

First to Burn

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First to Burn

by [boltplum](#)

Summary

Billy moves in next door on Steve's tenth birthday. They grow up thick as thieves, sharing everything. When they become old enough to date...they turn to one another for practice.

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“Since it’s us. Since I’m not Tina, and you’re not—you’re just you. It doesn’t count if we—if we practice.” Billy turns to face him, even though Steve can’t really make out his face yet in the dark. “*Right?*”

Steve's heart rate picks up. “Right. Yeah, that’s right.”

part i: kids

The tiny blond boy with the too-big tee shirt and nice mom moves in next door on Steve's tenth birthday. He knows the boy's mom is nice because she smiles a lot and pats the boy's head and spins him around before chasing him around the back of the house.

Steve could see the boy's backyard from his bedroom window. But he's out front watering the rose bushes and he has to rake up the leaves next and he's going nuts watching the boy's parents bring in boxes. He wants to know more about the boy who just moved in. Wants to know if they can be friends, because Tommy got mad and deflated his best basketball last week and so they aren't friends anymore.

His mom sends him next door with a plate of cookies that takes forty minutes to make, start to finish. His chores coincidentally take forty minutes to wrap up.

The cookies are snickerdoodle and gingersnap and chocolate-chip. His mom is very good at making cookies. She always wins the prize for best holiday basket at the town hall Christmas party. Dad does not eat her cookies because he has to watch his waist line or something.

Steve races next door the minute he's stacked the cookies on a plate. He's rung the doorbell twice and knocked four times before the door finally opens. The dad stands there, staring down with a smile at Steve like he said a joke he hasn't even thought of yet. Maybe Steve just really does have a funny face like Carol likes to say he does. He frowns.

"Well hello, who's this?" the man asks, and rubs his chin. "Cookies for me?"

Steve swallows, lowers the plate a little before holding it higher. He stares at the man's stomach because he's nervous and he can't do the thing his dad always tells him to do. To buck up and meet the eyes of those you want to impress.

The man turns around and calls back inside the house. Says, "Sal, some kid's welcoming us to the neighborhood!"

Steve steels himself. Puts on his best smile and fights his own nerves down to drag his eyes up to the man—and then the woman beside him. The nice mom from before, with her long, wavy blonde hair and clear blue eyes.

She blinks and takes the plate of cookies from him. She picks one up and before Steve can warn her they're still hot, she's bitten one in half.

"Oh, sweetie pie," she says, "these are delicious. Did you make these yourself?"

Her eyes find his and he nods. Then he shakes his head no. Then he turns quickly to point at his house, his mom on the front stoop. She waves with a smile.

"Hello neighbor!" she calls.

"See, Neil. This neighborhood is nice," the woman says.

The man stares at Steve's mom before going back inside the house.

"Billy!" the man yells, and then Steve hears hurried steps. Running. Then it's the boy Steve wanted so badly to meet, out of breath and lifting an eyebrow.

“Mom?”

“Billy, our neighbors made these cookies just for us. Come say thank you.”

Billy walks forward, says, “I’m Billy,” and into the light spilling in from where Steve stands on the porch. He’s got at least five inches on the other boy. Billy says, “Thanks. Who are you?”

“You’re so welcome! You know, snickerdoodle’s my favorite. My mom always makes them. At least once every month! Twice in my birthday month! I’m Steve...uh. Welcome? Are you new here? Will you be going to Hawkins?”

Billy stares and stares at him. Makes a face that tells Steve he’s being weird. Being funny. He smiles and laughs, and knows he sounds nervous.

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you boys go play out back?” The plate of cookies is handed off to her son, who looks like he doesn’t know what they are.

Billy’s mom leans out the door and starts toward where their driveways meet. Starts talking to Steve’s mom.

“They’re really good,” Steve says, and grabs a snickerdoodle. Eats it in two bites.

“Your mouth is huge,” Billy tells him. “Do you like baseball?”

“Not really.” But when Steve follows Billy inside, and when the front door is shut, he sees a baseball bat leaning against the inside hall.

“Me either.” Billy takes a snickerdoodle and eats it in smaller bites. Catches all the crumbs. Hums when he’s finished. “What about basketball?”

Steve lights up, says, “Yeah!”

Billy sets the cookies in the kitchen. Grabs two more and hands one off to Steve when they get to the backyard. There’s a hoop that wasn’t there the day before.

His basketball isn’t new, but it’s clearly well used. He’s not just showing off. Steve decides he likes Billy’s house.

“Want to be friends?” Steve asks Billy, already having decided. But he knows it’s nice to ask first.

Billy casts a look toward his father, who’s grumbling while he decides where to put what near the back of the garage. Through its open door, Steve can see his and Billy’s moms still talking.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

Billy shrugs and tosses the basketball at the hoop. Sinks it in one.

“First to five?”

"Sure." Steve dribbles and dodges and scores a point. "It's my birthday, you know."

"Oh. Happy birthday." Billy scores the next. "I won't go easy on you."

Steve pouts and plays. Plays his hardest. Billy's a lot better at basketball than all the rest of his friends.

Billy wins.

part ii: one more

Chapter Notes

Plot twist, I wrote the next 7k after posting the first chapter earlier tonight.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy likes Billy but Billy doesn't like Tommy. Calls him a nerd until Tommy tries to prove him wrong at every bend in the road. Jumped off one of the lower cliffs lining the quarry and broke his arm last summer because Billy called him a coward. Calls him a loser because Tommy is afraid when Carol kisses him for the first time and he's never kissed anyone.

That's how Steve first gets the idea. It's a day after his thirteenth birthday. Tina asked him to the Snow Ball last week even though it's still months away and Steve sweats every time he thinks about it. Tina will want to dance with him. He doesn't know how to dance.

He hasn't told anyone about it yet.

Until now.

"Seriously?" Tommy asks, then proceeds to warn Steve that Tina will want to kiss him. So he better kiss her real good.

"Kiss her like a woman wants to be kissed," Tommy says.

To which Billy, sandwiched between Steve and Tommy on the couch in the Harringtons' new basement, says, "She's thirteen, not a woman."

He grabs another snickerdoodle and breaks it in half, offering one part to Steve before chomping down the other.

"Same thing!"

"Is not. She's a kid."

"So are we," Steve supplies. "But Carol kissed Tommy last week and he didn't know what to do. He knows how it works now."

"Bullshit, Carol didn't kiss you," Billy says, leaping forward. He glares at Tommy. "I—"

"You what?" Tommy challenges. "I know you like her but we're going steady now."

"I don't like Carol," Billy snarls more than says.

Steve holds up his hands. "Uh."

"I bet you haven't ever kissed anyone, not even a *girl*."

"You calling me gay, Hagan?"

"So what if I am? I've never seen you kiss any girls. You're a rainbow loving—"

After that, Steve has to pull Billy off Tommy and they both get sent home.

Billy shows back up around midnight, after sneaking out to throw pebbles at Steve's bedroom window. Ever since Steve's family moved to Loch Nora, Billy's spent most nights sneaking over.

Steve loves when he sleeps over. Billy's his best friend. He knows Billy and his dad don't get along a lot of the time, especially since the divorce, so he's happy that Billy comes to him to get away.

Steve hops up and pushes his window open. Holds out his arm for Billy to grab when he's on the roof beside his window. Billy and Steve have never missed the jump. Steve doesn't like to think about what would happen if they ever did.

Billy jumps. Steve catches him.

Hauls him inside and quiets his own laughter as Billy shuts the window for him. Then Billy turns and lands a playful punch to his cheek. Light, a tap of his knuckles. He grins and flops back on Steve's bed, burrowing into the fluff of blankets he'd as good as made after dinner.

"You hungry?" Steve asks him as he grabs up his walkman and shoves at Billy's side to get him to scoot over.

He pulls a knee up and hands Billy the headphones. Billy holds them stretched out, one ear turned out a little so they can lean their heads together and listen to the same songs. It's one of Steve's favorite things to do.

"Not really."

Steve waits for three songs to finish before he nods, hands over the walkman, and heads downstairs. Not really means no dinner. Really hungry is bad. Like haven't eaten all day bad. Already ate means he actually did.

He grabs two slices of bread, slaps on some mayonnaise, and uses half a pack of bologna for a sandwich. Then he grabs a Tab and a beer—because Billy likes beer and Steve's dad never notices when they go missing.

His parents' room is dark.

Billy grins when he's back with the beer and food. He eats the sandwich in a few bites. Steve holds a pillow up so Billy can pop the tabs on the cans quietly. Billy sets the Tab down and sips at the beer, before handing it to Steve.

"Try it, Harrington."

Steve considers it. He smells the top. It's bitter and kind of stale smelling. He takes a sip and makes a face. Billy snorts.

"It gets better," he says as Steve keeps sipping.

He's not really a fan for the first thirty minutes. He thinks he's feeling whatever he's supposed to after that and decides maybe beer tastes kind of good. Billy keeps laughing now and then, almost to himself. His lashes are dark and long and Steve falls asleep beside his friend feeling safe. Comforted.

Steve is shaken awake. It's gentle. Nothing quick about it. The room is dark and his mouth tastes gross. Billy hovers over him.

"Move over, you're hogging the blankets."

Steve says, "Oh," and gets moving. Lifts his legs and watches Billy throw his shirt and his pants off before climbing back in. He shivers before he settles. Yawns.

Steve reaches forward and pokes the roof of his mouth. Billy gags and coughs and growls something unintelligible before full on tackling Steve beneath the covers. He wrestles Steve breathless.

Billy claps a hand over Steve's mouth when the swearing turns to laughing.

"Shut it or your folks will come in here and kick me out." But when Steve nods his assent and Billy takes his hand away, Billy thinks a good end to the conversation is to jab him a final time in the ribs.

Steve says, "Goddammit," and knees Billy. Maybe too hard. Billy curls forward and falls strangely quiet. "Shit. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Are you okay? Billy, you alright?"

Billy turns his face into the pillow. Says a muffled, "Asshole," and Steve sighs his relief.

"Sorry," he whispers. "But you kinda deserved it."

Billy turns his face only enough that Steve can see him roll his eyes.

"Lame." He closes his eyes. "Hey, you think Tommy was telling the truth earlier?"

"What about? Carol? Yeah. Carol's been into Tommy forever."

"It's gross."

Steve shrugs. "I think it's kind of nice."

Billy burrows in further to the blankets, inches closer until his forehead is plastered to Steve's shoulder. "She'll break his heart."

"Why d'you think that?"

"Girls leave. When they don't love you anymore they leave. So why bother loving them first?"

"Billy..."

"I'm drunk, Steve," he explains. Steve believes him.

"Were you?"

"Was I what?"

"Lying...or I guess, not fessing up earlier. When Tommy said you liked Carol?"

Billy bullies Steve onto his back before planting a cheek on his chest. Steve blows the stray curls that tickle the corner of his mouth away.

"I don't like Carol."

“...Really? Because you stare at her a lot.”

“No I don’t.”

“You stare a lot, Billy—”

“I stare at everybody.” He gestures with the arm nearest Steve’s side. Speaks with it twisting and pushing shapes around in the air above them, casting shadows in the already dark room. “I wasn’t staring at Carol. It was Carol and Tommy.”

“So you are jealous?”

Billy’s hand tenses, spasms into a fist that thumps Steve on the chest. He wheezes lightly as Billy settles into stillness once again.

“I’m *not* jealous, I’m—you—Never mind. Stop being annoying as hell, Harrington.”

Steve feels uneasy about the whole thing still. Something nagging inside him doesn’t want to let it go.

“Okay. I believe you.” They don’t say anything for a while. Then Steve adds, “Were you jealous that Tommy got his first kiss before you did?”

Billy doesn’t say anything which Steve knows to mean he’s trying not to lie. Billy’s a bad liar.

“It’s okay. I haven’t kissed a girl either.”

Billy’s hand twitches against his stomach, curls over his side. “Really?”

Steve smiles to the ceiling. “Nope. Truth be told, I’m kind of freaking out about Tina asking me to the dance.”

“She made you look like a pussy,” Billy says softly.

“I’m *not* a pussy. She just asked me first is all. I was going to ask the week before the dance.”

“It’s months away.”

“That’s what I’m saying!”

Billy pokes him. “Loud. So what, are you jealous of Tommy?”

“No? I’m—maybe I am? I don’t know—” Steve presses his palms into his eyes and rubs hard. “I don’t want to mess it up.”

“How can you mess up kissing?”

Steve takes his hands away. Tilts his head to look at his friend. Billy’s got his eyes open and is looking at him. He lifts up on his elbow and quirks a brow. “You’ve seen plenty of flicks where there’s kissing. It’s easy.”

“You don’t know that.”

Billy glowers. “I know it looks fun, not scary.”

Steve lets free a tiny whine of a sound. “I just wish there was, I don’t know, a girl I could ask to

practice with or something.”

“What?”

“Like practice kissing? But it would have to be with a girl who wouldn’t care. Like Barb or something.”

“Why would Barb not care?”

Steve shrugs. “I don’t know. I was just thinking—just throwing ideas out there. God, I’m gonna mess up. I’ll probably bite her or something.”

“So what, you want me to find you a doll to practice kissing on?”

Steve pushes himself up, hissing out, “No! No, no, no way, oh my god. I meant *with*, Billy. How am I supposed to get it right if I don’t know how to do it...*with* someone.”

“I’m confused. You went from kissing to doing it. What step are we at here, tiger?”

Steve shoves his friend. Billy laughs at him.

“Stop your groaning,” Billy orders, still laughing. He wipes his hands on his legs. “What if we practiced?”

Steve levels him a dark look. “That’s what I literally just said, idiot.”

“No,” Billy says, then wipes his hands again. He laces his fingers over his knees before planting his palms flat on the mattress. “Just don’t laugh at me for saying this, but, but what if—we—practiced—together?”

“Huh?”

Billy fists the sheet. “We kiss each other and it’s practice, fair and square. Nothing weird about it. Just so we know what we’re doing when we kiss girls.”

Steve watches Billy fidget.

“Isn’t that...kind of gay?” Steve whispers the word because it’s not a word he says in the house. He knows it’s bad. It’s Tommy’s favorite.

Billy won’t meet his eyes. He’s never not looked Steve in the eye. “It’s just *practice*, Harrington,” he spits out. “Like *you* said. Do you want help or not?”

“Well I didn’t mean—”

Billy goes dead still. Steve wonders at it, at him. Even goes as far as to shake him a little.

Billy blinks and snaps to life. Snatches the blankets off and starts for the window.

“I’m going home,” Billy says in a shuddering voice. Steve thinks maybe he might be crying he’s so embarrassed. Billy’s never cried in front of Steve before. “Sorry I said anything.”

“Billy.” Steve gets up and hurries to grab his friend’s wrist. “You’re in your underwear. It’s freezing outside.”

Billy yanks his hand free. “So?”

“*Fine*,” Steve hears himself say. “Fine, but you won’t tell Tommy?”

“I won’t say shit. This is just to help you.”

“Okay.”

Billy glances at him too fast for Steve to get a read on him. “This was *your* bright idea, Harrington.”

“Come on,” Steve says, whispers. He hates seeing Billy cry. It’s frightening. “It’s a good idea, really. This way it won’t count. Because we’re not girls.”

Billy follows him back to the bed, back to where Steve lifts the covers and settles down and pulls his knees to his chest. Billy mirrors him.

“Right. It won’t count,” Billy echoes.

“Right.”

“So.”

“So.”

“Steve, quit it.”

“Sorry. I’m nervous.”

“Well, stop it. It’s just me.”

“Just you,” Steve says. Billy nods. His eyes shine even in the dark. Steve swallows so hard his throat clicks. “So what do we do?”

Billy snorts. It seems to surprise him. “I, uh. Just.” He frowns. Leans forward and presses his lips to Steve’s.

