. Shit.

Steve had just hung up the phone again, looking pretty damn overwhelmed, and all Billy could think to do was smile a little, something paper-thin that wasn’t really meant to be convincing, and joke, “You cheating on me with Heather in your dreams?”

Steve’s resulting chuckle was born more of surprise and relief than humor, but it was something.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly when I started writing this sequel I was like ‘oh haha funny fluffy sequel fic where Billy slowly becomes part of the family and the group accepts him it’ll be fun’ and then somewhere along the line it turned into actual plot and here we are¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Also!! The lovely and amazing IAmOnlyPartlyMajestic took my dumb vine joke from last chapter and actually animated it?? Check it out here!
Collaboration

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

Today’s meeting was certainly going to be interesting, to say the least. Steve wasn’t particularly looking forward to telling everyone the threat they’d hoped was over and done with was actually far from finished, but he couldn’t risk anyone not knowing until it was too late and someone got hurt. Plus he’d really prefer to have as many people looking for a potential solution as possible, which was something that hadn’t been possible last month when they’d all been separated early on. Clearly that hadn’t worked to their advantage.

Steve had agreed to round up about half the kids, which was at least distracting him from the difficult conversation ahead. Mrs. Byers would bring Will and Nancy and Jonathan would come with Mike, but Hopper was coming straight from work so Steve had to pick up El, as well as Max, Dustin, and Lucas. The roundabout path he was taking through town brought him right past Max first, and thankfully she’d been waiting for him because it didn’t take more than a few seconds for her to scramble out the door and claim the front seat for herself. Which was just perfect for him, because he’d never actually gone inside the Hargrove-Mayfield residence on the not-so-subtle recommendation of Billy’s that him meeting Neil would not be a good idea, and from what Steve had gleaned from that conversation, he wasn’t exactly keen to disagree. Billy had even offered to come get Max himself, but Steve had refused, because he didn’t know exactly what he could do for Billy now but if he could keep him the hell away from Neil he would absolutely do so.

As Steve twisted to look behind himself backing out of the driveway, he cast a covert glance at Max, but nothing looked out of the ordinary. He worried, sometimes, about her still being in that house. Steve might be a bit of an idiot when it came to school stuff, as friends and teachers had so often pointed out to him, but he wasn’t stupid when it came to people. And that half-hunched thing Billy did when he dropped a fork at dinner, or the way he stiffened under Hopper’s touch that time at the restaurant, or that half-hunted look in his eyes when Steve looked a little too long at a scar too old to be from fighting Russians? That shit didn’t come from nowhere, not on otherwise-overconfident Billy Hargrove. So yeah, he tried to keep an eye on Max, as best he could.

Unfortunately, his covert examination was not so covert after all, because Max was scowling at him as he pulled back onto the road headed to Hopper’s cabin. “What?” she barked, continuing to stare at him even as he returned his attention to the road.

He wondered if she’d always had that hard edge to her, or if it was something she’d picked up spending so much time with Billy. As much as they’d had their disagreements, the two of them were similar in more ways than Steve could count.

“Nothin’ Red, just thinking about how Dustin’s gonna try to kick you out of that seat. You know he always complains.”

Max rolled her eyes, and just like that the defensive line of tension left her shoulders. “He can try,” she said, flicking strands of red hair behind her shoulder. “I’m not cramming into the back. Your middle seat’s shit.” Steve sincerely doubted that. Max was many things, but resistant to Dustin’s whining about ‘best friend privileges’ was not one of them. Not that he was going to tell Max that, as it would only make her argue with Dustin longer.

“Language,” he chided instead, without any heat behind it. “Fucking hell, Billy’d kick my ass if he thought you got that shit from me.”
Her whole face scrunched up in playful indignation at his own cursing. “Like he hasn’t said worse.” They laughed, but as Steve turned onto the bumpy dirt path that headed out towards Hopper’s, Max’s laughter faded. She didn’t seem sad exactly – no, it was mostly seriousness. “I’m… glad Billy moved in with you, Steve;” she said finally, when the silence between them had started to stretch. “You’re good for him. Even if you are a total dingus like Robin says.”

Steve slowed to a stop in front of the cabin and let Max out to retrieve El, even as his hands tried to tighten subconsciously on the wheel. She didn’t know or anything, right? No, probably not, he decided as he stared at the places where the boards of their patchy repairs to the cabin stuck out in unsightly angles from the older wood. Max wasn’t particularly subtle, she certainly wasn’t that subtle, and if the two of them were in a car alone and she really knew he was dating Billy she probably would have just come out and said it. He watched her re-emerge from the cabin, El in tow, the two of them already deep in conversation as they piled back into the car, and thought that if she ever did find out, she might be okay with it. It would be nice, for Billy to be able to tell her at least, now that they were trying to do a better job of not hating each other’s guts.

Also, he should probably keep Max and Robin apart from each other. They clearly couldn’t be trusted to bond over things other than harassing him.

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Dustin was not looking forward to this meeting Steve had arranged. It was a good cover, a great one considering Steve’s usual abilities when it came to lying, but that was half the problem – it wasn’t a lie, and it meant Steve really was in danger, and for once he didn’t have any idea what to do to fix it. He leaned his head against the passenger side window (Max had tried to stake her claim but was ultimately no match for Dustin, which in a weird way made him feel even worse for withholding what he knew from her) and tried to sound as interested as Max, El, and Lucas in getting Steve to tell them what the meeting was about. Even if they’d all find out in five minutes anyway.

By the time they got back to Steve’s, it looked like everyone had arrived, but Dustin’s attention was focused on the girl sitting stiffly on the opposite end of the couch from Billy. Wasn’t that Heather? What was she doing here? Not that she wasn’t connected to the Upside Down stuff now, of course, but seeing her at the meeting was unexpected to say the least. Especially when she looked so uncomfortable at the crowd of people who’d gathered in the Harrington living room.

Steve flashed her a reassuring smile as he took the last remaining seat, which just so happened to be between her and Billy. He leaned a bit closer to Billy’s side, ostensibly to give Heather a little more space, though on the admittedly pretty spacious couch Dustin might not have noticed the slight tilt of Steve’s body had he not known what he knew.

“All right,” Steve started, clearing his throat, “I know you all want to know what was so important I had to call a team meeting, so I’ll just get right to it. The last couple of nights I’ve been having these dreams…”

Dustin tuned most of the explanation out, taking in the concerned looks of the rest of the party with a squirm of discomfort in his gut. That was, until Steve gestured to Heather. “…And last night, I realized I wasn’t the only one having these dreams. I saw Heather in them, and she saw me – like, actually me.” Heather shuffled under the weight of their combined stares, but Dustin couldn’t help it, because seriously? Steve and Heather were, what, sharing dreams? Somehow, even as wrapped up in the existence of weird supernatural stuff they’d become, this still felt weird.

God, Dustin hated the Mind Flayer. He hated it more than he’d hated any Demogorgon, or any of the Demo-dogs that had nearly eaten his face off. He hated what it had done to Will, and he hated...
what it was doing to Steve.

“Actually, there’s something I don’t get,” Heather said, and Dustin was pretty sure it was the first time he’d heard her talk since he’d gotten there. “You were only in the dreams… sometimes, like the first one and the one last night. And I know you said you were avoiding sleeping, but you didn’t start doing that until after Wednesday – but Tuesday, I dreamed and you weren’t there.”

Steve didn’t move, but next to him Billy went a little stiff. Steve must have noticed, seeing as his thigh was just barely brushing against Billy’s, but he didn’t make any startled movements of his own. “Uh, that’s – that’s weird. I don’t know.” And that was a lie, sure as Dustin knew Steve, which meant it probably had something to do with the whole boyfriend situation. Dustin had assumed Billy was why Steve hadn’t been around the past few Tuesdays, but they’d probably have been sleeping by two in the morning the same as any other night… sleeping together… and nope, that was the end of that train of thought, Dustin was putting a stop to that right there before he had to run screaming out of the room and then no force on Earth could keep Steve and Billy’s secret safe.

“So essentially,” Hopper began with a tired sigh, “we know these dreams are connected to the Mind Flayer, and that it thinks it’s got another door, or gate or whatever, to get back here. And…”

Steve gave an apologetic shrug. “Sorry Chief. Was hoping one of you might have an idea of what that gate might be.”

By the resulting silence, it seemed obvious that none of them had any more clues. It was Nancy who ended the uncertain pause with a reassuring, “we’ll keep our eyes open. And we will figure it out.” Dustin figured the plan to use the dreams as a distraction was working on Nancy just as well as it was on everyone else – she seemed wholly focused on this new mystery.

Steve nodded, and it wasn’t until some of the tension ebbed from his posture that Dustin even noticed he’d been tense before. “Thanks Nance.” His smile was quick, but looked real enough. “In the meantime I’ll, uh… order pizza? We can worry about a game plan after that.” It was as good enough an excuse as any, and it was clear to Dustin – and Billy, if the concerned furrow between his eyebrows was any indication – that Steve needed the break.

The party immediately folded in on itself, a half-circle of concerned chatter as they discussed the dreams and what the Mind Flayer wanted. They launched into listing out everywhere they thought a gate might be, including the one in the old Hawkins Lab, while suggestions were thrown in about getting access to these areas, none of which the adults would have approved of if they weren’t too deep in their own discussion to pay them any mind. As strange as it was, Dustin started to relax a little as they fell into their old rhythms and all thoughts of secret relationships were left behind. When it came to helping Steve, it seemed they were all in the same boat.

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Billy waited about two minutes before quietly slipping off to meet Steve in the kitchen. Though Steve stood by the phone, he hadn’t yet picked it up, and turned at Billy’s entrance like he’d been waiting for him. “Tuesday,” Steve hissed, and it would have been nonsensical except Billy had been thinking the same thing.

He dropped his own voice to a whisper. “We were asleep on Tuesday, it doesn’t fit the pattern, right? If Heather still got the nightmare, then you should have gotten it too.”

“Yeah, I should have.” Steve nodded his head, a swift jerky motion. “Except. There was one thing
different about Tuesday night from the rest of the week.” Steve pointedly avoided saying it just in case someone from the other room decided now was the perfect time to burst in, but Billy already knew where his train of thought was headed. Because yeah, he remembered Tuesday. They’d gotten home from the restaurant and he and Steve had sex and then, for whatever strange and potentially creepy reason, the Mind Flayer had left them alone.

“You really think that’s—”

“I mean, I doubt whatever’s causing this is staying away out of a respect for our privacy.” Steve worried at his bottom lip. “But it’s got to be connected, right?”

“Shit, I don’t know.” Billy grimaced; there was a lot he didn’t know lately, and that made him feel pretty damn unsteady. “Hey Mind Flayer, did you notice anything weird that night?”

"Aside from being driven half-mad when someone fell asleep without cooling the room down? No, I can’t say I had the presence of mind to notice much at all until morning."

For a monster of undetermined age from another dimension that had to have experienced far more than Billy had in his eighteen years of life, Mind Flayer sure could hold a grudge. “Yeah yeah, and I already apologized for not turning the- the air back on…” The air conditioning. They’d turned it off that night so Mind Flayer wouldn’t be a creepy perv, but Mind Flayer wasn’t the only one bothered by heat. “The air conditioning!” he repeated to Steve, who was looking at him like he’d lost his mind – and really, since he now routinely talked to the voice in his head, Billy kind of thought he’d get that look more often.

Billy gestured expansively to the room, the house, all of it. “We turned off the air so Mind Flayer wouldn’t be watching, but the other Mind Flayer likes it cold too. If we keep it hot, the dreams will stop, no matter when you fall asleep.”

Steve looked… unimpressed. “And what, let you sweat to death every night? Because—” and he lowered his voice, “—I’ve slept with your sweaty ass, and it was not the most fun I’ve ever had, I hate to break it to you. Plus it would mean Mind Flayer would be MIA too.”

"Simply put, your plan sucks,” Mind Flayer added, but Billy didn’t really expect him to like it anyway. And hell, it wasn’t like he wanted to wake up every morning feeling like he was on the surface of the fucking sun either, but what were their other options here?