“Oh.”

“Like that,” Billy tells him.

Steve swallows again. His lips are very dry so he licks them. Then he leans in and does the same thing Billy did, just for longer. Billy tenses and relaxes. Makes a weird choking sound.

Steve pulls away. “What happened, what did I do wrong?”

Billy shakes his head. Coughs into the sheet. “Nothing. Nothing, got a tickle in my throat. Maybe kind of hard to breathe. Or something.”

“Oh.”

“Want to try again?”

Steve thinks yes, he wants to try it a lot. Says, “One more, then bed?”

“Yeah. I have to be up early anyway.”

Billy always says some variation of the same, every time. Steve knows his dad and his new stepmom don’t like him sleeping over at friends’ houses anymore.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Will you come back?” Steve asks, because somehow he’s suddenly afraid of something.

Billy nods. “Don’t I always?”

“You do.”

Billy nods and inches forward. Looks at Steve’s mouth, he thinks. “One more.”

This time when Billy leans in, it’s for a long time, and Steve feels a little like it’s melting. That single place where their mouths meet. His cheeks are warm and he feels fluttery, a little dizzy and out of breath. He wonders if kissing is supposed to make you sick to your stomach or if it’s the beer from earlier.

“Better,” Billy comments.

When he wakes up, his window is cracked and Billy’s clothes are gone.

The sun is out.

Chapter End Notes

Silly Steve, thinking he got turned off one beer.

part iii: wince, flinch

Steve has been fifteen for a month.

He rubs at his cheeks but can't stop grinning.

“What are you so happy about?” Billy asks him when he comes back downstairs.

The party is getting loud. Maybe a little too loud. But his house is tucked near the edge of the woods, and Hawkins has always been a quiet town, secluded. His parents are in Indianapolis for the week for counselling, so he knows he's in the clear. Still, there's a part of him that wonders what the breaking point will be.

Billy's wearing his new leather jacket. It's black, squeaks loudly when he moves. He twirls his keys around his index finger, showing off the fact he can now not only drive, but officially has wheels. The Camaro was secondhand, but nice, and nobody had to know as far as Billy was concerned.

Steve helped him paint his new car just last week. They did it at Steve's place, because Billy doesn't like staying too long at his dad's.

Hard to shake Max, Billy always adds. The kid is like a cancer, he sometimes tacks on at the end. Maybe when he's especially pissed off.

Steve holds up his hands, gives up hiding how much his cheeks hurt from stretching. “Get this.”

“Oh boy,” Billy says, totally unexcited.

“I just got *laid*.”

Billy's keys fly off his finger and hit Steve in the neck. Steve winces and catches them before they fall to the floor. Billy snatches them back.

“Pretty boy just had sex?” Billy states, narrowing his eyes. “Seriously?”

After rubbing the sting from his neck, Steve puts his hands in his pockets and leans in, nodding quickly.

“You popped her cherry?”

Steve nods again.

“You popped *your* cherry?” Billy says, lowering his voice. Steve shoves him. Only then does Billy grin. “You fucking king. How many times did you go?”

Just the once, Steve thinks. “Like three times. It was so—Billy it was, nice.”

“Nice. Yeah, sure.” He waggles his eyebrows. “How long you last?”

He finished halfway through the first thrust, but Billy doesn't need to know that. Ever. “Twenty minutes.”

“No fucking way.” Billy's eyes go wide. “Really?”

“I—”

Tommy chooses that moment to push between them, drunk and dribbling beer down his chin. “My dudes,” he slurs. “My buddies, my *pals*—come on, come do the kie—the key—the—”

“Keg stand,” Steve offers.

Tommy nods, shuts his eyes. “Bingo.”

Tommy loops an arm around Steve’s shoulders and leads him to the back yard.

Steve looks over his shoulder, to where Billy stays put, keys gripped in a fist.

“I’ll see you—”

“Later,” Billy finishes. He smiles, but it’s short lived. He turns and disappears into the crowd.

Steve breaks his keg stand record.

He’s on top of the world tonight.

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“I’m gonna throw up,” Steve mumbles later once everyone is gone. He begins heaving into the air.

Billy goes, “Fuckin’ gross, at least aim for the garbage.” Holds up the basket for him.

It’s wire. With holes. Steve thinks Billy’s trying to be funny. He gets up and tails it to the bathroom. He greets the keg he swallowed down in the tub. Says “I hate me,” and falls back on his ass on the tile.

Billy finds him a few minutes later. “Again, fucking. Gross.” It doesn’t stop him from cleaning Steve—and his mess—up.

As Billy is shepherding him from the edge of the tub to the bed, Steve hangs his head, presses his nose against Billy’s warm neck.

“Tina was nice,” he mumbles. “So nice to me.”

“Nice is one way to put it,” Billy says. Starts tucking him in.

“I’m not that drunk.”

“Oh, yes you are.”

“Come here. Stay over. You said you would.”

“I didn’t.”

“Stay over anyway.” Then, “Your dad doesn’t care.”

Billy gets angry. He gets angry fast. He gets angry a lot faster than he used to these days.

Steve pouts. “You know what I mean. I want you here tonight. What if I drown in my own vomit?”

“Then you’d deserve it. I’m at least getting you some fucking water.” And Billy leaves to do just that.

Steve busies himself with changing into sweats and sobering up. He slaps and pinches at his cheeks. Thinks of Tina turning away when he went to kiss her and how he got her cheek instead. How she giggled when he finished early and he felt so—so *humiliated*. He couldn't even be a good first time for her and make her have a good time too. He had to go and do...that. Peeling off the condom and trying to tie it after that had been a fumble. He ended up digging into the trash when she was in the bathroom after and checking he did it right.

Some king.

“Ugh.”

“Sounds about right.” Billy reappears with two white pills and a glass of ice water. Steve swallows them without asking what they are. He can trust Billy. “Drink it all.” Then he disappears again.

Steve drinks it all and lies back and tries to think about anything other than how awful he was. He's not good at sex. He probably won't ever be good at sex. Tina definitely won't ever let him near her again. She laughed. Laughed. He's an idiot. He couldn't even figure out how to do it right at first. It was a weird kind of push and roll happening and it was so *good*, and *fun*, and then it didn't seem to be really doing anything for her—seemed like maybe it kind of hurt for a while. He didn't ask. But then he did—did *that*, and she *laughed*, and he couldn't even tie the damn condom right and—

“Steve,” Billy mutters from nearby. Steve sighs. “What's up? You're not a sad drunk. This isn't you. Tommy hurt your feelings or some shit?”

The bed dips, his stomach dips with it for a dangerous moment, and then it's Billy and his stuffy cologne, missing his new jacket, lying next to him.

“You've had sex, right?” Steve asks the ceiling.

Billy hums. “Yeah.”

“You never really told me about it.”

He feels Billy shrug. “Nothing to tell, really.”

“But it was your first time, wasn't it?” Steve swallows, swallows again. Blinks rapidly. “It's supposed to mean something, right?” Steve blinks again. Shuts his eyes. “Because I don't think my first time was as great as I thought it'd be.”

Steve takes a deep, steadying breath. Billy shrugs and this time when he's settled, he's pressed closer than before. His shoulder is a wall holding Steve up. He relies on it.

“My first time was some girl from church camp last summer.”

“I still can't believe your dad made you do that.”

“It's three weeks I pretend never happened. Anyway.” Billy shrugs again. “She had a thing for me. Found me outside the bunks one night and we just...did it.”

“Just like that? Outside?”

“Well, yeah, kind of. She pushed me against the wall and undid my pants, and just—hell, Harrington, do I really have to explain everything?”

Steve sniffs. “No...I guess not.” He sniffs again before turning on his side to face his friend. Billy is staring off somewhere by Steve’s desk.

“I lied earlier.”

“No shit.”

“It lasted like less than a minute and I messed up the condom and—”

“Don’t tell me it broke. You about to have a little Harrington running around, that why you’re blubbering like a fucking dolphin over there?”

Steve punches Billy in the arm. Billy grins, but the edges are still soft. Teasing.

“*No*. I just—I’m not *good* at it.”

“Not good at sex?”

Steve shuts his eyes again. Turns over onto his stomach to hide his face in his pillow. He hears Billy’s quiet laughter, feels it bounce the bed faintly.

“Oh, hold on. Don’t tell me you had sex right here and didn’t change the sheets?”

Steve lifts his head. “It was in the guest room.”

Billy hums. “I would have guessed your parents’ room.”

“No. Just...no. What the hell, Billy?”

Steve flops back down and groans.

He can feel Billy shifting around. A hand lands on his back. Squeezes the muscles of his neck. All at once, the tension begins draining from his shoulders.

“First times always suck. It doesn’t always have to mean something. Mine didn’t mean shit. So what, you’re not supposed to marry Tina. Who cares? Unless that’s what you were aiming for?”

Steve reaches up and digs his hands under the pillow, sighs as Billy keeps squeezing the base of his neck. Digs his knuckles into the top of Steve’s spine.

“Why’re you so good at that?”

“I’m good at everything.” Then, “What’re you talking about now?”

“The neck thing you’re doing. That.”

Billy stalls. Then he starts up again.

“You never rub your own legs after basketball or running or whatever? It keeps cramps from happening but it just helps you relax, too. I can stop if you want.”

“No!” Steve flattens out. “No way. Keep going.”

Billy starts a word but cuts himself off. Steve wonders what he was about to say.

“You’ll meet another girl. Hell, I know Tina will do it again in a heartbeat.”

Steve turns his head away from the pillow and asks, “You really think?”

“I know.” After a pause, he adds, “She’s always watching you. Always trying to get your attention on her. Always trying to get you to touch her. Be around her.” Billy removes his hands. Steve turns the other way to meet Billy’s eyes, and finds him shrugging down, sinking against Steve’s headboard with his shoulders hunched. “I just mean she’ll jump at a chance to meet up again.”

“You really think?”

“You sound like a parrot.” Billy sighs. Looks at his hands in his lap. “You’re you, man. What do you want me to say?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Billy scoffs. “You’re *Steve Harrington*, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“And?”

Billy scoffs again, adds a disbelieving little laugh.

Steve braces himself on his elbows. Says sternly, “Billy.”

“Half the school wants you. The other half wants to be you.” Billy shrugs. “That’s what I meant. You won’t have any problems getting plenty of practice in before you land your very own Jeannie.”

He watches Billy put his hands behind his head and sink further down into the bed.

“So you’re saying I’m so popular I’ll need to find a genie bottle to get a wife?”

Billy rolls his eyes. “You *would* latch onto that.”

“It doesn’t make any *sense*, Billy—”

“Christ, Harrington! Just take my word for once, will you? It’s not like it’s hard getting around in a town this small. Everybody’s bored. Trust the system.”

Steve frowns. “Wait. You’ve had sex more than once?”

Billy stares at Steve’s desk. His jaw leaps. “Yeah.”

Steve supports his chin on a palm. “How many times?” Steve quiets. “And with *who*?”

Another roll of his eyes and Billy’s reaching over to turn out the light.

“Don’t—don’t, hey!” Steve cries. “Sorry, okay? I just—she didn’t want to even kiss me. I don’t see how she’ll give me a second chance. And once that gets around school, I don’t see how anybody will.”

“Steve,” Billy sighs. He rubs his hands down his face. “Just watch, on Monday everybody—wait. She didn’t want to kiss you?”

Steve shakes his head, no. Billy looks insulted.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know?”

“Well, fucking walk me through it. What happened?”

“I...seriously?” Billy nods. “Okay...well. I like, was on top of—her, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And I...was like...inside—”

Billy waves that away. “Skip to the kiss.”

“I leaned down and went to kiss her and she turned away and I got her...cheek, okay? I kissed her cheek. Then she laughed.”

“She laughed at you?”

“Well, not at me but...” At Billy’s dark expression, Steve amended, “Yeah. At me.”

“Bitch. That was not her first time.”

“What?”

“Bet you ten dollars that was not her first time.” He holds a hand up when Steve tries to argue.

“We’ll find out and when we do, you better have a ten on you.”

“I...just don’t think...”

“Good. Don’t want you to hurt that pretty little brain of yours thinking too much.”

Steve turns onto his back again. “You know I can’t—You know I hate it when people call me stupid.”

It gets Billy sighing, heavy. “I didn’t say you were stupid. I do know you get your feelings hurt too easy, though. Don’t waste it on her. She’s not worth it.”

Steve vaguely remembers something Billy told him before. About love not being worth it. He wonders if Billy thinks the same now, or if that changed somewhere along the way.

“It’s not about her...not really.”

“Then what is it, Steve?”

Steve wonders how it was for Billy, on his own at church camp. The guy could barely pick up a bible, so imagining him there had been the butt of endless jokes over that summer. But Billy had met that girl. Had had sex with her. Had probably—

“Did you kiss that girl from camp?”

Billy’s bicep twitches. He lowers one hand to scratch at his cheek. “No. Wasn’t really a kissing situation.”

“Why?”

“She went down on me for like two seconds. I didn’t want to kiss her after that. Anyway—Why are you so concerned with it?”

“I—”

“Does it matter?”

Steve bristles. “I guess it doesn’t. Just...remember when we said practice would help? I like kissing, and I guess I’m just bummed that I didn’t get to...do that earlier. I must be drunk still, or maybe not, maybe I’m just tired. Yeah, I’m beat. I’m gonna turn in now. Night.”

Steve flips over, facing away from Billy. Then he realizes the lamp is on his side and the light will only turn off, will hide Steve from his embarrassment, if Billy decides to pull the chain himself.

“You’re acting like a real fucking bitch, you know that?”

“No I’m not.”

“Acting like one and pouting like one too.” Billy’s hand finds his arm. Shakes him back and forth. “You’re acting like a chick who didn’t finish her first time and didn’t have rose petals everywhere like she wanted.”

“Billy.”

“You’re being a pussy, Harrington. Man up.”

“Hargrove—”

Steve turns over and sits up so fast, his head spins. Billy’s grinning sharky and mean and amused. Steve takes his pillow and hits Billy in the face with it. Billy grabs it and throws it to the floor.

Then he’s tackling Steve until he’s flat on his back on the bed. Billy’s curls halo his face. He’s grinning still, still just as mean as ever. Billy loves to rile him up and Steve sometimes can’t stand it. Not even a little.

“Get the hell off me, Hargrove.”

“Oh, baby Stevie’s mad I called him a pussy.” Billy slaps at his cheek lightly. “Pussy.”

“Hargrove.”

“Pussy.”

Steve bats his slapping hand away. It finds his cheek again like a magnet.

“Puss—”

“Fuck you! Fuck off if you think it’s fucking lame I wanted to have a special first time, okay? I’ve thought about it a lot, and I wanted it to be perfect for the both of us, and now I went and fucked it up, and if that makes me a goddamn pussy, then I’m a goddamn pussy, okay? Okay! Good night!”

Billy lowers his hand. It braces on the bed by Steve’s ear. Catches and pulls on his hair a little. He winces, and pulls himself free. Billy’s expression has cleared to the friend he knows. Maybe a little sadder than usual.

“I...I had a little too much to drink,” Billy finally says. “I—sorry. I’m sorry, Steve. Really. For all of it. But really, first times suck. Ask anybody.”

“Just go.”

Billy looks wounded for all of an instant. He doesn't move. "Mine was awkward and weird. We didn't even have a condom. I was a fucking idiot about it, and it still wasn't great."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Did the other times get better?"

"What do you think?"

"They did?"

Billy sighs. Nods a little. Hair falls over his cheek. He pulls a strand from his lips. "Sure they did."

"Okay."

"Okay. So, will you suck it up and let me stay over, or what?"

He blinks and gives in, because when it's Billy he always does. "Don't you always?"

"Course I do."

Billy lets up and strips his shirt off. He stands to shrug out of his jeans. Catches his briefs before they slip too far down his ass. Steve catches the edge of a dark bruise around his side before the light is turned off.

Steve feels queasy still. When he turns back over, he focuses on Billy's weight behind him, the slow pace of his breathing. Tries to keep his snuffles quiet, because Billy's right there and will probably make fun of him again.

He never does.

-

"Steve," comes Billy's voice sometime later. "Steve, you up?"

Steve exhales. Pinches the sleep from his eyes. "Now I am."

"Oh. I had an idea."

"What time is it?"

Steve squints, tries to see his alarm clock as he turns and looks over Billy's head.

Billy says, "Four. I have to go soon, but I was thinking."

Steve sighs. Falls back in bed. "Yeah? About how much I have to clean up after you leave before my parents get back?"

"I was thinking it doesn't count."

"Huh?"

"Since it's us. Since I'm not Tina, and you're not—you're just you. It doesn't count if we—if we practice." Billy turns to face him, even though Steve can't really make out his face yet in the dark. "Right?"

His heart rate picks up. “Right. Yeah, that’s right.”

“Right.” Billy’s looking a little more clear, a lot more defined as he chews on his lower lip, Steve sees his brows pull up, furrow before he says, “So why not practice now.”

“For...what?”

“For next time. So when you kiss whatever girl’s lucky enough to be getting picked by King Steve Harrington, she can tell the whole school he knows what he’s doing. It’ll build your reputation. Tina won’t be able to say shit.”

His pulse thumps. “That...makes a lot of sense, actually.”

“I know.”

“Tina won’t be able to say shit.”

Billy’s lips turn up. “Nobody will.”

Steve huffs. Billy inches closer. His breath is hot as it puffs against his face.

Steve feels less queasy than he had, but his hands sweat. He twists his fingers in the sheet underneath them for leverage, to hide it, for some way to ground himself. This feels apart from what he did earlier that night. With Tina.

Feels weird. Different. Because it’s Billy.

“Sure,” Steve murmurs. “Why not?”

Billy lunges forward and smacks their mouths together. Their teeth click hard and Steve reels back, going, “Ow! Christ, Billy! Are you trying to headbutt me?”

Billy giggles, maybe nervously. “Harrington, that was *not* all me.” But when he next leans in, it’s a slower approach. A steady incline instead of a damn rocket launch.

Steve still flinches when their lips first brush. Billy breathes out hotly, their lips tickling from such scant distance. Steve closes it, presses into the touch firmly, seeking more, wanting more. Billy obliging.

Steve embarrasses himself. He makes a quiet little sound. It feels good. Better. But it doesn’t count, so that’s okay. That makes it okay.

Billy doesn’t pull away. Doesn’t seem to mind much. Actually decides to cup Steve’s cheek and pull him back in, and this time his lips are open and Steve sucks in the smallest amount of air before Billy’s tongue is touching along his lips, opening them, pushing inside. It’s wet, maybe too wet. Steve pulls away and wipes his mouth. Not far enough that Billy’s hand ever leaves his face.

A thumb strokes near his ear. “Okay?”

Steve nods. “Yeah,” he says. He’s breathless. He can’t catch his breath. Why’s everything feel so hot? “Yeah, just peachy.”

Another brush of his cheek, a sweep down his chin. Billy smiles and pats his neck before settling back in for bed.

“Thanks,” Steve says, because he doesn’t really know what else to say.

“Any time,” Billy says, and his pulse might thump thump leap out of his skin. “And by the way, Tina doesn’t know what she’s missing.”

“You think?”

A laugh drifts over, soft and airy, a touch too breathy. “Go to sleep, Steve.”

Steve tries. He’s too focused on the fact he’s kind of hard and Billy made him hard and he’s in bed behind Steve and it *doesn’t count*. He squeezes his eyes shut and counts sheep trying to will it away. Eventually it works.

He at least pretends to be asleep when Billy finally has to get up and sneak back home.

interlude i: red omens

It's his sixteenth birthday.

He hasn't seen Billy all day.

And, truthfully, Steve's kind of fucking pissed.

They'd had plans to meet up at the quarry at five minutes to midnight. Steve would bring the beer, which he did, because his dad still didn't notice when his only son raided the fridge for excess alcohol. Billy would bring the tunes, because Billy was the music guy, the go getter, the one with the tangled mullet who headbanged to solos hard enough to knock his brain stem loose. Hard enough to worry Steve he actually, one day, might.

They were going to sit at the edge of the cliff and drink and ring in the new day. Steve's day.

He has snickerdoodles.

He'd made them himself this year because his mom was still on *retreat* in Cologne. The one where she went last month for four days to get *established*.

Onboarded.

She'd be gone for a while.

So, Steve baked himself cookies.

And they're burnt and a little too hard, maybe way too hard and very crunchy, but he made them and wants Billy to try them. To be here with him.

On his sixteenth goddamn birthday.

It's half past one.

Steve contemplates tossing the cookies into the dark abyss. Contemplates, for an instant, tossing himself. Laughs out huffy and bitter before drawing his knees to his chest to wrap his arms around them, to hang his head in the dark nook. Safe. Hidden away.

He sniffles.

The rumble of a familiar engine cuts off twenty minutes later and Steve is an ice cube. Certified frozen. His teeth clamp and chatter as he swivels stiffly around to confirm the sight of the Camaro. It sits parked sideways in the gravel beside Steve's BMW. A birthday gift from his dad, who couldn't bother to fly back from his business trip in Spain to gift it in person.

Steve kind of hates it.

Hates what it represents. The family he never sees anymore.

Maybe he can just drive the car into the quarry and kill two birds with one stone. Three, even.

Then again...maybe he shouldn't have started early on the drinking.

He sighs when the headlights don't flick off. They haze and buzz in the cold night air, lingering

like eerie fog. Steve gets up and walks over, dutiful and determined to figure out what the hell Billy's problem is, being so late.

Steve already has a hand poised to point accusingly to go along with some sort of accusing comment before Billy's door fully opens—and open it does. And then...nothing. No Billy.

Just an open door and a dark silhouette in the driver's seat that Steve can't make out behind the headlights.

He squints. Raises a hand to shield his eyes. No luck.

“Billy?” No response. The shadow slumps. “If this is your idea of a joke, it's not funny. It's freaky as hell.”

The shadow spills out of sight and then Steve sees a blur of bare arms and golden curls as Billy falls to the ground.

Steve freezes. He can't move. Did Billy...die? But he just drove—he can't—maybe he's hurt, maybe he's—

Steve runs to Billy's car and finds him slumped on his side in the gravel, eyes red and cheeks wet, blood smeared over his face and neck and shirt and—

“Jesus, Billy. What the hell happened? Who did this to you?”

He looks like he just got mugged. No jacket. Shirt ripped to shreds half down his chest.

Billy mumbles something slurred. Raises a hand up and knocks a light brush of knuckles across Steve's chin. They're split open and red.

A sweep of his eyes and Steve sees Billy isn't wearing any shoes. One sock.

What the hell?

Another mumble draws his attention back to his hurt friend in his arms, head effectively cradled on his thighs.

Billy flashes a weak smile. Dopey. Bloody.

Missing a front tooth.

Steve blinks away ridiculous tears. Billy's fine. He's fine. He's alive in Steve's arms and he's not sure why he's worried about any other outcome but he *is* and he's going to be *sick* and he—

Steve turns off to the side, coughing. Gagging a little.

Knuckles find his chin again. His cheek.

“Happy birthday, pretty boy,” Billy rasps out, his voice scratchy and rough before he passes out.

-

“I don't know what happened,” Steve says into the receiver. He clutches it to his face with both hands, his eyes still locked on Billy's bloody form on his couch. “He just showed up like, like he is and I didn't know if I should call you or take him to the hospital or—”

Chief Hopper makes a shushing sound on the other end of the line. “You did the right thing, kid. Your folks in town?”

“No.”

“Okay. You said you had to leave your car by the quarry? You know how far down you parked?”

Steve sniffs. “Just at that top pull-off. The one with the sandbank to keep cars from going over? It’s new, like days old for my birthday, and if my dad finds out I just ditched it he’ll kill me.”

There’s a groan and a chuckle from the couch. Billy is bent halfway over the edge with his head hanging over the magazine rack.

He starts vomiting.

Steve winces.

The chief says, “I’ll have one of the guys pick it up and tow it over before the morning. I’ll drop by in the morning to take an official report. For now, keep him resting. He’s not throwing up blood, is he?”

Steve startles. He didn’t know that was even a thing.

“Uh,” he says. “Hold on let me check.”

Billy is grimacing at the mess he made. The magazine rack is a bust. Steve will have to replace them before his mother notices.

When Billy sits up and squints at Steve, as if tllhe can’t really make him out, Steve sees no new blood. He says, “No. He’s not.”

Billy’s frown deepens.

“Good. Take him to the hospital if that changes. Try to get some sleep.”

“Will do. Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

The chief hums, says goodbye, hangs up.

Steve is left with the drone of silence. He hangs the phone up. Billy is glaring at him.

“You called the fucking pigs?”

Steve hurries over to Billy, hands going to his shoulders to shove him, gently, to the pillow so he can lay flat. Billy scowls up at him like he just kicked him in the crotch or something.

“Have you even seen yourself?”

Billy doesn’t answer the question. He looks off to the side, somewhere over Steve’s shoulder. The tip of his pink tongue pops out to run over his lips.

“You’re missing a tooth.”

“And you’re missing more than a few brain cells.”

Steve laughs breathlessly. “What the hell happened, Billy?”

Billy tongues at the gap. It's not bleeding anymore from the looks of it, but it is *gone*. His chin is already bruised where it wasn't before, and Steve feels his stomach lurch just wondering at the possibilities.

Who could have done such a thing?

Steve sighs when Billy refuses to say anything more. He gets up and jogs between the kitchen, the living room where Billy is set up, and the bathroom in an effort to get Billy whatever he might need. Pills, water, towels, extra pillows and blankets.

He's staring at pain pill labels from his mom's stash, trying to figure out what one big word means compared to another, when Billy mumbles something.

Steve lowers the bottle. "What? What was that, Billy?"

Billy won't look at him still. He's buried under the blanket Steve dug out from the winter closet, his hair a mess. The place where his lip is split starts bleeding all over again as Billy chews at it.

"Oh. I said, uh. Kiss me and I'll tell." He pauses, chews fresh blood from his lip. "Bad joke, that's all. You gonna let me wash this shit off or what?"

Steve raises an eyebrow but lets it slide. Billy's moods are fragile lately, and even though he wants to push and pry and get the truth out of him, Steve knows it's probably not worth the effort just now.

Billy usually tells him anyway. Just later on.

"Sure. Yeah, here."

Steve gets a wet wash cloth and crouches on the floor by Billy's face.

When the edge of the cloth touches Billy's swollen cheek, he flinches. Says, "I can do this part you know."

Steve ignores him and does it anyway.

"You can be a real son of a bitch sometimes," Steve informs his friend while he swipes carefully at his blood streaked face.

His mouth is especially sensitive. Billy hisses and clenches his teeth as Steve drags the material across his mouth. After that it's easy sailing. Broad stripes down his neck, the ripped collar of his shirt.

"Is there...are you bleeding anywhere else?"

"Like where, genius?" Billy snaps, and Steve tries to ignore it.

"Your—anywhere I can't see?"

Something in Billy's hard expression cracks. He sits up again to hook his fingers under his shirt. He winces and groans and Steve takes the hint. He gets Billy's shirt up and off him without complaint.

He's a rainbow of colors from his sternum to his belt. Red and purple and blue.

Steve can't catch his breath.

“...Steve?”

He can't breathe.

Billy's been—he's hurt so—and he *still* showed up—

“Steve!” Billy barks. It gets Steve's eyes dragging from his torso to his face. Blue eyes big, all concern above raised hands. Like Steve is some kind of spooked animal he has to calm. “Steve, you gotta breathe.”

“I—you—I didn't—Billy, I—”

Steve can't breathe. He falls back on his haunches, then his ass. He feels shaky. Unsteady. When he pushes himself up, the farthest he gets is a couple inches from the floor before he's back to sitting.

Everything is spinning.

Billy is a circular blur of gold and red and tan and Steve feels like he's the one about to be sick.

“Count with me,” Billy is saying. “Count, okay? One, two, three, four, inhale.” Steve inhales, shaky and jerky. “Exhale, five, six, seven, eight...good. Do it again, asshole.”

Steve does, echoing Billy.

He does it again and again and again. Does it until he closes his eyes and there are hands on his neck and his face and he's still shaky and then Billy isn't counting anymore with him, but his mouth is pressed against his cheek like it's another bit of practice. But it's not. It's not.

Steve blinks. The fog clears and it's Billy in front of him on the floor. “You—get back on the couch.”

Billy shakes his head. “You okay?”

“I...I don't know. Don't know what that was.”

Billy's mouth opens. Shuts. His thumbs rub circles against Steve's cheeks.

“Panic attack, babe,” he murmurs, chasing the shakes from Steve's skin with such easy touches. “You trying to kill me over here?”

“Why? I, no I—wait—tell me who did this to you. Billy this is so—*so* messed up.”

Billy's voice, his face, give nothing away as he says, “My dad.”

Steve gags on nothing. Wretches for a second or two and he's embarrassed, because like, what the *fuck* but Billy doesn't go anywhere. Just keeps rubbing and rubbing and rubbing.

Steve meets his eyes.

“I'll fucking kill him.”

And Billy laughs.

“Nice dream, birthday boy. Just...let's watch a movie or something, yeah? Let me forget for a while before the morning comes.”

Steve is helpless but to do just that.

But first, he gets Billy one of his old shirts.

He sits on the floor by Billy's head until it hits seven in the morning, listening to Billy's breathing and his pained winces in sleep until a knock sounds on the front door.

It's Hopper.

interlude ii: red pill

Hopper knocks again.

Steve bites his lip and turns to catch the last few peaceful moments he'll have of watching Billy sleep.

He's stained pink in places. His bottom lip is crusted over with a black scab. He mumbles in his sleep sometimes, like now, and Steve almost asks him what he means.

"What're you dreaming about, tough stuff?" Steve watches Billy mumble a while longer. Then he sighs and rises to let Hopper in.

"Hey kid, morning." The chief peers over his shoulder to look inside. It's dark and cold. Steve gets a chill the more his own bones wake up. "Can I come in?"

"Oh. Yeah, yeah come on."

Hopper nods, tipping the brim of his hat. He steps quietly, sweeping appraising eyes over Steve's parents' home.

"Think you might want to turn the heater up a smidge?"

Steve shivers. "Uh, my dad's not big on spending money on excess heat."

Hopper's thick brow turns down. "Turn the heat on, kid."

Steve goes to twist the thermostat up. High.

When he comes back, Billy's sitting up on his elbows, hair a mess and blinking slowly at the chief standing nearby.

"How about you give us ten minutes?" Hopper asks, aiming the question Steve's way. "Go get yourself together. I'll take you boys out for breakfast after. How's that sound?"

"I want to stay," Steve says. "I'm staying. I want to know what the hell happened too. I—"

"Kid, sometimes things like this..."

"I don't care!" Steve's just watching Billy. Eyes caught like worms in the mouth of a fish.

His friend is hurt and—

"Harrington, fuck off a while. I'm fine."

Hopper sighs. Takes his hat off.

Billy glares. He meets Steve's eyes and nods and that's what makes Steve go in the end.

-

Steve goes into the bathroom, turns the shower on and wets his hair a little. Then he tiptoes back to the opening of the stairs to listen in.

It's Hopper talking. "...This makes the third time now, kid. I don't know what else to tell you."

“I can fucking handle myself,” Billy snaps, low and upset. When Billy gets quiet that’s not great. Steve’s come to learn that typically happens right before some kid at school gets a bloody nose.