He must have looked as frustrated as he felt, because Steve’s expression melted into something sympathetic and tired. “Look, I know you’re just trying to make this suck less. But truth is, it sucks man, and it’ll keep sucking until we figure out whatever this new gate is and deal with it. And I can’t just ignore whatever this is and hope it goes away, because the last time I did that…” Steve trailed off, looked to the side for a beat, but before Billy could ask he continued, “I just can’t. And frankly, I don’t think Heather can either.”

Shit, he’d nearly forgotten about Heather. “Alright. I should probably go check on Heather, actually. Make sure the nerds haven’t started trying to, like, drag her into their geek game or anything.”

“Or started grilling her about being my secret girlfriend,” Steve teased, laughing. “Yeah, I’ll be out in a minute.”

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When Billy stepped back into the living room, he noticed Heather was actually nowhere to be seen,
but it didn’t take long for him to find her sitting on the front porch, staring across the Harringtons’ perfectly manicured front lawn. Billy closed the door behind him with enough force to alert her to his presence, then sat down heavily next to her. “Don’t tell me the geek squad chased you out here?”

She gave a dry little laugh. “Those twerps? No, I don’t think there’s much those kids could do to force me to do anything. Except maybe the girl who throws shit with her mind.”

Billy nodded in commiseration. “You’d hardly believe it, but she’s actually one of the better ones.” He paused, letting the easy ribbing fade away. Heather must have felt the shift too, or been thinking along the same lines, because she shot him a look that roughly read ‘I am unimpressed with your complete inability to show any tact at all,’ but waited for him to continue. “Listen Heather, I know this is freaky shit. If I hadn’t gotten wrapped up in it last month, there’s no way in hell I would have believed bumblefuck Indiana had anything like this to hide. So if you need a minute to like, cope, or whatever, then by all means.”

Heather’s reply, when it came, was quiet, but laced with a tone of urgency. “I was wrapped up in last month too – hell, probably more than anyone. And Jesus, yeah, learning about real life monsters and stuff was an eye-opener, but that’s not” She cut herself off, huffed a frustrated breath through her nose, and tried again. “I wish I could say I didn’t remember what that thing did with my body. What it made me do. But Billy, I killed my parents. And you can say it wasn’t really me all you like, but it doesn’t change the fact that I remember watching them die. I was awake when the Mind Flayer infected them, and I was awake when it almost killed you in the mall too. And I thought all those nightmares were just me… trying to deal with that.” Her eyes were a little glassy with unshed tears, and shit Billy really should have sent Steve out here instead, he wasn’t good with all this touchy-feely crap, he’d never been good at it and Heather could probably use someone who actually made the right sad faces and sympathetic noises as needed and not Billy fucking Hargrove, notorious asshole.

Thankfully, it didn’t seem like Heather was waiting for a response. “Guess I was wrong about the nightmares. But now I think I can do something to… to help. If I can do anything to make up for it, anything that even comes close to fixing what I did even if it’ll never be enough… then I’m all in. All this weird, freaky monster shit – if I can help, then let me help.”

And Billy could argue, could press the point that it wasn’t her fault, that what that son of a bitch had made her do didn’t say anything about who she was, but he had a feeling it wouldn’t make much difference to Heather no matter what he said. He couldn’t say he hadn’t felt the same way about the last month – hell, since November when he’d terrorized some kids and beat the shit out of Steve and had become so desperate to put things to right, but he just couldn’t bring himself to so much as look at Steve, let alone apologize, because he couldn’t stand to see the evidence of his own handiwork, like a neon sign that he’d never make shit right between them and anything that might have been there was surely gone now.

But then Mind Fucker had showed up, and the Russian base happened, and before he knew it he had to look at Steve because they were two idiots trapped stories below the Earth out of a five idiot group and Steve… didn’t hate him. Not like he should have, not like he was expecting him to, not like any rational person might have treated the guy who beat them half to death in front of a bunch of middle schoolers. No, Steve was talking to him, and even cracking jokes, and Billy manned up and apologized for once in his sorry life, and Steve looked at him like maybe they really could salvage this after all. Everything had just snowballed from there, but if someone had told Billy back in June that by mid-July Steve Harrington would have even given him more than a derisive roll of the eyes should they interact outside of an English classroom, he’d have laughed in their face. Might still, for all that he hardly believed things had worked out the way they had. What he
had now was… good. It was the best fucking thing that had ever happened to him, and if it wasn’t for freaky monster shit, it would never have happened.

So no, he didn’t know what it was like to sit in the passenger seat of your own body while some hopped-up asshole melted your parents with your own two hands. Hell, even if it had happened to him, it wasn’t like he’d know how that would feel in a functioning family with parents he gave a shit about, anyway. But he understood what Heather meant. He understood that twisting desire to do anything, anything at all that might ease the guilt for something you knew you would never really stop feeling guilty about. So he didn’t argue with her. He just offered her a hand up and held the door for her as they headed back inside.

The dorks were still making that list of potential gates and plans for checking them – maybe he’d see if they needed some help.

Chapter End Notes

You’ve heard of porn without plot, now get ready for the (cut-away) porn IS the plot! Or, well, plot-relevant anyway.

This has literally nothing to do with the fic or anything but while writing this chapter I veered away from my usual Harringrove playlist and ended up listening to Aly & AJ’s Potential Breakup Song on loop for like half of it because we stan a throwback jam tbh. My writing habits are strange beasts I fear and do not fully comprehend, but hey, it works.
The sun was nearly slipping beneath the horizon by the time Steve and Billy got to the old Hawkins lab. The second half of their team meeting had been more about eating pizza and trying to recapture some semblance of normalcy than it had been about planning their next moves, but they’d ended with a list of potential gate spots (which was mostly just ‘anywhere freaky shit had gone down before’) and strict orders to not check out any of them alone. And Steve and Billy weren’t alone, obviously, they were checking out spots together so it didn’t technically break any of Hopper’s weirdly overprotective rules, and they weren’t fourteen years old like half the group so it wasn’t like that rule had been put in place for them anyway. Besides, Billy basically had super strength, and he was pretty sure there would be none of those damn cattle prods in an abandoned lab, so the concerns about safety were a little unwarranted.

They’d also told Heather about using heat to keep the dreams at bay, leaving out any details and leaning heavily on Billy’s ability to throw together a convincing cover story about Steve’s air conditioning crapping out Tuesday night. Billy really hoped she tried it, if only to get a night of sleep where she wasn’t reminded of the shit that son of a bitch had made her do.

After everyone had cleared out, the kids grumbling promises to not go charging off directly into dangerous shit (Billy gave them about a day, maximum, before they did exactly that), he and Steve had needed little time to decide they were going to do some snooping on their own. They’d already poked around the hospital – Billy had mumbled some bullshit about visiting a sick aunt, and Steve had hit the woman working the front desk with his deepest, most sincere, endlessly concerned eyes and before they knew it they’d snagged two visitor passes – only to find nothing at all out of the ordinary, certainly no giant cracks in the walls save the ones that had been haphazardly patched up since July. They’d swung by that creepy ass Brimborn Steel Works building too, but hadn’t found much other than some truly nasty red stains.

Which was how Billy ended up leaning against his Camaro in front of the now-defunct Hawkins Lab, watching Steve attempt to climb over the fence. To his credit, he wasn’t doing such a bad job, and had already made it about halfway up. Not that Billy was gonna just tell him that when he could use it to poke fun at him instead.

“Not bad Harrington,” he called as Steve wedged the toe of his preppy Eastlands into another gap, “you learn all this from climbing in girls’ windows? Bet all the ladies loved it when you snuck out to see them right under their parents’ noses. Real Prince Charming-like.”

Mind Fucker rumbled impatiently at the display, clearly not enjoying watching Steve’s arms flex as much as Billy was. "I do not understand why we do not simply-"

“Shh, you’ll see,” Billy said under his breath, the corners of his lips tugging up in anticipation.

“Can it,” Steve grumbled, and grunted as he swung himself upwards once more. Then, after a beat, “You saying you didn’t scale the sides of any houses yourself? Cause I gotta tell you, chicks love that.”

“For Hawkins chicks? Nah. For you, princess? Yeah, I’d climb the tallest tower on your flowing locks of hair.”
With a final push, Steve heaved himself over the top of the fence, clinging to the other side to catch his breath before beginning his slow descent. “I dunno man, I think between the two of us, you’d make for a much more convincing Goldilocks.” Steve dropped to the ground with a huff, staggering a little on impact. “Alright, give me a minute to figure out the lock,” he said, starting to head towards the guard station that they’d figured would have the gate’s controls inside.

Well, that was his cue. Billy walked over to the fence gate and eyed the mechanical locks. Then, making sure Steve was paying attention, he reached out and tugged on the doors, feeling the metal of the locking mechanisms groan under his hands and quickly give way under the strain of Mind Fucker’s strength. He waltzed right through the open doors, sporting what he knew was a shit-eating grin.

Steve flung his hands out wildly towards Billy, his face screwing up in outrage. “You are such a dick, you know that Hargrove?”

”Ah, I see now. Yes, this was definitely worth it.”

Billy grinned, tongue poking out between his teeth. “Thought you loved my dick, Harrington.”

Steve rolled his eyes so hard Billy thought they might actually roll back into his head, but there was a fond, if exasperated, smile on his face. “Oh my God, come on, this is serious.”

Billy hummed thoughtfully, even as he followed Steve to the lab doors. “Didn’t hear a ‘no’ there.”

“Well I’m not gonna lie. But dude, I know you’re not trying to make a pass at me in the Hawkins Lab. Supremely unsexy.”

Even just smack talking each other, Steve was always able to make that warm, pleased feeling well up in Billy’s chest. Damn him.

The actual door to the labs posed even less resistance than the gate had, and swung open easily under Billy’s touch, giving them all-access passes to the shittiest amusement park in the world.

“So, there was a gate open here at some point?” Billy asked, breathing in the musty smell of somewhere that had long since been abandoned. He’d gotten bits and pieces of the story of that first year the gate had opened, but the lab hadn’t featured much in what he’d heard so far.

“Yeah, in the basement if I’m remembering what the kids said about this place right. Well, mostly El. I don’t think anyone else had much time to get the blueprints. And, as I’m sure you realized when Dustin was trying to get us to that radio tower on the hill, they’re all terrible with directions anyway.”

That was something else Billy wasn’t sure he fully understood. For all of Saturday he’d been convinced that everyone would know about him and Steve, that people he’d never even spoken to before were going to turn and sneer at him, that fucking Neil would have inevitably caught wind of it and shown up to punch his lights out or, worse, gone after Steve. But they… hadn’t. Dustin hadn’t run his mouth. Hell, Dustin hadn’t even seemed to care, not in that disgusted sense Billy had been expecting. Maybe it was the confusion the whole situation left him in, but he was speaking before he could think better of it. “He’s about as bad at directions as he is butting out of other peoples’ business.” Billy immediately winced at his own tone, but didn’t take it back now that it was out there.

“Yeah, I guess.” Steve shrugged noncommittally. “But he’s a good kid. I know you hate the idea of other people knowing – with good reason, of course – but if somebody had to find out, I guess I’m glad it was him.”
Billy wasn’t immune to the little wistful tone in Steve’s voice. He knew Steve hated all the sneaking around, even as he acknowledged it was necessary, and truth be told Billy kind of hated it too, but it wasn’t like they had any other option. Still, he knew Steve liked to be open about relationship stuff, he’d seen it first-hand with Wheeler and heard Tommy bitch about it often enough to be well acquainted with Steve’s tendency towards big romantic gestures so obvious the whole school would be abuzz with the news in a matter of hours.

And on some buried, incredibly selfish level, Billy wanted that too. He wanted to be able to lean into Steve’s space when he had to listen to the kids play D&D, and to not have to bite his tongue on the stupid joke or double entendre Steve had unknowingly perfectly set up, and to hold his damn hand above the table for once. And he used to only be able to do it when they were alone or only Robin was around, but maybe, maybe, Dustin wouldn’t care if he did it either. Haltingly, he allowed, “It… doesn’t bother me as much as I thought it would. Doesn’t mean I’m alright with the brats poking their noses in business that isn’t theirs or anything. But that kid idolizes you too damn much for him to screw you over.”

Steve knocked his shoulder into Billy’s as they continued down what had started to feel like endless hallways. “He won’t admit it, but he likes you now too, you know.” Billy raised an unconvinced eyebrow, but Steve carried on. “I’m serious. I guess something you did back in that Russian lab really changed his mind.” It was hard to believe that Steve’s number one fan could ever like him after his front-row seat back in November, but hey, if Steve didn’t hold a grudge then maybe anything was possible.

Then he considered certain other people in Steve’s life who clearly hadn’t forgiven him, and suddenly he wasn’t so sure.

Billy returned his attention to the abandoned lab, though he didn’t find much out of the ordinary. There wasn’t anything to suggest the Mind Flayer had been here recently, or even that anyone at all had disturbed the growing layers of dust that had accumulated on every available surface. After a thorough search, they headed down the stairs and into rooms that started to look more like test chambers than science labs, culminating in a wide room with some sort of tree-like growth taking up the far wall. The foliage was wilted and blackened, almost charred-looking and long since dead, even as it curved protectively back towards its center.

“Holy shit,” Billy said, and heard Steve echo his sentiment. He’d seen the gate the Russians were trying to open, yeah, but this was nothing like it. That gate had been forced open with a huge machine and pulsing light and heat. This one looked like it was alive, like it had wanted to be open, like it had fought its own way into existence – or at least, like it had been alive once, since it didn’t seem especially lively now.

"It is sealed." Mind Fucker confirmed. "While it does prolong our search, I'm happy it's not this one – even when I was still in that place you call the Upside Down, this gate called to us to pass through. If this was the gate that was open, we would be, as you say, fucked."

Yeah, Billy could definitely see how that would be the case. To Steve, he relayed, “Mind Fucker says it’s still closed as far as he can tell.”

“That’s good,” Steve replied absently, still staring at where the growth had once crept across the walls. Billy thought that might be the end of it, another place searched and another name to cross off the list, but after a beat Steve continued.

“You know, I used to think this Upside Down stuff was the worst secret in the world to have. I used to hate knowing so much, because it meant that outside of a bare handful of people, half of which
were under the age of twelve, there wasn’t anyone I could talk to about it. There wasn’t any way for me to explain why I used to care so much about school, and popularity, and parties, and practically overnight it had all become such… bullshit. I looked at Tommy and Carol – hell, I looked at you when you showed up – and I just wanted to tell someone. I was desperate for it. But it wasn’t safe, and it wasn’t smart, and it’d just get me looks like I was fucking insane, you know? And I knew all that, but I just… wanted to tell people anyway. Guess that’s a running theme with secrets for me.”

Billy didn’t think they were talking about the Upside Down anymore. “This,” he said definitively, “sucks.” It startled a snort of laughter out of Steve.

“Yeah, it sure does.” It wasn’t until they were halfway back up the stairs again that Steve continued their conversation. “You don’t have to, but if you ever… felt like that… I think Max wouldn’t mind. If you told her.”

Billy’s immediate response was to shake his head. Because for all the begrudging tolerance they’d been treating each other with recently, he didn’t know if he was really ready to trust her with something like that. They weren’t siblings, they’d probably never be, and that was supposed to have been just fine with him, it was fine, he reminded himself. Plus if Steve was wrong, there wouldn’t be much he could do to stop her from talking to Neil. It was too much of a risk, too stupid to consider, especially with everything else on their plate right now.

“I can’t.” It was as much an admission of the potential danger as it was an admission of his own cowardice, how even if Max didn’t tell Neil or anyone else that maybe she’d reject him anyway, and he was more scared of that than he’d care to admit. She might stop trying to reach for whatever last shreds of commonality they had between them, and even though Billy had spent the last few years tearing that bond into shreds anyway, he’d sure fucking hate to lose what little they had left now.

Steve nodded, and Billy could tell he was holding himself back from prodding, but he didn’t push the issue and they hit the top of the stairs without saying anything else about it. What little light the lab’s windows had let in before was all but gone now, which meant the sun was well below the horizon and they should probably save any more gate explorations for tomorrow.

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“Are you sure this is going to work?” Mike asked, looking a little hesitant. She tried not to get angry. Yes, her powers had been a little unsteady since last month, and she still wasn’t able to move things around much, but she thought she could still do this part. She had to be able to do it. Steve was in trouble, and that nice girl Heather was in trouble, and they were counting on her.
Some of her anger faded when Mike clarified, “I mean, you’ve always had a person to look for before, but this time you’re just looking for the Mind Flayer. What if it doesn’t work the same way?”

“Just let her do it,” Max said, short and terse, glaring unhappily at Mike. But she was worried too; El could see it in the uncertain twist of her face, in the way she crossed an arm over her chest protectively like Dad had taught her people did when they were uncomfortable or lying. She didn’t think Max was lying though. Just trying not to show how unsure she was, like the rest of her friends were.

El shook her head stubbornly. “Have to try,” she insisted, and tied the blindfold behind her head decisively. She couldn’t let Steve get hurt, so she had to make this work.

She stood in the dark space again, and breathed a sigh of relief at still being able to be here. But Mike had been right – unlike the last few times she had done this, she wasn’t seeking out a person, just the Mind Flayer itself, to see if she could locate the gate. She tried to focus on just that, not its host or any of the people that had made up its body, just the Mind Flayer. For a split second she was reminded of the lab, of that first accidental contact with the Demogorgon, but past the dark space she could still sense the quiet shuffling and muted whispers of her friends. She wasn’t alone anymore, not like she had been then.

She thought she could sense what she was looking for then, and started to walk towards it, slow and cautious. The black of the void leeched away into vibrant blues and the thin layer of water under her became sand between her toes, leaving her standing on a beach. She’d never seen one in person, just on the TV, but it was just like she’d pictured it, warm and bright and something salty in her nose.

There was a woman standing on the beach, and a boy a little younger than El was. The woman was smiling, laughing, the wind gently tugging at her white sundress as she spoke to the boy. El stood and listened for a time, unwatched, and only startled when she heard the woman call the boy Billy.

Was she… in Billy’s head? It didn’t make sense. Sure, MF was inside him, but he was Billy’s friend, and nothing like the other Mind Flayer. Maybe her powers really weren’t working after all? But they’d brought her here, so she had to keep trying. She had to know why.

She focused harder, took slow steps further along the beach, trying to sort through the jumble of unsorted memories. There were darker ones as she left the beach behind, ones that featured a bad man, like Papa, who yelled and slammed things and hurt people. But there were good ones too, where Billy fended off Russians below the mall and watched movies with Robin and drove with Steve in the passenger seat. Actually, there were a lot with Steve. One in particular seemed to stand out the most in her search, of the two of them on Steve’s couch. Billy had his head leaned against Steve’s shoulder, and they were holding hands. It reminded her of the first few weeks of staying in the cabin, when she hadn’t really understood what was going on with the TV but she had liked sitting on the couch watching it with the man who'd offered her eggos and told her to call him Jim. The memory made her smile.

But something about the scene in Billy’s head suddenly felt cold, in a way it hadn’t before. Her powers seemed to scream at her like the fire alarms that had blared in the mall parking lot, but louder, right on top of her, unlike what she’d ever felt before. And they only got worse when she looked at Billy, like he... like he was what she had come here to find. She didn’t get it. She didn’t understand why when she saw him she felt another presence, the same she had felt when she had tried to find Heather but almost muted, the way music sounded when it was playing from another room.
She could see, for a bare second, a glowing outline across Billy’s chest. It cut a jagged vertical line, like he was being split in two. Almost like a crack. Like a gate.

Abruptly she felt yet another presence, but this one didn’t feel nearly as cold. It was almost protective in its intensity, like it was standing between her and whatever was on the other side of that crack. She thought if the cold presence was what she had come looking for, if that presence was the Mind Flayer that had threatened all of them and hurt her friends, then this presence, similar but just different enough to separate itself, must be Billy’s friend. This had to be MF.

Its voice was a rumble in her ears, quiet but urgent. *"You should go. I could not see it before, but I believe I understand the nature of this ‘gate’ now. And it isn’t safe for you to be here."*

El knew that, she could feel it, but she couldn’t just leave. “He’s my friend too now. I won’t let him get hurt.”

MF laughed. **“Neither will I.”** It felt like a promise. El had to trust that he wouldn’t break that promise. She nodded, took a step back, and was instantly back at the Wheelers’. She reached shaky hands up to remove the blindfold and tried to focus on the concerned faces around her.

“Are you okay?” Mike asked, just as Dustin chimed in, “Did you find the gate?”

She nodded again, though it hadn’t been what she was expecting at all. “It’s… not a physical gate, not like we thought. I think it’s trying to come through Billy and MF.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Lucas protested, frowning in thought. “Every other door to the Upside Down has been something we could see. How can it come through a person instead?”

“MF is from the Upside Down, right?” Max pointed out. “So maybe it’s latching onto that connection. Maybe it’s trying to use whatever’s letting MF stay here as a way to get in itself.”

“Like a crack between the worlds,” Will said, his own frown looking shaky and uncertain.

Mike, who was clutching her hand in his own, posed the only question she didn’t think any of them could answer. “So if MF is the gate, then how do we close it this time?”

Chapter End Notes

Steve: *Texts Billy 10 paragraph-long messages in a row about his feelings*
Billy: That sucks :(

It’s been so long since I’ve watched season 1 please forgive if the lab layout doesn’t actually match up

Also holy hecc, just about every single Harringrove fic I follow updated in the last two or three days and I got very distracted reading the updates so this chapter took a bit longer to finish up than anticipated. Hopefully you all had some other lovely fics to read as well! :(
They’d been so stupid. They’d spent all that time running around trying to find a gate when it had been right under their noses the whole time. But it wasn’t something Billy could fix; he couldn’t just punch some Russians, or break it with Mind Fucker’s strength, or have El slap a psychic band-aid on it. It was him, he was letting the Mind Flayer through, and he didn’t know how to begin to stop it or fix it.

He was putting Steve in danger, he realized as he relayed Mind Fucker’s words to Steve. Maybe he had been this whole time. He’d known it when he moved in, when Steve had offered his house and Billy had done nothing but take advantage of his generosity. He didn’t fit here, in this big expensive home, or with Steve’s friends who treated him like family and had even tried tolerating Billy’s presence for Steve’s sake. And Steve might lose those friends if they found out about the two of them, he might lose his family, and Billy couldn’t do that to him. Not for his own selfishness. He broke everything, but he couldn’t break this too.

Yes, the gate stuff might have been new, but Billy had been putting Steve in danger for a long time. This was just the fucking cherry on top.

But for all his talk about planning his feet he was a coward when it really mattered. So when Steve turned imploring eyes towards him and asked what they were going to do to fix this, like it was Steve’s responsibility and not something Billy had all but dragged him into, Billy couldn’t answer. Because he knew that the only real solution he had was to get as far away from Steve as possible and hope that it kept him safe and spared him from the nightmares. He could do it, it would fucking break him but he could do it. But if he tried to say goodbye he knew he wouldn’t have the fucking balls.

He shot up from the couch and took a stumbling step backwards, trying not to lose his resolve at the open confusion on Steve’s face. “I- I have to go,” he bit out, and then resolutely did not look at Steve again. He snatched his keys from the kitchen counter, did his best to ignore Steve scrambling off the couch and calling after him, and bolted out the front door, not stopping until he twisted the keys in the ignition of the Camaro and sped off. He felt like shit for doing it without a real explanation, and felt even worse when he thought about how he was giving up the best thing that had ever happened to him, but he reminded himself firmly that it was the only way to keep Steve safe.

”What the HELL do you think you are doing?”