“Hargrove. You clearly can’t. I’m telling you I can—”

A pillow whizzes by into Steve’s eyeline of the lower floor. It clips the edge of one of his mom’s ugly lamps and it’s only saved from breaking when Hopper dashes in to catch it. He rights it and sends a withering look Billy’s way.

Then he glances upstairs, and he locks eyes with Steve.

And he doesn’t say a thing.

Just goes back to talking to Billy like they’re still alone.

“If you’re not wanting the city to press charges on your behalf—and since you’re a minor I have the authority to do that, remember—this will keep happening. I’m already stretching my rope here keeping things running your way, but that bastard can’t keep doing this, kid. Don’t make me live with that.”

“I don’t care about you.” Billy groans, makes a pained grunt. “And what happens to the brat, huh? What happens to me? I get bounced around like a goddamned potato until what? I run away? Because I will. I’ll fuckin’ run every time.”

A tendon in Hopper’s neck pops out. Then he’s walking closer to Billy, where Steve can’t see.

It’s a strain to hear them then.

“I know you don’t want to leave Hawkins. But if it means you don’t get hurt anymore...”

“I can handle my fucking dad!” Billy yells and Hopper sighs again and Steve feels his blood pressure dip.

He sways. Plants a foot on the first step down, but rethinks the benefit of bursting downstairs and joining the conversation. It wouldn’t go well.

He can’t keep listening to this.

Steve goes back to the bathroom. Makes a lot of noise about it. Runs into his bedroom and changes into jeans and a sweater and runs back down the stairs, his hands in his hair to make it look like he’s at work styling it.

He doesn’t care. He just wants the conversation to stop. He wants to get Billy alone, away from cops and his dad, and—god, his own *dad*—

They’re staring at him.

“So, breakfast!” Steve crows.

It works better than he thought it would.

-

Breakfast at Benny’s is, to say the least, awkward.

Billy won’t speak or look at either of them. Keeps his eyes trained on his plate of eggs and bacon

and sausage. He starts in on Steve's pancakes halfway through and Steve doesn't have the heart to tell him they're not even his, technically.

Hopper eats as he watches Billy eat.

Steve's about to lose his damn mind.

"Will somebody say something? What happened?"

"Will you quit asking about shit that doesn't concern you?" Billy says, pointing his fork. Ran into a tree."

"Your car was fine."

"Ran into a tree with my face. I was drunk."

"No, you weren't. You—"

"Steve," Billy murmurs. Steve falls quiet. Feels Billy's thigh press against his. It stays there. His eyes are shining. "Please."

He swallows the words he wants to spit out. To demand.

It hurts. Billy's leg by his doesn't. Sends chills against the fire under his skin.

Hopper speaks around a mouthful of toast. "Eat up. It's free food."

"No it's not."

"For you two it is." Hopper raises an eyebrow until they both start up again. "I think Billy here should hang around your house for a couple days, Harrington. How's that sound?"

"That's—"

"Sounds just great," Billy cuts in.

Billy shoves his leg. Steve swallows his tongue and hates every second of it.

-

They eat and drink and watch movies and swim and don't talk about the night of Steve's sixteenth birthday. Don't even bring up the quarry.

Steve's happy to pretend it never happened so long as Billy never has a rainbow of bruises against his skin again.

Billy heals and laughs and sleeps in Steve's bed and he feels like the kid with a new neighbor all over again, for a little while.

Billy gets a call after school a few days later. His face gives nothing away. He only says, "Okay," at the very end of the call before hanging the phone back on the wall.

They play ball.

They eat dinner.

They do homework and listen to music that Billy likes and has been trying to get Steve into for a

few months now.

And Steve decides he's a fan. And Billy smiles so big, whoops so loud, and smacks a wet kiss on Steve's cheek just like that and Steve's face tingles for hours.

Until they fall asleep. As they dream.

Until Steve wakes up alone. Until it feels like being splashed with freezing water.

He panics, because Hopper told him to stick around. He doesn't know if Billy went back to his house, maybe ran into his dad, or—or all the terrifying maybes Steve has spent every second since the quarry trying not to think about and—

And he doesn't see Billy again for six months.

interlude iii: wake up

Steve's never had a problem with girls.

He's never had a problem with keeping them around either, because he doesn't need to. Hook ups are just that, hooking up, having a good time, parting ways without any strings attached. No harm done. No broken hearts on Steve Harrington's watch.

He prefers it that way.

"You're like, seventeen already, right?" Carol asks in his general direction. She's perched on Tommy's lap in the backseat of the Beamer. They're looking at the liquor store kind of like they're getting ready to rob it, but he doesn't want to bring that up. "You look totally old enough. You'll get through, no prob."

Steve bites his lip as Carol and Tommy titter among each other behind him. It's like a nest of bugs scraping behind walls. They're annoying him more and more.

"I'm only sixteen and a half," he reminds her, moving on from biting to chewing.

She scoffs. "Close enough!"

"You shave too," Tommy tells him.

Steve frowns.

Tina exits the liquor store, stack of bright pink flyers in hand, a cigarette dangling out of her mouth before she's fully through the door.

"Woah."

"Wait here," Steve says and scrambles to meet Tina on the sidewalk before she can get too far.

Steve's never had a problem with girls.

They're easy.

He pops a hip and leans down, close, in her space. A flush spread pretty pink and fast across her cheeks, her nose. She's got these freckles in the right light. He thinks people should pay more attention to them.

She blows smoke in his face, he coughs. She apologizes again and again, hands him a flyer, touches his arm, rubs his arm, squeezes his fingers before hooking her pinky with his while he convinces her she should grab them a six pack of beer.

"Oh, Steve," she coos, "Come to my party and you won't need a silly six pack."

"Why?"

She cocks an eyebrow at him and smirks. "Come to my party tonight. I have a keg." She meets his eyes, stands on the tips of her sneakers to press a peck to the corner of his mouth. "And a *very* nice bedroom. But you know that."

And Steve smiles. And Steve promises to see her soon.

And so it goes.

-

They spend the rest of the afternoon smoking through a box of reds and lounging at his pool until it's time to hit the road to Tina's.

They stop to get gas, because between scoping out the liquor store and heading back to smoke the hours away, Steve forgot.

He's just turning around, trying to stuff change back into his wallet, when he bumps into a girl. She squeaks on impact. Looks up at him with almost terrified brown eyes. She's with Barb.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there!"

"Oh, no. Totally my fault," the girl says, waving him off. She takes a prim step back and smooths down her long navy skirt.

Barb is glaring at him.

"Hey Barb."

"Steve."

"I don't think we—"

"Nancy Wheeler," Nancy Wheeler informs him before proffering her hand. They shake and she holds his hand firm and solid, like a man would. She probably shakes hands like Steve's dad wishes he did. "You're Steve Harrington. You're on the basketball team."

Barb gives her friend a strange look this time.

"Oh, yep. Yeah, that I am. A few months now. I'm still on the bench a lot."

Nancy nods erratically. Ducks her head shyly. Steve thinks she's pretty.

Barb steers her friend toward the register. "See you in class, Steve."

Steve feels a little windswept. Pushes a hand through his hair. Says his goodbyes and leaves.

There's a rumble of an engine he thinks he knows—he misses, he mistakes—but then it's gone and all he can think about is the keg he's sure to dominate just like he always does, every time.

-

He's drunk.

He's beaten his record for the keg stand.

The crowd is cheering Harrington and Steve is drunk and feeling good, feeling sloshy, feeling seen and hidden all at once.

And then his world screams to a halt because Billy Hargrove appears before him for the first time in six months, and he's got his favorite leather jacket on, and he's a little taller and he's—

Really, really pissed.

Or something.

Man, he's drunk. Steve's too drunk. He laughs.

The phantom in front of him doesn't laugh.

Steve reaches out and pokes his chest. He doesn't give. It's a body in front of him, all right. A body wearing a phantom's face. The face of the boy who was his best friend, his—the one who abandoned him.

And phantom Billy, he says, "Look who the cat fuckin' dragged in."

And Tommy laughs like a little beast beside him, and Steve feels ill.

"I could say the same about you," Steve slurs back, feels good about it.

Billy's stoic. More stoic than Steve's ever seen him, under all that anger on his face. Acting like this, acting drunk like he is, *being* drunk like he is—it would have had Billy annoyed, teasing. Not whatever kind of hate he's wearing now.

"Six months. Twelve hours."

Something flashes behind those blue eyes and then like a blur, he's gone. The night goes on.

And so it goes.

-

Later, Steve finally finds him again. Billy. Real and in the flesh. High def. Lit up bright and vivid like some kind of MTV special.

Late night for sure.

He's arguing across the room with a girl Steve kind of recognizes. The longer he stares the closer they seem, and Steve realizes he's been pushing his way to get over to them. To confront. To ask and rib and bark and hug. To—

"I wasn't even in your way," the girl is saying. "And yet somehow, you *still* managed to spill my drink on my friend."

"Your friend," Billy laughs. "Sure."

The girl scowls. "I don't know who you think you are, but you're an asshole."

Billy sneers. Laughs cruel and short and as unkind as Steve's ever heard him. "Whatever you say, dyke."

And the girl freezes. And it's Billy who turns and sees Steve standing there, a deer in headlights.

And Steve's stupid and drunk and mad, so mad, but mostly he's—he's heartbroken. And he hasn't seen his best friend in six months and he might have maybe spent more than one night alone in bed, thinking Billy might have died. And what would he have done then? How could he have gone on?

It's relief and sorrow, holding Billy's eyes now.

Because of all of it, because of so many other things, all Steve can bring himself to say is, “I missed you.”

And just like before, with the girl, Billy sneers and laughs and snorts and says, and says—

“Don’t be such a fucking faggot, Harrington.”

And walks off.

Steve and the girl are left in his wake, still, not knowing what to do next.

Only—Steve’s brain kicks in a second later, a second faster.

It’s like sobriety sinks into his bones all at once. Ice water. So much of it, all over again, like he’s waking up alone for a second time and not the thousandth. Or however many mornings six months adds up to.

Steve turns.

And he catches up to Billy as he swaggers mean, unseeing, uncompassionate—

Steve’s never had a problem with a lot of things in his life. His parents, sure. Figuring out how to operate daily life mainly on his own, yeah, okay. Billy Hargrove, his best friend, the one he still thinks about feeling tingles over—he’s been a six month long problem that’s just presented its own solution.

So maybe, yeah, a lot of things have been easy, while so few haven’t.

Billy’s become one of the more difficult, painful ones.

But this, now—it’s easier than a lot of things he can think of doing.

So Steve raises his fist and—

part iv: not real

Billy's blood on his knuckles is colder than he thought it'd be.

His own blood is warm. A bloom of heat starting from his sinuses down to his throat, his heart. He's on the floor and Billy is straddling him, is hitting him, is pummeling him through the fog of alcohol and anger that Steve doesn't have the first clue to beginning to understand.

Billy's pouring fire into him and he can't catch a breath. He covers his face, can't when Billy pries his hands away. There's a crowd now, ogling and cheering and *ooing* and *ahhing*. Rejoicing in seeing their keg king beat bloody. Steve can't breathe, can't cover his face to try to, so he turns away. Focuses on the heels of one of the girls who clap and chant and laugh and howl and--

And he says, "Billy, Billy stop—"

Because Billy is his best friend.

And he missed Billy so badly.

He's spent so long hurting, he's not sure why Billy wants to make him hurt even more and—

And he did throw the first punch, he realizes. Because he's hurt and he's mad and Billy, before a lot of things between them, always pisses him off.

Steve did this to himself.

But still, he says, "Stop."

And Billy hesitates. Blue eyes clear for a moment while Steve gulps in air. They've done this before. Billy taught him how.

Billy hesitates, unsure. Steve's still fucking pissed.

Steve gets his knuckles in Billy's right eye and he goes down cursing.

Tommy and one of the guys from the basketball team jump in then, get their hands around him and Billy. Pull them away, apart, up and at 'em. Up and away from.

Looking away from the spot on the floor Steve's got his eyes trained on is hard. He knows he'll probably do something stupid if he even looks at Billy right now. Might say something worse.

God, he hates Billy so much right now.

Tears prick at his eyes and Steve hates himself for *still* being so affected. It's been six months of moving on.

It wasn't enough.

Steve retreats to the bathroom. Everything is still a little foggy, a little swimmy with drink. Everything hurts. His chest, his head, his hands. He pops his knuckles before gingerly touching his nose. It's not broken, but it's something.

He's sitting with his back against the tub, tissues stuffed up each nostril and stained red when the door bursts open.

Steve watches the phantom of Billy Hargrove go to the mirror over the sink, pull at his face and wince and start swearing under his breath.

Billy doesn't see Steve as he prods at the damage to his reflection. Hasn't seen the bruised and tearful boy sat on the floor. Billy's already starting to bruise, and the sight has Steve remembering a rainbow of colors over his friend's ribs and he feels sick. Looks away.

That's not his reality anymore. He hopes it's not Billy's.

But it's been six months. He doesn't have the right to hope for anything anymore.

Steve gets the toe of his sneaker on the door. Kicks it closed.

Billy jumps it startles him so bad. He meets Steve's eyes. Scoffs.

"Ready for round two?"

Steve reaches out and pulls on the worn cuff of Billy's jeans. "No. Come here."

Billy stares at him. At the tug on his leg, like some stray animal decided to chew on him. Looks like he doesn't know whether he should kick it or pick it up.

He lets Steve keep tugging.

"You don't want that."

"Sit down, Billy."

Billy doesn't. Steve takes a shuddery breath in.

Billy sits down on the edge of the tub. Steve dips his head forward, catches his breath.

"Breathe, Harrington."

Six months. Of nothing. Not a word. No call. Nothing.

"You're just a ghost," Steve whispers, choked up more than he'd like to let Billy witness. "You're not real. This isn't real."

Everything hurts.

Fingers card through Steve's hair, but at least it proves that ghosts are just as solid as anyone else still living, still around.

Not gone.

-

Steve wakes up in his own bed around two. He waits until the next *ping tink* sound of a rock hitting his window comes. His heart does a little twinge before he realizes it's still been six months and almost a full day and Billy throwing pebbles to come inside probably doesn't mean what it used to.

Still.

Steve climbs out of bed. Goes to his window and slides it up. Sees Billy with his arm back to throw another before he drops the few rocks he still holds back to the ground.

They don't say anything.

It's been a few hours since they fought. Since the bathroom. Steve had left Billy sitting on the tub, felt fingers drag harsh through his hair as he got up and fled. Ditched Tommy and Carol and drove back home. He got into bed and forgot the world.

Until now.

A rush of breeze chills his bare chest. He's in his briefs. He's staring down a crossroads. Either he can shut the window and effectively tell Billy to go fuck himself, burn whatever remains are left over of the smoldering bridge between them. Or he can not do that.

Billy's looking up at him. Waiting so well. Patient and neutral and quiet in spite of the hour and chill in the air and, well. Them.

Steve nods, sees Billy's shoulders slump with a sigh, and goes back to bed. Listens to Billy scrape and crawl his way up the siding of the house until he's grunting, climbing in, sliding the pane shut. Steve lies chilled to the bone over the comforter, facing away.

He can sense Billy just standing, just staring. At him, maybe. Most likely. Hopefully.

Billy lets out a soft *uh*, followed by the creak of a step forward. Steve can feel him hovering.

"Can I?" Billy asks, voice muted.

Steve doesn't turn to see what he means, what he's asking for. At this point Steve will do anything just to have Billy in his orbit again. He's tired of being a piece of rock circling a cold star.

He nods. The bed dips.

Billy lies behind him. He can tell Billy's facing him by the hot puff of air against his nape. It sends a chill unbidden down his spine and he shivers.

Steve doesn't know if Billy falls asleep, but he does. And he dreams.