Billy gritted his teeth. “Leaving, obviously.”

”And why exactly are you doing that? Steve wants to help. You know he wants to help. Leaving will not solve anything.”

Billy didn’t need this shit. Not from Mind Fucker of all people. “Fuck off, asshole. If you haven’t noticed, your buddy’s using me like Sauron and the fucking ring. It’s not safe for me to stay, and I’m not letting Steve get hurt just because I don’t want to go.”

Mind Fucker’s responding growl was ill-tempered and dismissive. ”He is not my buddy, and I do not know who this Sauron is.”
“That’s not the point.” Billy’s fingers flexed and clenched against the steering wheel as he took a turn just a little too fast, the back end of the Camaro fishtailing out behind him. “The point is that I’m not going to fuck up his life anymore.”

”When I ran and abandoned Steve you called me a coward, and you were correct. Allow me to return the favor. Dress it up however you like, you are running away, and that makes you as much of a coward as I ever was.”

“I’m not running away to save my own ass, I’m running to save his!”

”You do not give him enough credit. Steve does not need saving or protecting, nor does he want it.”

No, but that was what made Billy so dangerous to him. Steve would never tell him to leave, not to protect himself, because he was a self-sacrificing jackass who never knew when to put himself first. That was exactly why Billy had to go. “He’s not safe from the Mind Flayer with me around. Hell, he’s not safe from his own friends with me around. They’ve all been poking around lately, and sooner or later Dustin’s going to tell someone, or somebody else will find out, and then I’ll have ruined Steve’s life without anybody to blame but myself.”

”Humans and their hang-ups…” Mind Fucker muttered, but continued before Billy could interrupt. ”I have spent an inordinately long time around these humans, and I have learned more about them than I thought I ever cared to. But clearly you have not been paying as much attention. The tiny human has kept his word and not told anyone. The other humans all care about Steve and, by some miracle, you. Clearly you do not see it, but they do like you. If they ever did learn the truth, or if you told them, I do not believe they would be willing to change their minds about either of you so easily.”

Billy wasn’t sure he believed that, not entirely. But it was so similar to the conversation they’d had in the lab. Steve seemed to think it was true too, or at least he was willing to risk it, for the sake of Billy of all people. And Billy had spent so long knowing what reaction he’d get from Neil and people like Tommy that it was hard to believe there was anyone who could think differently.

But, to his surprise, he had been proven wrong. Steve hadn’t rejected him or sneered at him or repeated any of the names Billy called himself. No, against all expectations, he’d felt the same way. And Robin hadn’t had any judgment in her tone when she’d guessed Billy’s secret and revealed her own. Dustin hadn’t reacted like he’d expected either. It was hard to believe, but Steve’s friends really did seem like they didn’t mind, or at the very least they would make an attempt to understand. He hated to admit it, but maybe Mind Fucker really was right.

But that didn’t solve all his problems, though it did incrementally lift the pressure of his foot from the gas pedal. “Even if that’s true, what about the gate? If the Mind Flayer is trying to use me as the best way to protect Steve is to stay with him, and we are not going to find a way to combat my ‘buddy,’ as you put it, by
driving away from everyone who has even heard of my world. So if you do not wizen the fuck up and go back to him yourself, I will turn this body around!”

The Camaro rolled to a slow stop in the middle of the road. Billy took a deep breath, let it out in a gusty sigh, and ran his hands though his hair. He considered his options.

He reached again for the steering wheel, and made his choice.

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Steve stood in the sticky humidity of the Hawkins night air and stared sightlessly at his driveway. He couldn’t bring himself to turn around and go back inside. It would make this night too real. He’d have to face his big empty house, and accept that he’d be falling asleep alone for the first time in well over a month.

And he didn’t even understand why. Well, in a way, he sort of did. Billy had said he was the gate, and that the Mind Flayer was trying to come through him. And clearly that had freaked him out. And Steve got it, honestly. He understood that finding out you were housing some kind of portal for the thing that had almost killed all of them and was giving your boyfriend nightmares might be too much to deal with, and might send you hurtling away from said boyfriend.

Ex-boyfriend? Shit, had they broken up? Steve couldn’t tell. He didn’t want to think they had. This was just like Nancy all over again.

Either way, he got how that might freak somebody out. But Christ, he really hadn’t expected Billy to just up and leave with barely a word. Because Steve could try to fix this, he’d try anything, he’d have the nightmare a hundred more nights if it would give him the answers he needed, but he couldn’t fix it if Billy was gone.

So he was stuck halfway between his front door and the porch steps, waiting, hoping that he hadn’t fucked another relationship up. Minutes ticked by. He crossed his arms, shivering a little despite the heat.

There were headlights coming down his street. It was too dark to make out the car, but Steve couldn’t help the sad twist of hope that pooled in his gut at the sight of them. And then the headlights grew brighter and closer, and turned into his driveway, and Billy was getting out of the car and leaning against the diver side door looking about as uncertain as Steve had ever seen him.

Billy didn’t say anything for a beat, and Steve felt his initial relief get washed away in anger, sharp and hot, so he spoke instead. “What the fuck was that about?” It wasn’t what he wanted to say; he wanted to run up and kiss Billy, and to make sure he wasn’t going to leave again. But the sharp spike of hurt at watching Billy go made it impossible to do any of that.

But Billy surprised him. He clenched his hands into fists two or three times, took a halting step forward, and said, “I- shit, I’m sorry, okay?” And yeah, Steve thought, the apology was nice and definitely washed away some of the anger, but it wasn’t what he’d been expecting at all. “I just heard the gate stuff, and I thought about how I just keep putting you in danger, and I panicked.”

“It’s…” he was going to say ‘it’s okay,’ but it wasn’t. It wasn’t okay that Billy had tried to leave, but it also wasn’t okay that he thought the mere act of existing around Steve was dangerous.

“Just… you can’t leave like that man. I know what you were thinking but if we’re gonna make this work, you can’t go running off alone.”

“I know.” Billy smiles sardonically. “Mind Fucker talked some sense into me.”
Steve laughed a little. “At least one of you has some sense.” He finally stepped closer to Billy, taking his hand in his own. “And you’re not putting me in danger. Even if you were, you don’t have to protect me. I think I’m old enough to make that call for myself.”

“I don’t know what to do about any of this,” Billy admitted quietly. “The monster shit, the relationship shit, any of it. I feel like I’m completely out of my depth here.”

Steve tightened his grip on Billy’s hand. “We’ll figure it out together. I promise we will.”

For all their willingness to go looking for the gate, none of Will’s friends really seemed to know what to do about it now that they’d found it. El had reassured them that MF was going to tell Billy, which Will thought was a step in the right direction, but it didn’t mean Billy would suddenly have a solution for closing a gate he’d just found out was inside of him.

Not for the first time, Will wished he knew Billy just a little better. Because he could imagine how Billy might have been feeling. He’d felt the same way, when the Mind Flayer had been inside of him. He knew what it was like to feel dangerous to your friends, and to feel out of control of your own actions.

And he didn’t know for sure, but the way Steve and Billy acted around each other… he thought he might understand how Billy felt that way too. Not for sure, not enough to actually say something about it to either of them, of course. Though he had, he remembered with a flicker of embarrassment, confided in Steve only a few days ago.

He doubted Billy would be any more amenable to that kind of discussion than he would be to talking about his Upside Down-related feelings with Will. Though, for all that Will felt like he and Billy couldn’t be any more different from each other if they tried, the Upside Down seemed to have a way of tying vastly different people together.

Which brought to mind another question, one that Will had been privately wondering while his friends discussed their options with the new gate. They knew, or at least they were pretty sure, the Mind Flayer was using whatever connection the Upside Down had to MF to reach those who had come in close contact with the Mind Flayers. It made sense for Heather to get the nightmares, since the Mind Flayer had taken control of her. Steve, too, he understood – he lived in the same house as Billy, and Will thought he could remember them mentioning the Russians trying to put MF inside of Steve, so he would have been an obvious target too.

But if all that was true, then why wasn’t Will having nightmares too?

Of course, he was having nightmares – he’d probably have nightmares for the rest of his life – but they weren’t like Steve and Heather’s. He was pretty sure they were just real nightmares. But if these strange, almost cyclical dreams were happening to the Upside Down-touched, then… “Why aren’t I having the nightmares too?”

He’d said it out loud unthinkingly, only meaning to mumble it under his breath, but he must have been louder than he’d thought, because his friends quieted and all turned to focus on him.

Mike’s brows furrowed in confusion. “Do you… want nightmares?”

“No!” Of course he didn’t want them. Even if the idea that his friends were suffering while he had seemingly escaped gave him an uncomfortable twist of guilt in his stomach. “I don’t want them, but the Mind Flayer was inside me too. So wouldn’t it make sense?”
His friends were silent for a beat as they thought. “Well,” Max offered, “Maybe it’s because of when it happened? Like, the Starcourt stuff was only last month. Maybe November is too far away for it to affect you.”

“Maybe,” Will allowed, but it didn’t feel quite right – or at least, not like the entire reason. “I was still getting the— the goosebumps though. When he was near.”

“What if you’re just doing something different from Steve and Heather?” Mike tried. “Steve said he was avoiding the dreams by just being awake at the time. So something like that, something you didn’t even realize you were doing.”

“They mentioned something about air conditioning to Heather too, right?” Lucas added. “If it likes the cold, then the heat…”

Oh, that… that could be it. “We don’t have air conditioning,” Will said, with a self-conscious press of his hand to the back of his neck. “Since it’s August, it could have just been too hot. But if we wait too long, or we get a cold night, or I sleep over…” He didn’t want to think about it. They didn’t have great heating either, not enough that would be able to keep the dreams away if it took that long to deal with him. And if Will started seeing the Mind Flayer in his dreams again, if he went back to being the freak he’d felt like last November, on top of the knowledge that it was trying to get back to their world, he didn’t know if he could stomach it.

“Then we can’t wait,” Mike decided. “We have to deal with this thing now, before it gets any worse, and before Will gets the nightmares!”

Will flushed. He knew Mike didn’t mean anything by it, but... it was nice to hear. That his friends were looking out for him like that.

“We don’t know how to close the gate yet,” Dustin pointed out, though if Will didn’t know any better it almost seemed like he was hesitant for a totally different reason. “And it’s starting to get kind of late. Maybe we should wait for tomorrow—”

“That’s exactly why we have to get to Billy now, before 2 am. And it’s barely 9, are you tired?”

Dustin scowled, but strangely looked a little embarrassed as he replied, “No, I just don’t think bursting in on someone when they might be sleeping is a great idea.”

“I think I might have an idea.” El’s quiet voice cut off whatever Mike was going to say in response. “To close this kind of gate. I don’t know if it’ll work. But I want to try.”

In the face of her look of resolve, even Dustin didn’t have any more arguments.

“Okay, what do we need to do?” Max asked.

“It would help if I was near Billy, I think. Maybe Steve and Heather too. And we’ll need… ‘backup’.”

“What kind of backup?”

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“So let me make sure I’ve got everything right. All of you,” Hopper grumbled, gesturing at the assortment of pre-teens and barely-eighteen years olds in front of him, “completely ignored what I said and went looking for the gates anyway.”
El attempted a defiant, “Well, technically-”

“Ah ah ah,” Hopper cut her off, “Don’t you ‘technically’ me! And now you have this plan to- to what, exactly?”

“Enter the dreams. Chase the Mind Flayer. Find the gate inside the dream, and close it.”

“Oh, well when you put it like that…” Jesus. With all the supernatural shit that had been going on, Hopper had figured some demo-whatever was going to get him sooner or later, but he should have known better. These kids were the ones who were going to send him into an early grave.

But even if he now realized the Upside Down couldn’t hold a candle to a stress-induced heart attack, it didn’t mean running off into dreams chasing down flesh monsters was particularly safe either. It wasn’t that he doubted El could do it; he’d seen the kid do amazing things before, and he had full faith in her abilities. He just didn’t like the idea of her putting herself in danger somewhere he couldn’t go and make sure she was safe.