-

"...the waves were so cold. Colder than I remember. Guess Indiana heat does that. Fucks with you, your head. Even takes the good memories and turns them inside out until you don't recognize them."

Billy's talking and for a long, held breath, Steve thinks he's still in a dream. That the Billy in his head is speaking to him and not the phantom from earlier. The leather wrapped lump behind him in his bed, like not a day passed and Steve's never had to miss Billy a day in his life.

Billy's talking. "When I first got back, it was nice. Hadn't been down to the pier in years because of Neil. He hated it. Hated the noise, the smells, the people. Hated the sun and the sand too, probably. The son of a bitch sure knows how to hate."

Something moves behind him. Behind his head. Steve huffs, feels Billy freeze. The movement starts up again and only after does Steve realize Billy's got his fingers toying with the ends of his hair. Barely feels like anything at all.

Billy keeps going, talking even quieter. “My mom would always take me swimming off the pier even though it was dangerous. On the best days, when Neil was on call all week at the factory and couldn’t take off, she’d load up the car and drive just me and her all the way to Stinson. Now those were some decent waves. Caught a great one once. It was high as shit. Felt like flying. Same weekend I ended up wiping out so bad I skinned my knees bloody. Neil beat her until she couldn’t leave the house because she wasn’t watching me right. She’d been watching me just fine. I was the dumb shit who waded out too far. Got brought back in like a fucking tsunami...”

The fingers keep petting, smoothing, twirling. Billy’s presence has filled the room with the smell of cigarettes and whiskey and it’s stuffy and comforting and he falls back asleep.

-

In the morning, he’s alone. But a look out his window shows him the Camaro and Billy leaning against the hood smoking.

Steve pulls jeans and a new shirt on, squirts on his best cologne and runs downstairs.

Billy’s closing the front door when Steve skids to a halt.

He can’t just keep staring at Billy. He can’t. It’s weird.

But Billy’s staring too.

“You were in California?”

Billy blinks. “I needed some time.”

Steve vaguely recalls Billy talking about waves and the beach and what must have been California last night. He doesn’t remember much else.

He tugs at the ends of his hair. Billy traces the movement with his eyes. Meets Steve’s.

Billy approaches him. Puts on a smirk a shade away from sleazy. Looks weird on Billy’s usually laughing face.

“Why did you leave like that? You didn’t even call.”

Billy only stops when Steve is backed against the banister of the stairs. He folds an arm behind his back to squeeze the top until his fingers feel numb. Feigns casual with all the rest of his gangly body.

“You sound like a girl.”

Steve frowns. Decides to get right to the point.

“I thought your dad killed you.”

He expects something. Anger. Wide eyes. A sneer. A snarl. Something. Anything other than nothing, which is all Billy gives him.

It’s infuriating.

“I fucked around in California for a while. Got myself a girl and stayed longer than I thought I would.”

Steve feels the pit of his stomach give out.

“What?”

“Got myself a girl, weren’t you listening?” Billy snips.

“I...I thought—”

Billy toes the carpet. “She’s pretty cool. Gonna be moving out here soon so we can be together.” He puffs his chest out.

Steve deflates.

“She’s moving out here?” he asks, only slightly wild. “To *Hawkins*? Why?”

Billy snorts, sight fixed annoyingly on the carpet. “All its charm and it even wears on pretty boy King Steve? Huh.”

“Billy—”

“Yeah, she’s moving out here. Thought if it worked out I’d get a job and a place. Get away from my old man.”

Steve’s reeling.

“You—you’re not even eighteen!”

Billy just shrugs. Like it’s a nonissue.

“Stay here,” Steve hears himself say. He sounds terrified. He doesn’t want to sound terrified. “The guest room. My parents don’t care, they won’t even know. You can move away from Neil *now*, just—”

Billy rubs at his chin. Steve sees stubble.

“Hold your horses. You’re sounding like you’re sweet on me.”

It’s said as a jeer. Because Billy laughs when he says it and it’s mean, it is. So fucking mean.

But Steve’s heart thumps and he feels like running away, to the woods.

He *can’t*. Not like that.

“No,” he mutters, trying for anger instead of shame. Instead of shock and terror because suddenly everything he ever knew just got flipped upside down and he only just saw Billy again for the first time in half a year *last night*.

Too much to drink, maybe. Hopefully.

“No,” Steve repeats. “I just didn’t think you were the type of guy to marry a girl to get out of your dad’s place.”

“Whoa, nobody said I’m marrying her. And please, you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. We never even *talked* about Neil. You don’t—”

“I know you—”

“—know shit!” Billy finishes in a shout and it’s his turn to steam, red in the face and embarrassed.

“Billy,” Steve says, holding his hands up. Billy crowds him back, gets in his face. Steve refuses to flinch. He’s not *Tommy*. “One minute we’re talking to Hopper and figuring things out and the next you’re gone. For months. You just up and disappeared. Hopper wouldn’t even open a missing person’s case. You were just...just *gone!*”

“Missing pers—Seriously? I wasn’t missing, asshole. I was in—in California.”

“Did Hopper know?”

Billy pokes his chest. “Harrington, will you stop chatting my ear off with a million questions? I’m back.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“And I’m supposed to pretend you didn’t call me a fag in front of everybody last night, too, or what?”

Billy takes a step back. “I was drunk.”

“No you weren’t.”

“You were drunk.”

“Don’t recall ever calling myself names when I polish off a keg stand.”

“I was—look, Harrington—*Steve*, don’t look so fucking pissy, Christ. I needed time. I’m back. Let me deal with my own bullshit, alright?”

“No.”

Billy groans, running his hands down his face. “I don’t get this. I don’t get you. What’s your fucking problem, man?”

He crosses his arms. They can’t keep doing this dance around...around whatever it is they’re dancing around. Steve’s tired. He’s mad. He’s missed Billy more than he can put into words.

And that last part is only starting to make sense.

“Fine. Fine, whatever. Welcome back.”

Billy glowers his way for a moment longer before the edge of a smile starts up. Blooms big and real and like the Billy that never called him a faggot, or looked at him like leaving didn’t mean shit.

Still. And still, he just wants to believe that Billy is back for good.

“Come on, let’s go take a drive? I’ll buy us some breakfast or burgers or something.” Billy ducks his head, smiles big and soft and full of everything Steve is suddenly hungry for in a way he somehow missed. “God man, your hair’s a mess. Here.” Billy gets his hands in Steve’s fringe, pushes it back, brushes a sure and quick touch through to comb it into something better than whatever it was. His whole head tingles in the wake of Billy’s hands.

Joke's on him.

He goes.

part v: limbo i

Chapter Notes

Hey look an update.

They say to use what you know in writing. I don't believe in that, because I use what I don't know, and I don't know chemistry. Apologies to whatever that big swirly twirly beaker is called.

Steve still leaves his window unlocked sometimes. Once, he'd left it unlocked every night.

Every night for six months, a part of him hoped it would lead to the fever dream of his best friend climbing through, smiling, giggling, maybe drunk, maybe not.

Only he never did. Night after night after night, Steve's window sat unlocked until it wasn't.

Then Billy shows up and wants *in*, back in Hawkins, back in keggers, back in Steve's window, back in his goddamned life.

Because it is damned, when it comes to the Hargroves. It took him a lot of years to figure that out, but the second he caught sight of a frowny little blond boy next door while he watered the roses his life was fucked.

He stands in briefs and a shirt, in the dark in front of his window, and wonders if it's worth leaving unlocked tonight. It's been a day since he saw Billy. Since Billy last stood, right here, smiling like everything was normal.

It's not. Nothing is.

Steve is trying hard to keep that fact at the forefront. He can't slip up and let Billy just beat him up and waltz into his everyday life like he deserves that anymore.

He doesn't.

He *doesn't*.

Steve sniffs and turns away. Ignores the shame bubbling inside him as he tries not to think of the unlocked window across the room.

-

Billy didn't visit last night.

He feels stupid for hoping the awkward breakfast after Billy spent the night would have mended something. But it hadn't. Billy had been short, abrasive, laughing too much at nothing and everything. Steve felt too off balance, too nervous and tired and *sad* to really contribute. To talk.

So, Billy didn't visit again. Even though Steve waited. Hoped.

Steve finds out why at school the next day.

He's sporting a busted lip and a nasty black eye. Steve did *not* give him either.

Something rancid spills over, makes Steve fist his hands in his pockets where he stands by Nancy Wheeler's locker and watches Billy stride through the halls looking proud to be back with no notice, with a beaten face.

Neil.

Steve hates Billy's dad. Steve still wants to kill Billy's dad. Not even he's sure he doesn't totally mean it.

He doesn't want to see Billy hurt. But he also doesn't want to really see Billy.

Billy, who's apparently been kicking back in California for the last six months with a girlfriend who's willing to relocate halfway across the country just to be together. It makes something large and empty inside Steve twist, pulling at his skin. Lonely.

Billy's never had a girlfriend. He's a self-addressed loner. He doesn't *do* relationships. He likes to sleep with girls and not call them the next day. It got to the point it was what people expected of Billy Hargrove. A fun ride, but no follow through. And Steve remembers him being just fine with that. Unbothered.

Steve's the opposite. Always has been. He sees his parents, how they despair every time they have to spend more than half an hour together. He wishes they'd call it and get a divorce already.

Steve wants someone who wants him back. He can't imagine throwing something so precious away.

He debates stepping away from Nancy's locker altogether, abandoning his plan to wait until she shows up and ask her if she wants to sit with him at lunch. He knows it's weird, after only just meeting. But she's pretty and she looked at him with what a lot of girls look at him with, just softer. Sweeter. Not as presumptuous.

He likes her. He thinks.

But Billy is striding down the hall straight for him. If Nancy doesn't show up in the next minute, he has to bail, and Billy will have ruined the first two days he's been back in town without so much as a hello.

Thankfully, just as Billy is breaching the last few feet between them, Steve hears the familiar disappointed sigh of Barb Holland, and a higher pitched, surprised little, "Oh. It's you."

Steve turns, giving them his best smile. It's a killer, plenty have told him so. And it works to make Nancy blush above the binder and books she clutches to her chest. Barb is appraising him in the way she appraises everyone, guys especially.

Planting a hand on the lockers, he leans in close, makes her blush. Makes it his mission to ignore Billy just behind them and puts all his attention on lovely little Nancy in front of him. Plays with a dark twist of her nice hair. She smells like fresh laundry. There's a warmth to her. Her nose goes red the longer they talk, and she has a hard time meeting his eyes. She's sweet as can be, and he decides he *does* like her.

Making her go pink is easier than pretending he doesn't hear the gruff way Billy swears as he walks by them, turns down the other hall, like the locker he's always had isn't a handful of rows down from Nancy's, from *Steve's*. Alphabetical order can really be hell, sometimes.

He watches the tense line of Billy's shoulders for a moment before finally lowering his gaze to Nancy's lips. Watches her talk instead. Eventually, even Barb warms up and joins the conversation.

-

They're in chemistry together, a class Billy didn't share with Steve before he left. But apparently his old schedule is null now, and he's stuck at the same table with Steve. Because goddamn alphabetical order.

Chemistry has never been Steve's strong suit. He's not even sure how he passed biology last year, honestly. Maybe he passed out and a smarter, more educationally-intune subconscious took over for him.

But then, he *knows* the real answer. He had Billy to help him. They would do their homework together and Billy would try his best to teach concepts Steve barely clung to during tests to barely pass. He scraped by, in the end.

But now Billy, this new, angry, hateful Billy, is his partner. And he's always been so smart, so clever. He could probably watch a rocket launch and decide from afar how the math worked if he put himself to the task.

Billy's flinging beakers around like he's paid for it, and really Steve just stands there and watches, a frown on his face underneath the bulky plastic goggles they all have to wear.

Something starts bubbling after Billy adds a smaller vial to the bigger beaker and he laughs. Whoops. Fist bumps the beaker into the air.

He's the first to replicate what their teacher demonstrated.

The teacher comes over to congratulate them. Steve stupidly says it was all Billy.

Which makes the teacher tell *Steve* to do it this time, without Billy stepping in.

Steve sighs. Billy chuffs at the sound.

"Christ, man, it ain't that bad. It's easy once you get the hang of it."

"Tell that to my failing grade."

Billy's brows lift beneath his goggles. "You're failing?" He seems to chew on that for a while as Steve listlessly weighs beakers in his hands, trying in vain to remember what order Billy did things in. "Want me to help you study—"

"Nope. I'm just fine. Peachy, even."

Steve adds the first liquid. It's slightly yellow. Billy makes a sound and Steve turns a hard look on him. He shuts up.

Steve is so not in the mood today.

Billy taps his fingers on the table as he watches Steve pour the contents into the biggest beaker, the one with the twirly, swirly bit. He can't remember what it's called.

"You can't fail, man. It's required."

"I'll figure something out. I always do."

Steve's reaching for the water next. At least, he thinks it's water. It's clear and the liquid's consistency looks the same when he jostled the container around a little. He pours that in next, spilling a little when Billy startles him with a derisive little snort.

"Something on your mind?"

"Since when have you figured anything out without my help?" Billy asks and Steve could kick him.

"I've done pretty great for the last six months or so," he snips back, and adds a little more of the maybe-water straight from the container it's in.

Billy watches on, one cheek dimpling as he twists his lips. Like he's holding back what he's thinking.

Steve blinks hard, fast, freaks a little when he feels his eyelashes are wet. He's so angry, all at once.

"Seriously? This again," Billy mutters under his breath, but Steve hears, because how can he *not*, and god, it hurts. "Harrington, you know you—"

He licks his teeth, jerking another random vial into the beaker to throw it in the mix, because why the hell not.

"What, Billy? What am I? Stupid? You know it. Or were you gonna call me a fag again? Maybe throw in a few more just for fun."

Beside him, he can sense Billy going rigid, stepping into his space. He's too close. He smells too good. He's Steve's best friend in the world and he has no idea who he is anymore.

And it's fucked up and he hates it.

Steve leans over the swirly beaker, glares because nothing is happening. Billy's had bubbled like five steps ago.

Why is he such a fuck up at everything he does? Why can't he ever *get* anything?

Without looking away, he reaches out for the yellow liquid again. Tips it all into the beaker and waits, nearly vengeful.

It bubbles and he can't help but feel relief.

Then there's nothing but bright, intense heat, and Billy is shouting something suspiciously close to, "Steve!" before hauling him back by the waist to avoid the fireball flying right for him.

Steve stumbles, flies right out of Billy's less-than-secure-grip and falls on the hard linoleum. Cracks his head against the metal leg of the table behind them.

He sees stars as he lays there, not knowing whether he should clutch the back of his throbbing skull or make sure his eyebrows weren't just burned off his face.

"Jesus, Steve, that was a close one." Desperate, searching hands paw all over him, his face and head. Billy smells like his favorite cologne and nicotine and his goggles are big and dumb looking and he looks worried.

Steve sucks in a sharp breath. Pushes off the floor, past Billy's hands and the teacher hovering

above them, tears off his bullshit chemistry safety gear and leaves the classroom behind. He can take the students' eyes on him, their shocked, awkward laughter smothered by hands, the teacher's questions—what he can't stomach is Billy pretending he cares.

“Harrington!” A curse, sounds of steps. “Steve!”

Steve jogs the rest of the way, fighting not to turn around and see who he knows is calling after him.

Where he's going, he doesn't know. He just needs to get out, get away.

part v: limbo ii

Tip. Tap. Tip. Tap.

Christ, he thinks.

It's one in the morning. He should be fast asleep, but he's not. Because he's been thinking about almost blowing himself up all day, and about Billy saving him, and about Billy leaving him, and about Billy having a girlfriend, who's moving out to Hawkins. Soon. Or something.

What the fuck.

Tip, tap, tip, tap.

His head throbs where he lays.

"Jesus Christ," he mutters. His parents are asleep down the hall. Billy is seriously pushing his luck after everything.