She had a good heart, and wanted to help her friends. He just hoped she stayed safe too.

He pulled at the collar of his uniform where a light sweat had started to plaster it uncomfortably against his neck. Clearly Steve had already been swayed by the kids before he’d gotten here, since there was a distinct lack of air conditioning in the house. Hopper ran hot, but about the only person who looked even more uncomfortable at the temperature was Billy.

That kid… Hopper still didn’t know how he felt about Billy. It felt like in one second he was asking Steve if he wanted to press charges against the guy who’d beat his face in and threatened the kids (he hadn’t, which Hopper supposed made sense – it would have brought more attention to what had been going on in the Byers house that night than they could afford), and in the next instant Billy was living here and he and Steve were practically inseparable.

The moving in, at least, he sort of got. He was a cop after all, and he knew what it meant when someone like Billy totally shut down in front of him, or flinched at a simple grab of the shoulder. He couldn’t do anything about his suspicions unless Billy brought it up, which he highly doubted he’d ever do, and things had only gotten more complicated now that Billy was legally an adult and no longer living at home… but Hopper was at least happy the kid had pulled himself out of that shit and attempted to turn his life around.

Easier said than done, with a monster living inside your brain. Hopper could admit he was impressed on that front.

He didn’t exactly understand what had changed between the two of them in their infiltration of the Russian lab either, but he guessed things looked a lot different when you were facing potential death by Russians and murderous monsters from another dimension. Case in point, Hopper had actually started to trust Billy Hargrove. A little bit. Steve certainly seemed to, and as much as it surprised Hopper given what he’d known of Steve prior to this Upside Down stuff (mainly busting a good number of parties and an unfortunate fist fight with Jonathan), Steve was someone whose judgement he’d come to trust.

It was almost funny, in a dark sort of way. He’d spent so many years alone since Sarah, and all of the sudden Hopper seemed to be adopting kids left and right. He really shouldn’t have made a habit out of it.

So when Billy stood up to offer defense of El’s plan, Hopper at least allowed him the courtesy of listening before he shut it down again. It was only fair.
Now that all eyes were on him, Billy seemed to wilt a little under their combined stares. “I uh… I don’t know much about this Upside Down shit, I’ll admit. And all this stuff about entering peoples’ minds and seeing their dreams and stuff, it’s kind of freaky. But if El thinks she can do it, if she thinks she can help them…” he gestured to Steve, Heather, and even Will, but his eyes were focused only on Steve with a sort of desperate intensity. Interesting.

“She won’t be alone.” That was from that girl, Heather, the one who’d been possessed. “We think, at least. If Steve and I keep sharing a dream, then when El tries to enter the dream we should be there too.” He didn’t know Heather at all really, which usually meant only good things coming from a cop, but in this instance gave him precious little to go on. But she seemed determined, with an almost-desperate look in her eye that mirrored Billy’s own. From the reports of Mr. and Mrs. Holloway’s “disappearance”… yeah, he could understand why she felt so invested.

“Of course, I couldn’t let any of you brats get hurt on my watch.” Steve smiled, soft and easy, when he looked at the kids. “Especially not El. She’s actually well behaved, unlike the rest of you.” This statement incited offended shouts from the kids and a fair amount of pride from Hopper.

The other older girl, Robin, snorted a laugh at the racket. “And you’ll have us to help out here if there’s anything we can do. I can’t afford to lose my coworker to a shitty sleep schedule any longer, Keith’ll fire us both.”

“Keith wouldn’t fire you,” Steve grumbled in response, but there was a sincere thanks buried in his tone.

At his shoulder, Joyce nudged Hopper gently with her elbow. “As much as I hate to admit it, El’s the best chance any of us have at stopping this before it gets worse.” Her eyes darkened, and Hopper considered that she wasn’t entirely altruistic – after all, she had to protect her kids too. And if this might spread to Will if they didn’t deal with it now, then she had plenty of reason to worry. But it didn’t mean she was wrong either, and it didn’t mean she wasn’t also concerned for the others’ wellbeing.

Jonathan, where he was seated next to Nancy, seemed to pick up on the threat to Will as well. His normally slumped, self-conscious pose was a little straighter, a little more eager to offer what help he could. Next to him Nancy looked similarly focused, with that same spark in her eyes that had led her to take on that first Demogorgon head-on.

Hopper looked between everyone seated and spared a brief moment of thought for when his life had taken such a strange turn. Being stared down by a bunch of pre-teens, trying to protect people he almost thought of like family from monsters from another dimension while they endangered themselves to do the same. It was a pretty far cry from where he’d been only a year prior.

There was no help for it. “Well, we’ve got a while until 2:15 at any rate. And while normally I’d say it’s way past you kids’ bedtimes, I guess it can’t be helped tonight.” Hopper sighed. This was going to be a long one for sure. “I guess I’ll get us some caffeine in that case.”

Chapter End Notes

Hopper: Don't go exploring these gates before we know what we're dealing with
Literally everyone: *ignores him*
Hopper: Am I a joke to you
You can tell we're getting closer to the end because the chapter word counts just keep getting longer lmao

Quick edit: Some minor personal issues have come up that have delayed the next chapter and comment replies. Apologies for the wait, but I assure you more is coming! Thanks for your patience in the meantime ^^
Thanks for sticking with me on the inadvertent mini-hiatus this fic took lol. Apologies for the wait, but enjoy an extra long chapter in exchange!

I will respond to all of your lovely comments on the last chapter very soon as well <3

As it turned out, waiting for their own personal witching hour meant they had a lot of time to kill. It also meant that Billy was attempting to kill that time without trying to look too obvious when it came to how worried he was over Steve. Because he’d been in support of the plan to confront this thing, yeah, but it didn’t mean he was thrilled about this Nightmare on Elm Street shit.

Especially considering the conversation they’d been in the middle of before their house had become mission control. Again. Maybe someday Billy could make a good argument for changing the locks. The first bullet point on his list would have been interrupted conversations.

He hadn’t exactly meant to start a Big and Serious conversation – frankly Billy thought they’d reached their quota for the day anyway – but he hadn’t thought before he spoke, recounting some dumb gift Max had gotten him last Christmas (it wasn’t dumb, it was barely a month after she’d decided she wasn’t taking his shit anymore so the fact she’d gotten him anything at all had taken him aback, but good fucking luck getting him to admit that without gagging). He’d laughed a little self-consciously and tried to save face by joking that Steve had probably gotten a Porsche, expecting Steve to give that cute little huff and correct him, but something in Steve’s expression had shuttered.

In a second it was gone, replaced by an easygoing smirk. “Yeah, but I sold it to buy more preppy polos,” he said easily, but Billy wasn’t an idiot and he hadn’t missed whatever had just happened. “I should have used it to get Hopper a new wardrobe instead apparently, because he was wearing this atrocious lime green Christmas sweater, man, you should have seen it, I’m sure he’s still got it around-“

And why had Steve been anywhere near Hopper on Christmas anyway? Yeah, they’d fought off monsters together or whatever, but surely Steve’s parents wouldn’t have let him leave on the holiday to spend time with the police chief for any reason that wasn’t getting arrested. It didn’t add up, or rather, it did add up but Billy didn’t like the answer. It fit a little too well with the way the Harrington estate felt just a little too empty some nights.

He had a few options here. He could grin, and ask if Steve had any pictures of the awful green sweater, and comfortably discard his suspicions. Or he could actually grow a pair and ask what he’d been avoiding asking since July.

Well, blackmail material for the chief of police certainly sounded promising.

”Pussy,” Mind Fucker taunted like he could already predict Billy’s response. Hell, maybe he could; they shared a body, it wasn’t so farfetched that Mind Fucker was probably able to read him like a book at this point. What rankled more than that was that he was right, damn it. Billy was a
coward when it really counted. But he didn’t have to be this time.

He gathered his resolve. “Steve,” he interrupted, “Your parents weren’t actually home last Christmas, were they?” Internally, he winced. Not the most tactful way he could have asked that probably.

Steve looked caught out, his lips parted and eyebrows raised in surprise. “I, uh-” Abruptly, pounding on the front door drew both of their interests, and something relieved entered Steve’s expression instead. “I should get that, hang on.”

And like that Billy had lost whatever opening he’d had. It wasn’t that he was trying to catch Steve off guard or anything, but he knew whatever Steve’s situation with his parents was had to be bothering him – how could it not, right? Billy missed his mother every damn day, and as shitty as Neil was Billy wasn’t exactly sure he could make the claim that not having either of them around would have been preferable. But he couldn’t actually help Steve until he knew what was going on.

Though they had plenty to worry about right now aside from that. Namely the reason their house had been all but overrun. But their sudden occupancy did present an opportunity he wasn’t sure he’d get again.

It wasn’t one he particularly relished taking advantage of, but he had to admit there was at least one person other than Steve that might be able to fill him in on the deal with Steve’s parents. If only they weren’t also the person least likely to want to tell him that information.

…He was really going to regret this, wasn’t he?

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It wasn’t that Nancy wasn’t concerned with all this dream haunting stuff. She was, of course. There was no way she couldn’t be, after noticing the dark smudges under Steve’s eyes, and the tense set of Jonathan’s shoulders, and even the lost look that periodically flickered across Heather’s face. She had more than enough on her plate with all of that alone.

But it didn’t mean her other concerns had vanished either. And now that they were preparing to risk their lives on some crazy mission again, it somehow seemed more urgent to get her answer. If they were going into this together, there shouldn’t be any secrets between them, right? And yet Steve was still hiding something from her – from all of them. And for the life of her she still couldn’t understand why.

It was enough to drive a girl insane. You know, if the knowledge of the Upside Down hadn’t been enough on its own. Everyone biding their time in the calm before the storm was starting to drive her up the wall, but it wasn’t like Steve was suddenly going to change his mind and tell her all about whoever he’d tried to keep secret for the last month or so, right?

Well, now that she thought about it, there was one person she hadn’t asked who might have the answer to her question. As loathe as she was to admit it, the only person who might really know if anyone unusual had started visiting was the house’s other occupant. Normally she’d consider how tough of a time she was about to have trying to get Billy to tell her anything, but she also considered that it wasn’t often that an opportunity like this would present itself again. She should probably make the most of it.

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If there was one thing stranger than Billy actively seeking out Nancy Wheeler, it had to be that
Nancy appeared to be seeking him out as well. He’d hardly met her eye passing her in the hallway before she’d paused, a determined set to her jaw, and jerked her head to the side with a “Can we talk?” that was more command than request. He might have protested on principle alone, but he reminded himself that he had wanted to talk to her too, and it saved him a whole lot of trouble if he just agreed and went with her.

He followed her into the study, a room he’d hardly entered himself but which was far enough away from the living room that they were unlikely to be overheard. Which was certainly suspicious, but again, had been exactly what he wanted anyway, so he couldn’t complain. Of course, Nancy picked up on his lack of bitching. “Alright, that was way too easy. What’s the deal?”

Billy shrugged, trying to make it seem casual and dismissive. “Can’t a guy just want to treat the princess like she deserves?” Nancy’s flat look communicated ‘no’ pretty effectively. “Okay, fine. I had something I wanted to talk to you about too.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “In that case… if you agree to answer my question, then I’ll do my best to answer yours.” Billy figured that was pretty damn dependent on what she tried to ask, but he nodded his agreement. “Alright, what did you want to know?”

Well, he’d been blunt with Steve before. No point in developing a sense of tact now. “I’ve been crashing here for almost two months now, and I’ve never once seen Steve’s parents. Not that I’m complaining, but… are they ever around? In all the time you dated Steve, did you ever even meet them?”

It didn’t seem to be the question Nancy had expected him to ask – though what that might have been he had no idea – and she took a minute to consider her answer. “Steve’s parents aren’t…” she began, then trailed off, and started over. “I never really met them, no. A few times Steve told me they’d ‘dropped by,’ like they were distant relatives and not his own parents. But in general he didn’t like to talk about it much.” Yeah, Billy had gathered that much for himself. “Honestly, Steve’s probably the only one who knows the deal there… But Hopper, and Mrs. Byers, and even the kids have been good about it. He’s always around on holidays. And,” she added with a twitch of a smile, “Mrs. Byers is always happy to have another kid she can mother hen.”