Steve hauls himself out of bed and pads over to the window, glaring before he's even got his fingers on the sill.

For a split second he keeps his line of sight on the trees straight ahead, peeling off into a dark, leafy mass. If he looks down and sees Billy, will he see bruises and blood? Or a face all smug and knowing? Like *of course* Steve Harrington will come to the window at Billy Hargrove's beck and call.

But, if he's hurt...

His fingers twitch. Steve hates he has the energy left to even care.

So what if Billy's dad beats him? So what if he ditched Steve to go and find a girl in California and —

What is he? A scorned chick?

Christ.

Fuck.

Steve looks down and sees Billy. Serious and with a handful of pebbles. Honestly, where does the guy even find so many? Between the pool and the trees there's a lot of weeds and dirt, not much crumbled stone to pick through.

He's stalling.

Steve bites the inside of his cheek and debates just going back to bed and pretending to sleep through the rest of the night. Nevermind Billy's already, clearly, seen him.

Billy spreads his arms out wide, like *come on, dickwad*.

Seconds past. A match to the beat of his heart. One, Billy punching him. Two, Billy calling him a faggot. Three, Billy sneaking back into his room and asking *can I, can I, can I*. Four, Billy telling him once it's just practice.

Steve deserves better. He doesn't know what he and Billy are anymore, but it's sure as hell not friends. Not like they used to be.

And if Billy's proven anything, it's that he's just fine. He pulls through. Beaten or otherwise, he always manages to come out the other side unscathed.

He doesn't need anybody else. He doesn't need Steve.

Steve locks his window. Turns away and goes to the other side of his bed and sits on the floor, feels the carpet soft against the soles of his feet as he hunches his shoulders, hides his head, his face, and thinks.

Nobody really needs him.

—

Steve is early. He hadn't slept a wink once he denied Billy the right to his room. The first time in— in probably forever. He can't remember the last time he said no. It feels good to say no for once. Like maybe he *does* have some control over his life.

He gave Billy the cold shoulder after he saved Steve from burning to a crisp from his own dumb mistake in lab, and he's watching Nancy walk toward him with Barb in tow and he's smiling and he's happy. He is. He's doing great.

Nancy walks up to him and beams, her cute little smile twisting up at one corner. She's cute. She's beautiful. Doesn't care what everybody else thinks, which tends to be verbalized quite loudly and often in her direction, especially with Barb Holland trailing next to her.

Neither of them really seem to pay any attention to the gossip. Steve wonders how that's possible.

"Hey," she says brightly, cheeks pink in the morning cold. "You look nice."

"That's my line!" he says, pouting. She giggles and he leans down to press a lingering kiss to her cheek. It's sudden, unplanned. But it works to make her blush and look down, trying in vain to hide her grin.

Being around Nancy is easy.

"Ugh, get a room," Barb complains, rolling her eyes at her friend. Nancy elbows her. "Or not, that's worse."

"Now ladies, I have more class than that," he gripes, but he can tell it's not that serious. If Barb had a real problem with him, he thinks he'd be able to tell. And, she wouldn't suffer through eating lunch with them. "Same place at lunch? I heard they're serving sloppy joe's today."

"Sure. I love those."

"You hate messy food, Nancy."

"Barb," Nancy quietly admonishes her friend. Turning back to Steve she adds, "Did you start on the essay for history yet?"

"Uh." He hadn't realized there was an essay. "Not yet. Have you?"

"Not really. Want to study after school?" She tucks a lock of hair behind an ear. "Together."

A giddiness lights him up from the inside out. “You—yeah, yeah! What time should I pick you up?”

“Oh. I was thinking we could, maybe, meet at the library?” She trails off, and Steve’s hope of getting to see what Nancy’s room looks like wanes. “But sure, we could study at mine. I’ll give you my address later. Check your locker after first period?”

Steve can’t help himself, he ducks down and plants a kiss on Nancy’s small smile. She giggles in his arms when he moves to spin her around.

“It’s a date!”

Nancy’s only got eyes for him, and he feels enraptured. Sucked into her orbit. It’s new and exciting and *nice*. The first kiss of many, he can just tell.

Tommy comes barrelling up to them, throwing his arms around Steve’s shoulders to wrestle. The moment is ruined. The magic is broken. Carol and Tommy can be mean, a lot of the time, and they’ve voiced their opinions about Nancy and Barb on more than one occasion. But now here they all are, in each other’s atmosphere, breathing the same air.

Tommy grips his shoulders hard when he finally settles his gaze on Nancy. The grip tightens.

Maybe the air is toxic. But Steve admires how Nancy just smiles at him like she doesn’t give one single shit what Tommy Hagan thinks and Steve decides it’s a new day.

And Billy Hargrove might not matter as much as he used to.

—

Steve’s standing at his locker, running his fingers over the indented lines of Nancy’s handwriting. It’s a piece of neatly folded notebook paper with her number and address on it. He’s going to pin it to his wall so he can see it as he’s struggling through homework.

His senses prickle a second before he’s being shoved against his locker. He turns, shoulders tensed and fist wound up, ready to go—when he sees Billy walking past, glowering over his shoulder.

Something just unburied and raw burns, making Steve sick to his stomach. Something about Billy and him; it takes almost nothing to boil. To get so angry it hurts.

Billy turns back around, throwing up a middle finger over his shoulder.

Billy doesn’t need him. Doesn’t need anybody.

The note with Nancy’s neat curling letters is crumpled in his fist when he finally relaxes enough to review the damage.

Okay, then. If that’s the way it’s gonna be.

That’s the way it is.

part vi: breathe

“I told you five times already, it’s *Buckley*. Robin Buckley. I only have two books out, so why can’t I get a third?”

Steve stands behind Robin Buckley, who seems very upset and about two seconds away from zapping the school librarian, who’s about a hundred years old, into oblivion. He can’t really blame her. The lady moves slower than molasses.

Mrs. Gallodan pushes her glasses up her slanted nose. “As my records indicate, you’re flagged, Ms. Buckley. No two ways about it.”

“Impossible.”

“I’m afraid not. Are you sure you’ve not misplaced the other three you have out? They are all marked past due.”

Steve watches the girl in front of him straighten up, start tapping her fingers.

“No. I don’t *have* any other books out besides the two. Which is *why* I’m trying to check out *this* beast.” She pats the cover of the large, dusty text. A twin to the one Steve has tucked under his arm. “Come on, man. It’s required for english. I have this *huge* essay, and—”

Mrs. Gallodan narrows her eyes. “Do not *man* me, Ms. Buckley. I’m going to have to ask you to move to the back of the line. If you’d like to rethink your manners and try again, please, feel free. Otherwise, I suggest checking with records and admissions.”

The girl turns around after a long, tense, beat, sees Steve, and the subsequent lack of anyone else in line. Then she turns back around.

“Seriously?”

“Next,” Mrs. Gallodan calls and it’s a dismissal if Steve’s ever seen one.

He respectfully keeps his eyes on the floor as the girl passes by, stomping her way off to somewhere that’s certainly not the back of the line. He checks out the book and makes a decision. It’ll likely backfire with his luck.

He finds her slouched and frowning at a table nearest the fiction section. She’s glaring at the front desk as she spins a number two pencil between deliberate fingers.

“You look like you’re plotting something,” he comments.

“Who made you so smart?” Her frown deepens before she decides to finally look up and see who’s speaking to her. When she sees it’s him, she pauses, eyebrow arching. “You’re Steve Harrington. From the party.”

He offers her a smile, but it doesn’t seem to work on her like every other girl he’s ever met. “And from other things.”

“Yeah, but it’s not every day the famous schmoozer, Steve Harrington, gets outed. Makes for a memorable night. After all, outsiders like us gotta stick together, right?”

“I’m not a schmoozer, I—wait.” Steve blinks. Outed? “What do you mean? I don’t—don’t get it?”

She blinks then, slow. A dark flush rises to the tops of her cheeks. She stiffens in her seat, moves to stand up. “Forget I said anything. Catch you in class, or never.”

She’s mumbling something dark under her breath as she starts walking, but Steve steps in front of her.

She looks ready to murder him. He holds the book in front of his chest, the same one she’d been needing.

“Oh. You came to rub it in. Very nice. You’ll get a good grade and I’ll bomb, thank you *so* much for reminding me. Now outta my way.”

“Your name’s Robin, right? Robin Buckley? I’m Steve. But you—you already know that. I saw Mrs. Gallodan giving you a hard time, but I thought, if we’re both needing the same book anyway, why not share?”

“Share?” she repeats, eyeing the book, then him. “Steve Harrington wants to share with *the geek*?”

It hits him then. “Oh my god, you’re in band!”

Robin rolls her big eyes. “Move. I have places to be that aren’t here being diminished by an idiot. Goodbye.”

That stings, but it’s barely anything as Steve steps in front of her again. He knows he’s more than testing her patience. Will probably have a fist in his teeth in under a minute flat.

But something tells him to push his luck.

“I just meant you—I recognize you. From rallys and like, games and stuff.”

“Duh. You and your little group of howling apes make fun of our team every home game.”

He winces. “That’s just Tommy and Carol.”

“Well, they’re dicks.”

“They can be, yeah.”

Unimpressed, Robin adds, “And so are you. Big time. Major dick. Like, a huge asshole and a half.”

He lowers the book, frowning, but knowing she’s not really...wrong. He *has* made fun of her and her bandmates at games. At practice too, just walking by the field to the parking lot.

“Huge. The biggest.”

Robin considers him a moment longer before finally taking the book from him. She flips it open, eyes the table of contents, before slamming it closed. They get shushed, but neither of them acknowledge it.

“Can’t fathom how you manage to fit into a single pair of pants.” But she’s sitting and taking the book with her. And she’s even bringing paper out to join her pencil. “Sit, Steve Harrington.”

He does, a little too hard, but still. Robin gives him a look. “It’s just Steve.”

“Okay, just Steve.”

She begins flipping through to certain chapters, taking notes.

“And I’m sorry. You know. For the teasing. And...and for Tommy and Carol. I’ve been trying to get them to back off a few things for a while.”

“They’re chattering monkeys, those two. Absolutely hopeless.”

“Hey. They’re—”

“What? It’s true.”

“They’re still my friends,” he insists, because they are. Because he can’t afford to lose any more friends right now. “I don’t have to share the book, you know.”

He watches the frown reappear before she huffs. “Yeah, guess they are. You ever think about keeping better company?”

Steve pictures Nancy then. Thinks about their dinner tonight, where he’ll get to meet her parents and siblings. Two of them, apparently. He’s always wondered what it’s like having a brother or sister.

To not be so alone. Or bored.

It’ll be their fifth official date. Or is it the sixth?

“Yeah. I do.”

“Well that’s at least something.”

They sit in silence for a long time, nothing but the scratch of Robin’s pencil and the quiet sounds of others studying to listen to. Steve tries to take his own notes, but it’s hard when the book isn’t even turned his way.

“So,” Robin starts up out of the blue, quiet and low, “you’re not...you know.”

“Not what?”

The pencil lowers. She taps it twice before meeting his eyes. “At the party. That guy who called you... *you know*. I’m not repeating it.”

“Oh.” That. “No. He didn’t mean it. And I’m not—that. I’m not.”

He resettles his weight where he sits, shuffling, hunching. Feels like the closer he is to the table the less real Billy’s anger towards him is.

“Well, neither am I. I was joking earlier. Making a bad joke. Ha,” she adds, in a rush. “Anyway. Why are you defending that jerk?”

The conversation is moving too fast for him to get a foothold. He’s not a hundred percent sure what they’re even talking about. “Billy’s not a bad guy, really. He can just be...”

She waits. “A jerk?”

Misunderstood seems a stupid word to describe everything he’s thought about Billy Hargrove the last few...the last half year.

“Yeah. He was an asshole. I don’t know why he was acting like that. He was never—not before. He wasn’t like that before he left.”

“Where the hell did he go?”

California. Girlfriend. Beaten bloody, bruised, busted up, healed and returned like nothing ever happened.

“I don’t really know.”

Robin hums, leaning back enough to cross her arms. She wags the pencil at him. “So you two aren’t friends?”

“I—we—” What are they? They aren’t. Not anymore. Maybe not for a long time, and he’s just been in denial. Too slow to let go. “No. Not really.”

“Good. People like that aren’t worth knowing. They’re mean for no good reason and cause a lot of hurt.”

He thinks about Billy shoulder checking him that morning after class. Flipping him off. Steve still feels a pang in his chest. Of anger. Of sadness. Of something deep and unsettled.

He buries it down, away. For later. For never.

“He spilled your drink on you? At Tina’s party?”

“Nothing I don’t expect from some drunk asshole, but that guy...” She shakes her head, as if holding back from saying what she wants to. “That Hargrove’s got a huge chip on his shoulder.” She shrugs, resuming her note taking. But this time, she angles the book so they can both see, clearly inviting Steve into her space. “If you ask me, good riddance.”

Steve scans the first paragraph, then the second. Writes down notes he knows he only half understands. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.”

—

Nancy adjusts her sweater for the third time in a minute. Steve smiles at her, strained. Stills her hand by grabbing it and lacing their fingers together. But she doesn’t get the idea and they fumble for an awkward minute before she finally huffs and pulls away. Starts fidgeting all over again.

“You look great, Nance.”

She gives him her favorite *I know* smile. Small. Uncertain. “Just don’t get my dad started on politics. Or baseball. My mom made cookies? Like two sheets worth. Eat them. Just eat them all. In fact, eat whatever she hands you, but *don’t* accept a beer if my dad offers you one. He thinks it’s *cool* or something. But he isn’t a fan of underage drinking. It’s a trick. And Mike *better* behave, I swear to god—”

“Nance,” Steve says, taking her shoulders in both hands to get her to still. She falls quiet on a pout. “Everything will be fine. I’ll love your parents. They’ll love me. I’m a genuine certified parent-pleaser. They can’t help but love me. Bet your dad will be planning our wedding before dessert!”

Nancy’s eyes bug out. “Oh god. Oh god, that’s the worst. I’m not even eighteen yet. He’ll freak—”

Steve sighs. Rubs down her shoulders again and again, kisses her forehead even though she

continues her mild freakout.

It'll be fine. Just peachy.

The lock turns. Nancy squeaks into silence. Steve takes a deep breath and feels his heart thump when Nancy slips her hand in his.

A pretty, older, blonder version of Nancy answers the door shadowed by a sour-faced boy.

“Nancy, he’s so...” The kid looks between his sister and Steve in displeasure. “Stringy.”

“Mike!”

Steve paints on his best, most impressive smile, and braces himself for a long night.

—

Robin chews on her eraser like it’s candy.

“Stop that.”

“No. Don’t think I will.”

Steve has been studying with Nancy after school almost every day. It gives him an excuse not to spend every waking free hour he has with Tommy and Carol. And it’s helped raise two of his grades so far, even though the most input he gives during their *study sessions* is flirty innuendoes and cheesy pickup lines to make her smile and blush.

It’s been a happy time for once. For the first time in too long.

He used to share afternoons filled with laughter and books with Billy. Billy used to make him almost piss himself he’d laugh so hard. And always at the dumbest things. Billy hardly had to try, on his typical deadpan delivery.

But it’s a new day. A new month, even. He and Nancy are serious now. Tommy and Carol are even easing up on her a little, which is really all he can ask for with them.

He’s been moved off the bench in basketball.

Robin and him spend a lot of free periods together *actually* studying.

And Billy hasn’t been in his life. At all. He’s been a dark shadow in the halls, a wordless addition to classes.

Except in chemistry. Because they sit together. But damn it all if they haven’t tried their best to ignore each other while still getting work done.

And it’s worked, for the most part. Proved they don’t need to talk much beyond *this assignment is gonna be a lot* and *no, you gotta add this*.

Then the bell rings and Billy is the first out the door, Steve still left standing in his goggles and yellow rubber gloves.

It works.

Because then he usually sees Nancy or Robin or Tommy or Carol and then more class and then

more Nance or Robin or Tommy or Carol and then the occasional (re: frequent) party where he breaks his keg stand record, and Billy is off in the corner being loud and drunk and—bed. And then Steve sleeps and he wakes up, if he's lucky enough to get to sleep at all, and does it all over again.

It works.

Robin takes the eraser from her mouth. Spins her pencil like a small baton.

“Wanna hit the movies tonight?”

She keeps talking. Something about some romcom she's been wanting to see. Or is it that action one? He doesn't listen really. Only half pays attention. Nods yes, because what else does he have to do?

He yawns. He's tired. He's got plans, because plans are good. The more plans, the more he has to keep busy, the better.

“That works,” he says. Because it does.

-

Midnight is smack in the middle of the anxious hours of night. Starts at the tail end of ten and crawls slow and unstoppable into eleven. Soon enough it's one then two then three and Steve finds himself, once again, lying awake going over all the many mistakes he's made in his life.

Nancy is asleep beside him.

It's the first time a girl's ever slept over. She's small and beautiful, her skin pale in the moonlight streaming through his window. The curtain is open just enough to illuminate the edge of her ribs, her shoulder as they peek out from under the comforter. He'd pull the covers over her if it wasn't for the arm she had hugging them to her chest. She's faced away from him.

He's never had sex with someone who stayed the night before. It's different in a wonderful way. He's always been a big dreamer. It's easy to imagine this to be the first night of a thousand and one. Of more. Of late nights followed by early mornings filled with breakfast and coffee and life. Living. Of plans for the future he hadn't really ever considered before.

Nancy is safe. Picturing a future with Nancy seems doable. Likely. Wanted.

Inhale, he wants it more than anything. Exhale, it aches that he doesn't have it yet. Impatient, that's him. He has an idea and immediately wants the end result. His dad's complained about that personality trait enough for Steve to recognize when it's happening.

Nancy mumbles and sighs in her dreams. Snuggles down into Steve's bed. She's safe here, next to him. He did that.

Everything about this moment is safe.

But why can't he ignore the strange ache sleeping just under his ribs?

-

Billy's in the locker room.

Rather, he's changing into the green shorts and gray shirt Steve's been wearing every other day for

months.

For practice.

For basketball.

For the *team*.

But now it's Billy in front of a locker, changing, brushing his hands through his curls, making stupid jokes at Tommy's expense even as he laughs along. Like it's so great to be made fun of, as long as it's Billy Hargrove doing the teasing.

It's pathetic, honestly.

Steve isn't stupid contrary to popular belief. So what, Billy made the team? It's not like the guy isn't good at it. He and Steve played ball the first time they met. Played for years after. All the time.

Billy's on the team.

Billy licks his lips and flips Steve off like it's just another day when they lock eyes.

Steve slams his locker shut.

Whatever.

-

Billy is all *over* him. Seriously. What the hell is the guy's problem?

"What the hell, Hargrove?"

Billy's blue eyes light up all electric fire, a wire gone rogue whipping in the street. Careful, the sparks will catch, burn down the whole town.

The way Billy just grins at him then, Steve wonders how fast a city can burn to the ground.

Billy steals the ball. Throws from half a court away. Sinks net. Hollers and it's Tommy giving him a high five.

Steve sighs and just tries to survive until Coach blows his whistle.

-

"Look who it is," Tommy croons as Steve is soaping his hair. He's got a lot of it and it takes a while. Everyone knows this. Billy and him flank Steve in the showers. Why Tommy all of a sudden decided he's Billy's best friend in the universe, Steve doesn't know. Doesn't care. Or at least tries not to. "Played like shit today, Harrington! Thought you were trying for captain next year. You'll never get it like this."

"Captain, huh?" Billy grabs Steve's bar of pink soap, shoves it under the spray. It's too fast to linger, too much a play at getting inside Steve's head. He *knows* Billy, and Billy's just fucking with him. "Nah. Harrington doesn't have the cajones for that."

Tommy gives a pointed look between Steve's legs. He doesn't try to hide anything. He knows what he's working with and nobody really cares anyway. Billy starts washing his hair.

“Hm, don’t think he does. Wonder when they shriveled.”

“Probably around the same time I got back in town,” Billy says, eyes closed and curls a soapy halo around his ears. “He went and turned bitch when he didn’t have me covering his ass all the time.”

Steve sighs again. Steps under the spray. Steps back out and relathers. Two lathers equals good lift. That’s just science.

“Harrington’s always needed somebody on his ass. It’s a wonder he hasn’t *really* turned full bitch yet. Bet you any day now he’ll get on his belly and spread his legs just begging for someone big and strong to come play guard dog just to get him through to graduation.”

Steve opens his eyes. It’s almost boring, really. Tommy’s never branched far in comedy. So many areas to draw from and yet he just...stays an asshole.

Watching his friend laugh now, like a pig in slop, Steve wonders when he outgrew that. Him. And Carol.

He slides his gaze to Billy. Billy laughs, husky and deep, as he finishes washing his hair. Steve thinks it’s mostly an accident that Billy meets his eyes again at all, as he’s pulling his fingers through his tangles. His mouth forms a small o. He frowns.

Then the grin is back full force. Painted on. Slathered even.

Fake.

“That right, Harrington?” Billy asks. “You waiting for a nice jock to give it to you good, make you a real woman?”

Tommy snickers. Steps under the spray.

But Billy isn’t laughing and neither is Steve.

It’s just them then. In the showers. In the gym. In the whole school. The whole world.

Steve shrugs. “Wouldn’t know. After all, it would just be practice, right?”

It doesn’t make a whole ton of sense. Not really. He knows that.

But then, it does. It makes all the sense in the world, just in the world they made. The one two kids crafted out of ideas and half baked stupidity. A game. He barely thinks about it anymore.

But Billy gave him his first real kiss. And he was kind. And he was funny. And once, Billy was the kind of person who stuck up for him.

He wants to ask Billy then what happened. Why did it all fall apart? Was it his fault, like things usually tend to be?

Billy goes from neutral to furious all at once. His expression crumples. He swipes out and slaps Steve’s shower’s faucet off.

Tommy’s sensed the change in the air. He’s watching now, showering faster now that whatever tension had been brewing has clearly switched into *danger* territory.

Steve gives Billy a smile when he doesn’t move to do or say anything else. He just stands there, wet and fuming.

And Steve thinks, *good*.

-

He wakes up. It's two am. He sighs and wonders what did it this time. Can't remember any bad dreams. Does remember he doesn't have anyone over. No Nancy or friends—because fuck Tommy and his attitude lately—and his parents are gone again on some faraway European vacation.

So, what woke him up?

Something slams against his window, rattling the frame. His whole wall shakes.

Steve's up and in the middle of his room in a heartbeat.

For a beat he thinks he's hallucinating.

Then it's Billy impatiently slapping his window again, wanting in.

Steve knows that drop is a bad one. Once upon a time, he worried about Billy falling and breaking his neck if he wasn't there to help him in. Maybe all that new anger inside him has made him super strong. Or super long and suddenly he doesn't need Steve's help to sneak inside his room at night.

But Billy goes to slap the pane again, wavers, and dips out of sight.

Steve's at the sill with the window wrenched to its limits in the span of a breath. He grabs the first part of Billy he sees and yanks, doesn't give a shit if the guy gets a dislocated shoulder or whatever else.

Billy swears as they scramble to get him inside. He clambers over Steve once he has purchase on the sill and then he's jumping with just enough force to knock them both to the floor.

Steve groans and lifts his head. Billy's legs are in a tangle over his chest, and he's pretty sure the guy landed an accidental shoe to his balls. But fine, *whatever*, at least he didn't *die*.

Steve grabs Billy's legs and pushes them off, to the floor. Why are his damn boots so heavy? Billy pushes himself up on his hands and knees and glares at Steve as if this was all Steve's idea.

"You gotta go, man."

Billy just keeps glaring.

"God, don't you ever get tired of that? Being angry all the goddamn time? Just looking at you gives me a headache." Steve rubs at his forehead, because he is starting to feel a headache coming on, and he's just now remembering the conversation they had in the showers earlier in the day.

But still, Billy just stares and stares. At some point hating someone so deeply must break a person apart, right? That would only make sense.

The thought sends tears pricking sudden and terrifying to Steve's eyes. He turns away and covers by running his hand over his face.

"Go, man. Just," he says, breathing and hating the way his voice threatens to shake. "Go."

"Steve."

It's been weeks. Months. Not since the chem lab, he thinks.

“Leave, Hargrove.”

It’s not nearly as biting as he wants it to be.

“Billy,” Billy mutters.

“No.” Because they’re not doing this. Whatever this is. The middle of the night is not meant for hashing out things like the failure of friendships, the loss of the right to use each other’s names. What the *fuck*. “No.”

“Come on, Steve.”

Steve can hear Billy as he shuffles around, comes closer. If it’s a ploy to get close enough to knock Steve’s teeth out, he doesn’t get the angle. The why. But he can’t say it isn’t smart.

Billy knows him, even after everything. And that’s why he should have made it clear, earlier in the showers, that no, they aren’t friends anymore. They can’t be. He promised Nancy, in the way he likes the way her fingers fit between his. He promised Robin, in the way she was so confident in saying *good riddance*, like it was a fact of life nobody ever received anything good by being friends with a guy like Billy Hargrove.

He promised himself. Silently, between every moment he was left alone and clueless during those six months when he had to count his breaths. Billy taught him that. Silently, when he found himself smiling at something funny Robin said. Silently, when he woke Nancy up some mornings with a raspberry against her sternum, even though her giggle would turn into a rushed frown soon enough. It was all better than how Billy made him feel.

Billy very gently grasps Steve’s wrist. Pulls at it until he realizes it won’t budge.

Billy used to be his best friend in the world.

“Come on, Steve. Come on, please.”

Something small inside him—something unburied and raw and broken—cracks open. Enough to let in just enough light, just enough sound that he lets Billy pull his hand away.

The sound that escapes Billy is small and broken too.

But he still hasn’t said sorry. Not for any of it.

“Go,” Steve says, trying again. Steeling himself.

Billy keeps pulling, keeps pulling until Steve is left with nothing but the barrier of his legs between them. But Billy pushes too, and pushes and keeps pushing until Steve is pushed up and sitting against his wall, knees to his chest. It’s uncomfortable and he tries to knee Billy but Billy just keeps pulling. Keeps pushing. Moves between his legs and it’s *weird* and it’s *new* and Steve hates him for making him so unafraid of clearly frightful things.

Billy crowds in close. Steve expects to smell cigarettes and alcohol, but all he smells is cold leather and familiar hair product. A little—no, way—too much cologne.

For an insane moment, one where time ceased over a year ago and he could expect Billy to dream up the idea to kiss each other in the dark, Steve forgets himself. Forgets where he is. How old they are. All that’s changed.

But Billy's blue eyes are dark and soft and he's here, even though Steve locked his window. Even though they somehow piss each other off more than they make each other laugh.

They aren't friends.

But Billy still brushes his nose across Steve's cheek like he once did, and he can't stop his breath from catching in his chest.

"Steve," he whispers.

Steve feels a hand, firm and warm, cup him where he's soft. They've never—*Billy's* never—

"Are you crazy?" Steve gasps, when he feels his blood start moving in the wrong direction. Billy notices, because how can he not. He jostles his hand, but not in a rough, unknown way.

His fingers stroke then, purposeful, and Steve slides to his haunches. Tries to get some distance. Maybe it's all a bad dream.

Billy drops his hand. Moves away to give him space.

For long moments they just breathe.

"What the fuck, Billy?" Steve finally voices, and sees an old smile cross his face.

Billy moves like lightning. Kisses Steve harsh and full and Steve groans, kisses back. Because he's a fool. An absolute, total idiot.

He winds up on his back, legs spread around Billy's bulk. Billy kisses him while he works on Steve's pants, and he doesn't want to know what's happening, even though he does. The air is cold when it hits his skin, but only until Billy can wrap his hand around his length again. But this time is different. A whole world different. Billy's working him over and it's embarrassing how good it feels.

Steve grips at Billy's shoulders, winding his fingers tight into his leather jacket. He's panting, trying not to thrust into Billy's touch. But it's hard, so hard not to.

Then Billy's mouth is off his, skating along his cheek, biting at his jaw, his ear. He moans, just from that. God.

What the fuck are they doing?

Then he's locking eyes into endless black, a deep blue he'll only ever associate with this moment now. A breadth of time both intimate and sinister.

Billy stops.

Drags his hand away from Steve's overheated flesh. He's made Billy's palm sticky from how worked up he is. And it's like Billy doesn't even *care*.

"Can I, Steve? Can I?" He looks almost pleadingly down at his handiwork. Licks his lips. "Let me?"

"Let you w-what?"

They're both heaving. Billy is red in the face, his shoulders are quaking. He's as much a mess as Steve is.

Steve can't bear to look down and prove himself right. Or worse, wrong.

Maybe this is all a joke to Billy. Maybe he's just doing this to make a point, to prove something cruel from practice. Make him a *woman*.

Make sure Steve gets off but not himself and brag about how *queer* Steve Harrington is so nobody in all of Hawkins will ever respect him again.

Why would Billy do that?

Steve blinks more tears away.

He can't begin to think of what the alternative would mean. If Billy wants this too.

Because *what the fuck are they even doing?*

They've kissed, sure. They've never done this. Never done anything close. Practice makes perfect but this is taking the concept a little far, he thinks.

"You're thinking too loud, Harrington," Billy tells him. But it's soft. Not mean like the name has been. Teasing. Fun. Like this is funny.

God, maybe it really is all a joke to him.

Then Billy's mouth is on his own again. And Billy's kissing him deep and careful until Steve can't think of anything at all. All except Billy.

Billy pulls away. Spits into his palm and slicks Steve up in one firm stroke. He winces from how good it feels, how hard it is not to move with it, to ask for more, more, *more, Billy*.

Billy scoots back. Drops his shoulders a little, his head even more. Steve can't help but follow him down until he feels hot breath fan his skin and then he's biting his lip.

"Billy. Billy."

Why can't he just say anything else?

Billy hasn't looked away from his eyes. From him. Like this means something.

It doesn't. It can't. This is a joke. A nightmare. A dream that isn't real, and just as terrible for it.

"You're a ghost," Steve whispers. "This isn't real. You're not—not really here. You hate me now. You went away and came back and you just—God, you *despise* me."

Billy's eyebrows twist together. "Steve, come on. Breathe."

"I am breathing, asshole."

Billy smiles, lopsided but there. "I'm here. Okay? I'm here with you."

Steve can't think of what to say to that. How do you address what's too good to be true? His friend isn't his friend and they don't do this and this is crazy and feels amazing and he's *not Billy's friend*.

Not anymore.

“Do you want me to stop?” Billy asks then, and Steve didn’t expect that. It doesn’t seem the kind of thing a dream would ask.

They aren’t friends.

They haven’t been friends.

This isn’t practice.

Billy doesn’t need him.

And Steve already decided Billy shouldn’t matter as much as he used to.

Steve holds Billy’s gaze. Breathes.

Says, “No.”

part vii: hold

Chapter Notes

Oh my god is something actually happening??? Is progress going to maybe be made???

He blinks awake, half in between crying and feeling himself slide in his own mess inside the sweatpants he'll have to change.

Steve blinks the dream away, wants it gone and out of his head. Wants the image of Billy's soft and endearing eyes as far away from him as possible.

He's not gay. He's not into—into *guys*. He's not into Billy.

Christ, he's *not*.

Why is he crying? What the hell kind of nightmare even was that? How did his brain cook up something so mean, so strange?