Didn’t he know it. Nancy had confirmed some of his own assumptions, but left just as much unanswered. He was about to pry further, but before he could Nancy presented her own question. “Speaking of Steve, now that you live here… if someone was coming around recently, someone that he might be dating, you’d know, right?”

Uh-oh. She was still convinced Steve was dating someone, wasn’t she? He really should have seen that coming. Well, that was one question he couldn’t answer. Especially since, in a sense, she was correct. In another sense, though…

“How’ve you seen anyone unusual. Aside from yours truly, of course.” That was… technically true. Even if Nancy’s look of annoyance and only mild disappointment conveyed her reluctance to believe it. Well, he was annoyed too. What right did she have to be prying into other peoples’ business anyway? Maybe that was a little hypocritical, considering what his own question had been, but no one had ever accused Billy of being a saint.

“Look Nancy Drew,” and she bristled under the nickname like he’d expected and it gave him an uncomfortable sort of gratification, “why the fuck do you care so much anyway if Steve’s got a girlfriend? Don’t know if you noticed, but you chose Jonathan, so you don’t exactly have a solid case for jealousy here.”

She only grew more incensed at his words, but abruptly the anger in her eyes melted into an intense
concern that made him a little uncomfortable to bear the brunt of. “Because I’m worried, you jackass,” she said, though it lacked any of her previous heat. “I can’t imagine why he might be dating someone and not want to tell us, unless there was something making him, or something dangerous he doesn’t want us involved in, or… or something that might end up hurting him. And if he does get hurt, and I didn’t even know anything was wrong in the first place, I’d only have myself to blame. You said it yourself – I chose Jonathan. I know that doesn’t give me the right to demand personal information, but if its courtesy or Steve’s safety… I choose his safety.”

Billy loosed a gusty breath, unsure of how to deal with that. Again, she wasn’t wrong in more ways than she knew – he had hurt Steve, and if the wrong information got leaked to the wrong people, he might be the reason Steve got hurt again. She probably had every reason to be worried even if she didn’t know why. But his silence was supposed to prevent that exact thing from occurring. Hadn’t it worked so far?

He considered, reluctantly, the worried and hurt look on Nancy’s face. He thought about how frustrated Steve had been with the need for secrecy, and the very real possibility that one day someone would find out on their own who cared for neither of them, and this would all go to shit regardless of who Billy told. He also remembered, somewhat begrudgingly, that Robin and even Dustin finding out hadn’t been the end of the world, much to his surprise.

And he thought, not for the first time but this time he was starting to actually believe it, that if their strange little group could take the existence of monsters in stride, then maybe they could accept and keep this secret too.

"I can tell you are thinking too hard about this," Mind Fucker cut in when he’d probably been quiet for longer than socially acceptable. "I still don’t fully understand everything about human hang-ups. But if this is the family Steve has chosen, and the one he has therefore dragged you into as well-" Billy couldn’t help the wry quirk of his lips at the remark- “then, from what I have seen, they are not likely to abandon each other so easily.”

It reminded him of being in the car, trying to leave Hawkins in the rearview, and Mind Fucker managing to talk some sense into him before he fucked up the best thing he’d ever had. Maybe it wasn’t always such a bad idea to at least consider the guy’s advice from time to time.

“Just… shit, can’t believe I’m about to say this. Listen.” He dragged a hand through his hair and tried not to acknowledge it for the stalling tactic it was. “If you really want to know who Steve’s dating,” her eyes sharpened at the apparent confirmation of her suspicions, not that she really needed him to say as much it seemed, “I think you should hear it from Steve himself.” It felt a little selfish to say that, to push the burden off onto Steve, but he really did mean it. Despite how personally involved he was, it really wasn’t Billy’s secret to divulge, not to Nancy at least. There was enough shit between the two of them that it was a boundary he wasn’t crossing without Steve in the room.

Nancy wasn’t quite appeased. “I’ve asked him before, but he just dodges the question. He laughs it off, or redirects, or worse, pretends he has no idea what I’m talking about even though he’s an awful liar and we both know it. If I ask him again, I doubt I’ll get a much different answer.”

“Wouldn’t be so sure about that one if I was you.” Because, and it shocked him to his core to admit it, but he was actually okay with Nancy Wheeler knowing. Sure she was a prude, and frankly a little stuck-up for his taste, and it wasn’t like her and Steve hadn’t hurt each other before. But something about the way she’d pleaded her case, the quiet intensity with which she’d described her concern that there was something Steve couldn’t tell her, made him think that maybe she could be trusted with this. That whatever the rest of backwater Hawkins may have led its populace to
believe, Nancy wasn’t going to abandon Steve over something like this.

“You should talk to him… when he’s ready. Don’t push it. But when he feels like he can tell you, he’ll tell you.”

And maybe he should take his own advice as well, when it came to matters of parents, though that particular topic could wait now that he had a few people to talk to himself before this night was through. One, Steve, to tell him yes he was sure that some - some! - people could know if Steve really needed to tell them, and no he wasn’t feeling sick, and no Mind Fucker hadn’t taken over his body just to get him to say it. The next conversation, however, was one that surprised even himself. But he thought about what Steve had said in that old shell of Hawkins lab, and figured it was about time he had a revelatory discussion of his own.

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Steve’s hushed conversation with Billy had been startling, to say the least. Just earlier Billy had been so against anyone finding out about the two of them that he’d nearly tried to leave altogether, and now he was (admittedly, reluctantly) okay with Nancy knowing? He’d have been half convinced that Mind Fucker had gotten fed up with the two of them and taken the reigns if Billy hadn’t led by dispelling the possibility.

Selfishly, he was sort of thrilled. Try as he might, Steve was not much of a private person. And after all the shit their group had been though together, trying to lie to any of them really sucked. They were practically family after all. And Nancy especially had been pretty awkward to deflect, considering their history. Not for any romantic reasons, of course – he was over Nancy, and she was over him, and that part of his life was definitively done with. But for a long time he hadn’t kept any secrets from Nancy, and even now he didn’t want to either.

And now he didn’t have to. Plus Billy quietly agreeing that certain people could be trusted had made him disproportionately happy on its own. Sometimes he wasn’t sure if Billy was really happy with the newfound friend group he’d been all but thrust into, but if he was agreeing to this, then he really was growing more comfortable around them after all. It made something funny skip around in Steve’s chest.

Well, Nancy first, potential heart condition later. He motioned her away from the group in his living room and down a hallway so they could talk without being overheard.

“Billy mentioned you might have something to ask me?” he offered, expecting her to light up. Instead, she looked a little pained.

“I… I did. And Steve, you know you can always tell me anything. But… I got carried away too. And I’m sorry about that.” She looked distinctly uncomfortable, lips pursed and arms crossed, hands tightened in the fabric of her shirt. “I tried to solve a mystery, when I probably should have just said all that from the start. I don’t want you to feel like you have to hide anything from me, but I’m not entitled to the truth either.” She let out a gusty sigh, eyes still downcast. “So if you’re going to yell at me for snooping, and tell me to mind my own business… yeah, I deserve that. And I’ll stop pushing, if you don’t want me to know.”

Steve could hardly do more than blink at her for a few beats. That wasn’t what he’d been expecting at all, from what Billy had told him. And yet, it was kind of nice to hear anyway. Ironically, he thought, it made him a little more certain of his decision to tell her about Billy, rather than giving him an excuse to keep quiet.

“Uh. Well, that’s nice of you Nance – really, I appreciate it, I do – but I actually came over here
because I… wanted to tell you.”

“You – what?” Nancy just stared at him for a few moments, head tipped to the side, apparently pretty thrown by his answer. “You can tell me? I mean, everything’s just been so secretive…”

“With good reason,” Steve replied wryly, not unaware of the potential repercussions. But he trusted Nancy, and if he was going to try to fight off the Mind Flayer in his dreams and potentially get himself killed tonight he figured there was no better time to tell her. And it sounded kind of nice, getting to tell someone of his own volition rather than being accidentally found out. “I mean, it was kind of dangerous, really, so we weren’t sure if—”

Nancy’s features darkened with concern. “Steve, is someone hurting you?”

“Wha- no! No, not dangerous like that. Just…” Steve ran a hand through his hair, huffing a nervous breath. Well, maybe there was something to be said for getting accidentally discovered after all. At least then he hadn’t had to stumble through what felt like some sort of confession. “I mean, it’s dangerous if the wrong people find out. So I know the secrecy sucks, but for now, if I tell you this I gotta know you’re not gonna tell anyone else yet.”

Nancy nodded, looking uncertain but serious enough. “You know I wouldn’t do that.”

Steve had to trust that she was telling the truth. God, how had he gotten through this with Robin? Some Russian truth serum sounded great right about now. “You asked me before if I was dating some girl, and I answered you truthfully, but you were half right. I did start dating someone. But… he’s not a girl.”

Steve’s eyes flicked away from Nancy’s face to the wall behind her, then down to the baseboard, as his heart beat against his ribcage. He didn’t want to know what expression was on Nancy’s face, wasn’t sure he could bear it if it wasn’t what he hoped, if Nancy simply called him bullshit and stalked away; he reminded himself forcefully that he’d wanted to tell her and has trusted enough to do so, so it was only right he gave her some time to process after he’d dropped a bombshell on her.

Eventually Nancy repeated, “He?” in a quiet tone. “…Who’s ‘he,’ Steve?” Steve dragged his eyes back up to her face, but she didn’t seem angry or necessarily upset, just a little wide-eyed and confused.

“Uh. …Billy Hargrove?”

Nancy’s face went perfectly blank for a beat, but abruptly filled with understanding. “That… explains a lot, actually.” She laughed, something nervous sounding and uncertain. “But I’m glad you told me, really. And that’s okay, you know? That’s- I mean, I didn’t think—” She paused, laughing a little at her own inability to articulate her thoughts for once. “When I asked, it was originally because I saw that look on your face. The one that meant you were in love… that you were happy.”

Steve smiled, something warm spreading through his chest. Yeah, he really was happy. It was hard to believe and it would have been impossible for anyone to predict, but he was truly happy.

Nancy smiled too, but looked at him appraisingly. “So when we dated, you were…?”

“No! I uh, I still like girls.” Nancy raised an unconvinced eyebrow, but he’d spent more than enough time considering this over the last month, so he was pretty sure about his own feelings. “I think I just, uh, like both?”

Nancy shook her head, but she was still grinning. “I shouldn’t be surprised. You’re incorrigible,
Steve Harrington,” she teased.

“Hey!” he protested, mockingly offended, “I’ll have you know I am perfectly monogamous, thank you very much.”

“Of course,” she allowed with a resigned shake of her head, “Ever the romantic. That’s why you always manage to go after heartbreakers.” It was good, being able to joke again like this with Nancy, and not feeling like he was hiding anything from her. And while there might always be some hurt between the two of them, being able to laugh about it was nice too.

He knew full well that it would probably be a while before he and Billy felt comfortable telling anyone else, but he thought eventually everyone in their strange, cobbled-together family would someday know too, and the idea made him even more determined to make it through whatever the rest of the night had in store for him.

“…Wait a minute. Did you say in love?”

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Billy had taken one step into the living room, looked at Dustin and the rest of the party sprawled over Steve’s couches, and course corrected for the front door. Dustin didn’t care, necessarily, about whatever had made him all but flee the house, except that now Billy was slumped on the front porch step with apparently no intention of heading back inside anytime soon. And Steve wasn’t around to wrangle his boyfriend, so Dustin supposed that made it his duty now. This was not what he’d signed up for.

Well, if Billy wouldn’t come back inside, then ‘inside’ would just have to come out to him instead. Dustin slipped off the couch under the pretense of getting a drink, but veered to slip outside instead. Without asking for permission he was sure he wouldn’t be granted anyway, Dustin sank down next to him on the porch step, joining him in staring out across the Harrington’s front lawn.

“What’s got you all dark and broody?” Dustin asked without preamble, and Billy sighed like Dustin’s mere existence was a hardship for him personally.

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with, twerp,” he bit back, all but rolling his eyes.

Dustin was undeterred. “Don’t be a jackass, I’m trying to be nice here. And you look like you could use it.”

“I feel like we’re about to walk into fucking Mordor completely unarmed. In short, no, I’m not particularly thrilled right now.”

Dustin gaped a little, he couldn’t help it. Billy knew Lord of the Rings? “You…” His face cracked into a wide smile. “You’re a total nerd!”

Billy’s eyes lit with offense. “Excuse me, twerp? I’m not part of your little geek squad.”

“Dude, Mordor? Lord of the Rings, for crying out loud! It’s the My Little Pony hypothesis all over again!”

“The what hypothesis?” Billy asked, completely baffled by the seeming non-sequitur. He shook his head and continued, “First of all, Lord of the Rings is literature. It’s not nerd shit.”

“Oh my God,” Dustin complained, “Are you serious? Magic artifacts, wizards, quests, spells? There’s no difference between Lord of the Rings and your average D&D campaign!”
Billy graced him with an unimpressed sneer. “Tolkien’s rolling in his fucking grave.”

Dustin pushed his advantage. “That doesn’t make it untrue!” he countered, waving a finger in Billy’s face that was grumpily slapped aside. When it looked like Billy was about to protest again, he played his trump card. “I guess, if you’re really a colossal nerd, then you’re not totally out of Steve’s league.”

That shut Billy up pretty fast. As much as half of him was instinctually yelling to get defensive, to brush it off and tell Dustin to shove it, the other half of him was thinking that it was kinda… nice. It was nice that Dustin felt so comfortable about the two of them dating.

But it wasn’t Dustin whose approval he was supposed to be seeking right now. “Alright, Jesus, if it’ll get you out of my face, I’m a fucking nerd.” He rolled his eyes when Dustin gave a whoop of triumph. “Listen shitbird, send Max out here, will you? I’ve gotta talk to her about something.”

“What do you have to talk- Oh!” Dustin’s eyes widened in realization, and he had a goofy grin on his face when he seemed to take the hint. “Really?” Billy gave him a flat, unimpressed look. “I mean, uh, yeah, sure.” Dustin scrambled to his feet andBilly listened as the front door swung shut. A beat passed, and then the door swung open and shut once more.

“Billy?” Max asked, still standing behind him.

Billy waved a hand towards the space Dustin had just vacated. “Park it, pipsqueak. Gotta tell you something.”

“Okay…” She almost sounded suspicious, but she sat, turning her curious expression on him and waiting for him to explain.

He cleared his throat awkwardly, ignoring what he was sure was an eye roll from Mind Fucker. “You remember the week before we left California?” he asked, returning his gaze to the front lawn. “You remember why?”

It took Max a moment to reply, probably trying to figure out where he was going with this. “I remember barely having time to pack and say goodbye. I remember…” she hesitated, but barreled on. “I remember Neil being pissed at you. Like, really pissed.” Something in her voice shook. “He never told me why though.”

Billy just nodded. He wondered if some of their friction, worsened after the move, had been because Max blamed him for it. He wondered if she knew she was right. “I fucked up. Neil saw something he shouldn’t have, and he decided there were too many "degenerates" in California. Better to come to Hawkins, where at least men knew how to be men.” The words were bitter in his throat, but he said them anyway. If he couldn’t even say that, then how could he even begin to tell her about Steve?

"You know, it is not too late to go back and eat Neil. As far as I am concerned, it is always an option. A very good option,” Mind Fucker reminded him. Despite himself Billy smirked. It was nice to know that at least Mind Fucker was firmly on his side when it came to this.

When Billy risked a glance at Max, she was looking back at him levelly. “I’m not stupid, you know,” she said. “And you weren’t very subtle back then. Though I guess you know that.”

He’d always suspected she’d known more than she let on about the guys he was with back in Cali, but it didn’t mean he knew how she felt about it. For all he knew she might have been the one to rat him out to Neil. But it didn’t seem likely. Max had never really warmed to Neil, and it was hard to
picture her doing that. Though maybe he was just being optimistic. Huh, that was new.

“Guess I do,” he agreed. “Unfortunately for Neil, what he didn’t understand was that you could take a so-called degenerate out of California, but you sure as shit can’t expect him to change.” Though maybe, at least in part, that was untrue. Billy had changed – though not in the way Neil had likely been hoping – especially when it came to relationships. California may have had a lot of good memories, but it didn’t have Steve.

He drummed his fingers mindlessly against the porch step, waiting for Max’s response. But she stayed quiet, apparently waiting for him to keep going. Well, leap of faith then.

“You remember when I decided to move out, after all the shit at the mall went down, yeah?” He risked a glance at her, and she nodded, a little frown of what he hoped was concentration on her face.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I was just happy you…” She trailed off, but Billy could fill in the blanks himself. Weren’t going back to Neil, or something to that effect, he imagined. Even when they’d been at each other’s throats, she’d frowned at his bruises. Not that Neil ever did anything in front of her, but like she said, she wasn’t stupid. She could put two and two together.

“Well, there was another reason for it too. Why I moved in with Steve specifically.”

Maybe he’d been wrong about the two and two thing, because Max looked at him blankly. “Because he has a big house…” Billy huffed a laugh, trying to find the guess amusing instead of being frustrated he’d have to spell it out himself.

“Steve and I… we’re…” He swallowed. Shit. This was a bad idea, wasn’t it? He should say something else, anything else and get the fuck out of this conversation while he still could.

Mind Fucker took the pause as an opportunity to taunt, “Steve and Billy, sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-“

“Oh my god, where did you even hear that,” Billy muttered under his breath, rolling his eyes. But apparently the jab accomplished its purpose, because before he could think better of it he was raising his voice and telling Max, “We’re together.”

There was a half-second where it didn’t register with her, where she heard ‘together’ but didn’t quite connect it to anything, and then abruptly she understood. “You and Steve?” she blurted, then seemed to think better of it and looked a little chagrinned. “I mean. I knew you two were friendly after the Russian stuff, but you’re really…?”

He nodded, but didn’t look at her. He prepared himself for her to get up and storm back inside, because he’d really fucked it up now, hadn’t he? But she… laughed. And it didn’t sound cold or taunting, but just sort of pleasantly surprised. “Cool.”

“Cool?” he repeated, disbelieving.

Max nodded. “Yeah, Steve’s pretty cool. If anyone could put up with a jackass like you, it’s him.”

Well that was… unexpected, to say the least. And rude, but what else did he expect from Max really.

But she wasn’t finished there. “You know, I met Steve in the middle of everything that went down last year. We were fighting off these demo-dogs – don’t ask – and this random high schooler was there pulling me out of the way and swinging around a nail bat like he had any reason to care about
our safety. He probably kept me from getting eaten, really. Didn’t even know my name.”

Huh. That was a story Billy had never heard. Though considering what had followed, he wasn’t surprised it wasn’t something he’d been filled in on.

“What I mean is…” Max sighed. “If you really had to pick someone from Hawkins to fall in love with, Steve’s pretty cool I guess.”

“…Oh. Well, cool, then.”

And apparently, that was that.

”Aww,” Mind Fucker added in a disgustingly sappy tone, and that was it, he wasn’t letting Steve make them watch dumb romcoms ever again.

“Hang on, did you say love?”

Chapter End Notes

Max: Do you ever want to talk about your emotions Billy?
Billy: No.
Steve: I do!
Max: I know Steve.
Steve: I’m sad…
Max: I know Steve.

I’m so tired of job applications please allow me to indulge myself with fluff lmao
“Absolutely not.” Joyce wasn’t the biggest fan of taking such a stern tone when it came to parenting, not after everything Will had been through in the last few years, but she figured she could be forgiven for putting her foot down this time. Even if Will’s wide, pleading eyes only intensified their pleas.

“But Mom, what if I can help?” Will pressed.

Joyce sighed. “We don’t even know if this crazy plan will work, and even if it does, there is no way I’m letting you anywhere near that horrible thing again.” She’d nearly lost her son to this Upside Down shit enough times. She wasn’t about to let it happen again.

“That’s exactly why I have to help too. Steve and Heather will go in the dream with El, but what if they can’t find the gate right away for El to close it, or what if the Mind Flayer is one step ahead of them, or what if they get hurt and it’s all my fault because I could have been there and I wasn’t?”

Joyce pressed a hand to her mouth, kneeling to reach eye level with her son. “Oh sweetie,” she said, resting her hands on Will’s shoulders. “I understand you’re concerned. I won’t lie, it kills me to think of them facing off against this thing again. But if there’s anything I’ve learned lately it’s that these kids are strong. Strong enough to make it out of this mess okay.”

She pulled Will gently into her arms, and he went unresistingly. “I just want them to be safe,” he said quietly, pressed against her ear.

“Me too,” she agreed. It was almost funny to think that not long ago she’d hardly if at all known any of the party they were currently worrying about. But her heart shattered when she saw Heather’s hurt, and El had been through so much pain already that Joyce just wanted to bundle her up and keep her safe. As for Steve, he practically spent more time at her house watching the kids and helping out with dinner than he did at his own. She’d basically adopted another kid without looking, even if Steve still gave her the deer in the headlights look every time she tried to fuss over him. To think of sending any of those kids on some strange dream trip where she had little influence over whether they lived or died was nearly more than she could bear.

But as had been the case with most things related to the Upside Down, she had little choice; all she could do was make sure everyone was as safe as possible. “And we’re going to do everything we can to help. But for that to happen, I need you here, Will. I can’t be worrying about you too.”

Will still looked uncertain, but he seemed resigned to her answer. She squeezed him once more in her arms before letting him step back and slowly raising herself back up to standing. She glanced over at the counter where various amounts of bandages, rubbing alcohol, gauze, and any other assorted medical gear she’d been able to dig up in the Harrington’s house were strewn, hoping it was enough to deal with any injuries should the plan go wrong. They had no idea if injuries were even something they had to be worried about, but Joyce had squared her jaw and decided safe was far better than sorry and set about scrounging up makeshift medical supply kits which apparently Steve’s parents had decided to forego.

Maybe helping in this way would give Will something else to focus on. “Could you try to grab some buckets or pots for warm water?” she asked, reassured when Will’s determination was
redirected onto the task.

By the time they re-emerged into the living room, first aid supplies juggled between the two of them, Steve and Heather were reclined on two of the couches, eyes nearly slipping closed. Robin sat perched on the armrest beside Heather, a mug of coffee clutched desperately between her hands as she warded off sleep in service of her pledge to stay awake and make sure Heather didn’t suddenly stop breathing at any point.

Mike had a similar position near El where she’d propped herself near the Harrington’s TV, idly twisting a blindfold between her fingers. Though Joyce noted that Hopper wasn’t far away and wasn’t likely to take his eyes off El once everything began.

Joyce had half-expected it to be Nancy who’d agreed to keep an eye on Steve – she knew they didn’t retain feelings for each other and Nancy was dating Jonathan, of course, but they had dated and something in their friendship had seemed to mend over the course of the night – but instead it was Billy who’d claimed the role and was currently fussing over Steve’s safety. And he really did look a lot more concerned than Joyce had expected, especially considering they still had ten minutes or so before 2:15. But she supposed the two of them had become pretty close since Billy had moved in after the events in the mall.

In fact, it was hard to align this Billy with the one in her memories of a few months ago at all. She certainly hadn’t forgotten the cuts she’d helped Steve bandage and the bruises that had lingered for weeks, all of which had occurred while she was trying to get her son un-possessed and had been relayed to her second-hand by an ever-energetic group of fourteen year olds. Even when Will had said Billy had stopped giving the kids a hard time, she’d found it hard to believe the name Billy Hargrove would ever inspire more than residual irritation in her.

But, she allowed, people certainly did change, and no one could be expected to be their high school self forever. Billy had come a long way in a fairly short time, and ultimately she was thankful for it, even if it meant she did have to tamper some of her more overbearing motherly instincts when she’d started considering him as more than ‘that kid with the non-murderous Mind Flayer in him.’

Like now, when he fidgeted uncomfortably with the buttons on his jacket while Steve, boneless and relaxed, began to slip into sleep. Joyce firmly reminded herself that any sort of comforting gesture towards Billy would probably be unwelcome and instead moved to kneel next to El.

She reached out to lay a hand on El’s shoulder, figuring she could at least reassure one kid here. “You ready?” she asked quietly, trying not to focus too hard on how El was far too young to be putting herself in this kind of danger.

El nodded, still looking worried, but it seemed to be all for her friend and not for herself; there was something hard and determined in her eyes, something that didn’t belong on a fourteen year old’s face but that had become uncomfortably common in Joyce’s life.

Joyce could only offer her a faint smile as the clock ticked over to 2:15 and El tied the blindfold tightly around her head. None of these kids deserved this. Not El, not Heather, not Steve, not even Billy. They didn’t deserve to spend years of their lives jumping at shadows and dreaming of monsters. And yet, that was the fate Hawkins had dealt them. All Joyce could do was offer what help she could from out here, and hope all members of this strange family she’d found herself in the middle of, all of her kids, came out of all this okay.

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Sleep came easy and near-instantaneously to Steve for once. He only felt the blink of an eye pass
between laying his head down on the couch pillow and standing upright in the Starcourt Mall. But
now that he knew who he was looking for, it was easy to identify two other forms surrounding the
towering Mind Flayer. Heather stood on the monster’s opposite side, and El was only a few feet to
his right.

The Mind Flayer didn’t take long to notice the new addition. Its head swung towards El, spider-like
limbs already beginning to propel its body towards her. Without really thinking Steve was up and
running, snagging El’s arm and hoping Heather was following his thought process of finding
cover. They wouldn’t have much luck finding the gate if they ended up dead.

Heather’s footsteps joined their own as Steve slipped down the alleyway between the Orange
Julius and B. Dalton. He motioned her and El into a restroom, praying the faint whirring of the
Orange Julius refrigeration system was enough to drown out any noise from the three of them.
They held their breaths as creaking and groaning signaled the Mind Flayer crashing past their
hiding spot, continuing down the line of stores in its hunt.

Steve huffed a relieved breath that felt like it took all the air in his lungs with it. “This,” he
decided, “was an awful idea.”

Heather, looking a little out of breath herself, nodded. “How are we supposed to get back to the
gate to close it if we’re going to spend the whole time running from that thing instead?”

El frowned, her head still turned towards where they’d last heard the monster’s movements. “I saw
it, before you both showed up. When it came through the gate – at the fountain. The gate is like…
a bridge. Connecting your minds, and Billy’s.”

“Okay, so we just head back to where this bridge is and… what, seal it?”

El looked a little uncertain. “More like cross it, I think.” Steve grimaced. He knew people said you
really got into your partner’s head once you dated for long enough, but this was ridiculous.

“And what’s our plan for that, exactly?” Heather asked. “We don’t even know how this thing is
finding us, let alone what happens if it catches us. I mean, are we playing by Freddy Krueger rules
or…”

Freddy what? “Who?”

store!” Steve shrugged. “Unbelievable. Anyway, how are we supposed to get El back to the gate?
I’m sure the Mind Flayer is out there guarding it right now.”

“Unluckily for the Mind Flayer, we do have one advantage here – home court. I spent two
miserable yet paranoid months here – if there’s anything I know, it’s the layout of this dumb mall.”
It looked like his imprisonment at Scoops Ahoy was going to come in handy one last time. “There
are maintenance and shipping tunnels that run behind most of the stores. If we can get to one of
those, we could use it to get back to the gate without being seen. They’re all probably locked, but I
think we could break into the Orange Julius right outside as long as that thing’s not still around.

“Hopefully that’s enough to get us through this then,” Heather said, looking a little doubtful. Steve
tried to stave off his own concerns. He’d done dumber shit, he was sure.

Though, trying to picture something dumber than leaving the relative safety of their current hiding
spot to get to the maintenance tunnels… it was hard to come up with. But surely there was
something.
They headed back the way they’d come as quietly as they could, with Steve keeping El behind him and close to his side. He really had meant what he’d promised Hopper; he was going to keep her safe. Provided he could keep himself from getting eaten first.

He paused at the end of the aisle, peering around the Orange Julius for any sign of movement but not seeing the Mind Flayer anywhere. “Okay, I think we’re-” The floor above them gave a great shudder and groan before collapsing, raining plaster on their heads as the Mind Flayer crashed back down to their level. “Shit! Go!” Steve yelped, scrambling out of the way as a falling bit of ceiling smashed down in front of the Orange Julius entrance and hoping they might lose the monster in the chaos.

No such luck, of course. They made it a few yards ahead, but there was no way they would outspeed it and Steve didn’t like their chances of outlasting it in a chase either. And no way would they have enough time to break into a store now. Steve hissed a quiet fuck in between panting breaths. Well, if they couldn’t use the Orange Julius, then any store would do, they all had maintenance tunnel access, he just needed to find one with unlocked doors or put enough distance between them and the monster that they could break a window or some shit come on come on-

A quiet laugh escaped him, and he shoved a hand into his pocket, his stupid Scoops uniform pocket that he was still wearing in this dumb dream, fingers closing on his prize. “Keys!” he yelled triumphantly as he held them overhead, abruptly switching course and making sure Heather and El were still behind him. They didn’t have to break in if he had keys!

“Oh man, I’ve never been so happy to see this place!” Steve flung himself at the Scoops doors with all the enthusiasm his manager probably would have killed to see a few months ago, willing his shaking hands to calm long enough for him to get the key in the damn lock. It released with a click and Steve threw it open, hurrying inside just as the Mind Flayer rounded the corner and loosed an ungodly shriek.

“Get in the back!” he yelled, but Heather was already ahead of him, vaulting the counter in what looked like an effortless slide and tugging El into the backroom behind her. Damn, that was impressive. Was there some sort of secret lifeguard action hero training Steve had missed out on in favor of scooping ice cream for twelve year olds all summer?

Resolving to pester Billy about it later, he followed them into the back and the maintenance halls only seconds before the Mind Flayer smashed through the storefront, careening after them and sending tables and chairs flying in its wake. It reached a clawed tentacle towards them, but before it could make contact Heather slammed the heavy metal door in its face, muffling what surely would have been a deafening cry of frustration.

Steve pressed a hand to his chest and tried not to feel like he was having a heart attack. “I didn’t know these dreams could suck any more than they already did, but dropping cardio into the mix? This is officially a nightmare.”

Heather, who Steve noted looked just as winded despite her earlier counter vaulting, flashed him a teasing smile. “Weren’t you on the basketball team Steve?”

“Yeah, but last I remember, the basketball we used wasn’t a three-story monster trying to eat our faces.”

“Huh. So that’s why I never went to any games.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Alright, alright. Let’s head back to the fountain. Burger King is that way, so if we go left here, and turn when we pass by the third corridor…”
Finding the fountain turned out to be no problem at all. Trying to figure out what the hell they were supposed to do from there was another issue altogether.

Just like El had said, there was a sort of crack above the fountain, with the space around it seeming distorted and unnatural. “You’re saying we have to go through that thing?” Steve asked, sincerely doubting he was cut out for this kind of thing.

El pursed her lips. “I have to go. You stay.”

Yeah, that wasn’t gonna fly. “No way kiddo. I told Hopper I’d keep you safe.” Plus it would look pretty pathetic if a fourteen year old was willing to go in there and he wasn’t. Then again, El wasn’t exactly your run of the mill fourteen year old.

“Uh, guys… if we’re gonna do this, we should hurry it up.” Heather cast a glance behind her, looking over the rest of the mall. “We don’t know when that thing’s gonna come back.”

As if on cue, something crashed ominously from nearby. Steve had no intention of sticking around to find out what. Well, now or never. The three of them approached the base of the fountain and, together, passed through the gate.

The other side was a little underwhelming, if Steve was being honest. It was dark and kind of empty, and Steve pulled a face when he felt water soak into the underside of his shoes. “This is Billy’s head?” he asked a little dubiously. No offense to his boyfriend, but there wasn’t a lot going on in here.

“No,” El said, which immediately made him feel more relieved, and a little guilty. “The bridge.” Right. The one between his and Billy’s minds or whatever. He really didn’t get this shit.

“Huh. Well, guess we just keep walking then.”

For a while the scenery around them hardly changed, but slowly Steve noticed there was a light at the end of the tunnel. As they kept going the light slowly got more visible, and eventually revealed itself to be not a light at all, but some sort of… dining room?

Steve opened his mouth to ask where exactly they were but Heather beat him to the punch with a quiet gasp of, “Oh my god.” She took off running towards the dining room, leaving Steve and El to cast a panicked glance between each other before scrambling to catch up. As they neared the room, it seemed to swallow them whole, until the strange dark void behind them was replaced with the opposite wall of the room.

It wasn’t anything Steve recognized, nor did he recognize either of the two adults who stood in the room facing them, but Heather certainly seemed to. She had a hand clasped over her mouth, and her eyes were glassy with unshed tears.

“Heather,” the two strangers both said in tandem, and Jesus that was creepy, “What did you do?”

“Mom? Dad?” Heather choked out. Oh. Oh this was not good at all.

“What did you do to us Heather?” her parents asked, staring ahead unblinking. “We were so afraid. You let us die. You… killed us, Heather.”

“No,” she protested, but it was a barely-there sound, and she’d started to tremble, tears slipping down her cheeks.
Steve grit his teeth, angry on Heather’s behalf and absolutely sick of whatever game the Mind Flayer was playing. They’d left the nightmare, this shit wasn’t fair, Steve wanted off this damn ride right this instant.

“They’re wrong,” he said, walking up behind Heather and laying a hand on her shoulder. “You didn’t hurt them. What happened to them was horrible, and nobody should have to see what you saw when you were being controlled by that thing, but it wasn’t you.”

“Not you,” El said, reaching up to grab Heather’s other hand in her own. “It wasn’t you.”

Heather shook her head, protesting, “All my fault.”

Steve sighed, trying to come up with some other way to help her. “Do you remember,” he tried, “had to be two, three years ago, when you were in that AP Bio class with Nancy. I’d fucked up my leg in basketball, and I was trying and failing miserably to hold all my books and use a crutch at the same time.” He laughed hoarsely. “And halfway through dropping my Geometry textbook for the third time you came over and offered to carry them for me. Didn’t even laugh when I was so surprised the book fell out of my hands again. Not like Tommy who busted a fucking gut at that one.” He rolled his eyes, remembering the scene. Heather had turned to look at him during his story, visibly confused but at the very least distracted. “My point is, the Heather Holloway I knew then was nice. Nice enough to worry about a guy who’d been a real jerk to just about everyone. Heather, I know you, and I know this wasn’t your fault.”

She blinked forcefully once, then again, shaking her head determinedly. “I’m sorry,” she said, looking back at her parents. “I’m sorry for what happened to you. But they’re right. It wasn’t my fault.”

The images of her parents flickered, then at once vanished altogether, and slowly the rest of the living room scene faded with them, leaving just the three of them huddled close in the wide open space.

They stood there a while, back in the empty black void, letting Heather catch her breath. “You okay?” Steve asked, worrying at his bottom lip.

She hesitated, but nodded. “I… yeah. I think so.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was initially planned to be a bit longer but I ended up adding the whole beginning scene and it’s taken me so long to finish this bit up that I figured it was about time I just posted what I had. So the dream scenes get split up between two chapters now. Endings things is hard x.x

Trying to juggle a few responsibilities rn (+ a new job!) so sorry updates have slowed!

Works inspired by this Wake Up Sleepyhead by IAmOnlyPartlyMajestic

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