The idea that Billy would ever touch him—ever just show up and do, do *that*. Run a hand over his junk and just—get him—want him to—*want to* put his *mouth*—

Steve flips over, eyes shut so tight he can feel the pinch of a headache start up at his temple.

He's biting his tongue, because the pain of that is better than accepting how he's hard all over again, like he didn't just have a wet dream, didn't just come in his sleep picturing Billy wanting to go down on him. Fuck. *Fuck*.

Driving his hips down hard into the sheets, Steve tries to imagine anything—anyone—else. His brain decides envisioning a random throat is best. He tries to picture someone he knows—someone he *really* likes, like Nancy—but she doesn't like that stuff. He's teased and flirted but would never force her into things she doesn't want to do. What they do, what they've done—it's sweet, it's *nice*. Nicer than he's ever had before. They've had sex, but it wasn't like—wasn't the rough, desperate need in his dream.

It wasn't like waking with an animal burrowing under his skin, wanting out. Needing release.

And his brain is awful, is so goddamn mean and stupid and stubborn because all Steve can think about is the dream-Billy asking him if it was alright to touch him, to open his mouth and take him down, take him inside.

It's imagining that warm, flexing heat that tips him over the edge for a second time.

And god he's ashamed of himself.

He frowns, lifting his hips from the mattress to see the mess he made. There's a sticky dark spot at his groin and his sheets are even damp. He can't remember the last time he ever came so much. For a wild moment he feels like a *girl*—

No. Nope. No way. He's shutting off his brain for the rest of the night —no, no it's morning. It's six and he's got two hours before class starts. Before he has to go another day dragging himself through activity after activity to keep busy so he won't think about anything like how much Billy's hurt him, how much he felt alone for those six months, how the whole thing with Nancy is moving a little too slow, how—

No, he thinks.

He rolls out of bed, strips his pants and underwear off, and throws them in the hamper on his way to the shower.

Today won't be like this. Today will be normal. Today he'll ignore Billy like every other.

He draws the line at having weird sex dreams about his best-*former* best friend.

After all, he already decided. The Billy that came back isn't the Billy that left.

I'm here. Okay?

He's not worth it.

I'm here with you.

Even if Steve's eyes still sting.

-

Nancy kisses him on the cheek in hello when she climbs feet first into the passenger seat. She settles in, buckles her belt first, even before she's got her books figured out. She finally stacks them on her lap and proceeds to chat his ear off about her government and geometry classes. Topics he never really paid attention to back when he took them. He honestly can't even remember if he took geometry last year, or if it was algebra or something else.

He just likes listening to Nancy talk. She has a nice voice.

“Steve?”

“Huh?” He glances at her as he prepares to take the turn into the school parking lot. Had they already arrived? “Sorry, wow. I must've spaced out.” He finds his usual spot and pulls in.

Nancy gives him a funny little look, one that makes her nose scrunch up in a cute way that reminds him of when she's about to let go and fall over the edge in bed.

Can I, Steve? Can I?

Steve licks his lips, thoughts drifting to where they shouldn't be. He parks.

Let me?

His knee hits the steering wheel. He sputters, scrambling to steady the wheel with both hands because he feels suddenly like the ground is falling out beneath him. He ends up hitting the horn by accident.

Nancy is just *looking* at him. Staring just like the rest of the parking lot is.

And Billy.

Billy is staring at him too, from his place sat against the hood of his Camaro parked in the row ahead of them.

Steve sucks in a sharp breath. Turns to Nancy and kisses her what he hopes is long and deep, but ends up being hurried, teeth clacking. She laughs through a groan, holding her fingers to her teeth.

He leans in close, grabs up her hand and noses at her wrist, focusing on only her. Blocking everything else in the world out except the way her baby hairs tickle around her ears, the delicate, dark bend of an eyebrow as it draws low. The blush across her cheeks is slow and pink and pretty, and Steve dots the moment with a longing stare at her lips.

Yes, look how much I want you, he wills her to understand.

“Sorry, Nance. I’m all over today. I—I didn’t sleep well. What was your question?”

Charmed, Nancy rolls her eyes at him but doesn’t remove her hand from his. “I *was* asking about your chemistry assignment. You mentioned it last week. It’s due in a couple days, isn’t it? You just haven’t talked about it lately. I wondered if you needed any help?”

No. No way. That huge project isn’t due until *next* week—

He thinks quickly on the last few days, envisions the calendar tacked to his fridge that he dutifully crosses each day off in the morning and realizes that yeah, he’s screwed.

He can’t even really think of what the assignment is *on*. How the hell is he supposed to scrounge up something passable?

“Oh, Steve,” Nancy sighs, like she *knows* him, what he’s done. It makes his heart pang with want and also annoyance.

He draws away, letting her wrist slip from his fingers as he reaches into the back for his book bag. He frowns out his window.

“I can help—”

“No, it’s not that. Really, Nance—I, I already started?” He hates it sounds like a question. He doesn’t even want to turn to see the look on her face right now. He can guess it’s something too close to disappointment. “I just realized I forgot to ask my teacher something about it. You reminded me.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah! Don’t even worry. I’ll uh…” He faces her only long enough to press his lips messy against her cheek, and ends up getting her forehead instead. Whatever. It works. “I’ll see you at lunch?”

“Sure. I was thinking we could get some food out, after school’s out? I wanted to try that new bananarama shake they have at the diner on second. How does four sound?”

“Perfect. It’s a date,” he says, grateful for something to do to look forward to. He kisses her a last time and starts out the door.

Nancy is already following his lead, which is good. All he wants is to lock his car up and get to class. Wants to escape the way Billy is *still* staring at him, cigarette between his fingers at a hip like he’s the king of the goddamn school and above the rules.

Nevermind he's done exactly the same so many times before. It's just—it's *different*, okay?

He hates today.

By total accident, he meets Billy's eyes. Like the universe is forcing even his eyeballs to adhere to a type of gravity personally set against him.

Nancy is saying goodbye, but it's periphery. It's nonsense words.

The universe is Billy's eyes, is Billy's red lips around the cigarette, is those lips forming a plush little alcove for smoke to reside, burrow, coax up and out of.

He hates Billy.

That morning he woke up with the shadow of Billy Hargrove's name in his mouth, rutting into his own mess.

Steve rips his sight away.

He hates himself.

-

The only thing curtailing his anxiety over once again having to sit next to Billy in chemistry is the fact he managed to forget a major part of his grade is due in less than forty-eight hours. He's one murder mystery away from passing or failing, and he's not so dumb he can't figure out which one.

If he fails...

His dad is going to kill him if he ends up needing summer school.

"What's up?"

It's Billy's deep voice, cutting through the tumult in his head like a chainsaw.

Steve focuses back on the chemicals Billy is playing with. Really, they're supposed to be observing metal changes. Or something. From the last twenty minutes all Steve's managed to observe is that some metal blocks have bubbles when Billy uses the eyedropper and some don't.

Billy glances up at him, then back at his little vial of hard-earned bubbles. He's writing something down on their shared lab paper. Steve taps his pencil.

"What, Bil-Hargrove?" he asks, annoyed and catching himself.

The muscle in Billy's jaw spasms. "Nevermind."

"No." Steve taps his pencil faster. "No fucking—*No*. Say what you were gonna say."

Billy's eyebrows lift. "Not if you're going to chew me out for it."

He's still writing on their paper. Like there's so much to say about bubbles in liquid.

Steve drops his pencil flat on the table. He picks up the vial and circles it around, bringing a little tornado to life. "I will if it's stupid. You want to say something stupid?"

Billy hums a long, low sound. "What the hell's gotten into you, Harrington?"

“Nothing. Just—god, I didn’t sleep well. Okay? Nothing new. Just fucking spit it out, man.”

Billy looks over for the vial, sees it missing, then finds it in Steve’s grasp. He grunts before he swipes it back. Their fingers brush.

Steve feels his face burn, a chill dragging up his arm from that small, meaningless point of contact.

Billy doesn’t seem affected by it at all, which makes it all the more ridiculous.

“It’s just...you look like a penguin slapped you.”

What. “What?”

“You just got this,” Billy says, holding his hand up, palm toward his face. He moves it around.

“Look. So. What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Don’t bullshit me. I know what it looks like when you’re bugged by some kind of shit. Is it the misses?”

“The—the who?” He chooses not to comment on Billy still seeming to think he *knows* Steve. He doesn’t. They’re different people now.

“Wheeler,” he says, his face doing something...interesting.

His chin is hiked up, a pink spreading at the top of the ear that Steve can see. His fingers work over the pencil he’s still scribbling with, the other hand clutching the vial until the knuckles are white.

And Billy’s tight-lipped through the whole thing.

“It’s got nothing to do with Nancy...no. We’re—we’re great. Yeah, things are perfect there. I just didn’t sleep much. I haven’t been sleeping. I’ve just been tired.”

“Tired or not sleeping, which is it?”

“Tired because I’m not sleeping.”

“I sleep when I’m tired.”

“Well,” Steve says, “congratulations. Good for you and your, your...” he waves a hand flippantly in Billy’s general direction, “metabolism processes.”

Billy stops what he’s doing suddenly, turning a slow, amused look his way. “My what?”

“Your, you know.” Steve grasps for the right word. He knows he’s wrong. It’s just a bad day.

“Your body process or whatever. That makes stuff work inside you.”

Billy seems to think a moment. He taps his pencil now, looking thoughtful. Steve’s hit with a wave of nostalgia over what it used to be like between them. Easy, simple. Like breathing. They could joke around and fight and argue and tease and still laugh at the end of the day because it wasn’t serious. It wasn’t whatever it was now.

It’s why he looks down, away from Billy’s almost playful smirk. Like he’s not the guy who called Steve names in front of everyone at a party, who’s been so mean to him—

“You mean physiology?” he asks abruptly.

Steve shuffles out a rough sigh. “Sure. Yeah, that. Let’s just get this done okay? I have a lot of work to catch up on.”

“Like what? We have the same homework, man. I see you turning in shit.”

The teacher walks by and Billy makes no attempt to lower his voice or hide the fact they’re just talking and not really working. But whatever their teacher sees over his shoulder on their paper is enough he keeps walking.

Steve, however, slouches down in his seat, starts tapping his knee. He almost bumps into Billy’s beneath the table but moves too quickly to be embarrassed.

It didn’t used to be like this.

“Nothing,” he says. “Just nevermind.”

It’s Billy leaning into his space then, smirk on full cocky display. “No way, Jose. Your turn to share with the class. What the hell are you missing?”

“I’m not *missing* anything. I just—I thought that midterm project was due next week. I was planning on staying after and begging for an extension.”

He hums. “Interesting.”

“What?”

“The Harrington I knew wasn’t one to beg for anything.”

Billy. Billy.

His stomach twists into knots.

What the hell is he doing?

He’s friends with Robin now. And Nancy. And sometimes Barb, when she isn’t scowling at him. He’s trying his best to stay friends with Carol and Tommy, trying and failing because he knows how they are.

It really boils down to Robin and Nancy. Mostly Robin. Robin has made him realize a few things about people he’s kept around himself since he was a kid, and for what? To be teased, to be let down, to let others hurt without him stepping in to stop it?

What the hell is he doing, and why is he still doing it?

“Steve?” Billy asks, and it’s little more than a whisper. And how dare he sound worried.

“You know, Billy,” Steve says, tired more than anything in that moment. More than caring about keeping up appearances, more than maintaining the game of Hargrove-instead-of-Billy, more than his memory of gasping awake with thoughts of Billy touching him so sweet and hungry.

He’s just exhausted.

“You know...” he repeats, “were you ever really my friend?” He asks it because he used to count the hours of difference between the before and the since, until Billy showed up stoic and burning

like a firecracker stuck in Indiana grass so that the clock finally started to slow, to tick down, backward, flashing all at once into the future again. Until there was an after. “Did I somehow make it into this big thing it wasn’t? Gave you those stupid cookies when you moved in next door and just—just assumed?” He takes in a shaky breath and hates how his gut flips over, how he feels sick. He can’t even look Billy in the eye, let alone his face. “Or was I really just that stupid all these years and never knew how much you hated me?”

The silence is heavy. Steve didn’t really expect a deep response, not even necessarily a lengthy one, but nothing? At all? That’s just shitty. Embarrassment piles on top of the exhaustion, and he wonders how he’ll be able to stomach the rest of the year when it’s like this.

Maybe instead of asking for an extension after class, he’ll just go to admissions and ask to transfer. It’s just a few months until the end of the school year, but maybe they’ll make an exception since his dad donates money to the district every year.

Maybe it’s time to bite the bullet and write Billy off.

The bell rings. Steve takes a moment to steady himself. He fists his pencil and pretends it’s his own personal lightsaber. Nobody can fuck with him if he’s got one of those, right? He’ll be able to walk out into the hall and into his next class and leave Billy Hargrove in the past where he belongs.

He’s standing and Billy hasn’t moved. He wonders if he should turn the work in, even though Billy usually does it.

Steve notices then that Billy already wrote his name down, as if he contributed anything but confused pondering when it was really Billy who did all the work yet again.

“Your cookies weren’t stupid,” Billy says once the ringing has stopped, and *that’s* what he’s been hooked on?

Steve shoulders his bag, finally looks down at Billy and the strange expression he has.

“See you later, man,” he says quietly, and goes to turn their paper in.

Billy’s up in a flash and behind him when Steve turns around. He jumps, startled. Billy grips his elbow to stop him from tumbling over the poor girl behind him, but drops it just as quickly.

Steve doesn’t know what’s happening.

“I don’t,” he says, low and urgent. “I don’t hate you.”

No. No, no, no.

“I—that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter anymore, okay? Forget what I said.”

But Billy doesn’t *want* to forget, apparently, because he’s stepping in front of him again. And his eyes are burning, and he just looks so—so dead set on whatever it is he’s trying to get out.

This is really ruining his plans.

“This isn’t,” he stops then, and they both turn as a couple of girls titter as they pass Billy, one passing her hand over his waist like he’s free range meat. Steve frowns. Billy ignores them, only continuing once they’re gone. “We should talk.”

“A little late for that, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I get that. Listen, I—” More girls walk by, throwing flirty farewells at them both. Billy’s mouth flattens into something just shy of angry, Steve recognizes it instantly and hates that he does. “Can I come over later? To talk.”

What else would he come over for, his traitorous brain asks, and Steve wishes his pencil-saber had a real shining beam to wield. It would probably be more helpful than looking like a nerd ready to take notes.

“Why not here, at school?”

“Because it’s not for them.”

Them. The school. Not for everybody else.

For someone. For him.

For Steve.

A girl full on bumps into Billy on her way out and Billy snaps. Loses it.

Half shouts, “Can I help you!”

The girl scurries away, startled and called out. The others still gathered in the hall to see just when Billy and him will actually leave the class laugh at her.

But their teacher takes it as his cue to come over. “Is everything alright over here, Mr. Hargrove.”

It wasn’t as much a question as an attempt to see what kind of detention needed to be given. But Billy was always as slick as they come, and even now, in the midst of whatever kind of anxious conversation they were having, he turns it on like a superpower. He paints on a wide, welcoming smile, throws his shoulder into Steve’s like an old buddy would.

“I just was offering to help Harrington here with his midterm.”

“Ah, right. That’s very kind of you. Remember, as long as you both complete separate projects, I don’t oppose working together.”

“No, yeah, totally. I’ve already finished mine.”

“And what have you come up with, Mr. Hargrove?”

“I made soap,” he announces, like he’s proud. And maybe he is. Steve doesn’t totally recognize the tone in his voice. “Kind of ruined my kitchen though. Man, was my old man mad.”

He laughs lightly, easily. And the teacher laughs with him.

The knots in Steve’s stomach have overturned, unwound and reached to claw up his throat. Made it hard to breathe, to speak.

Automatically, Steve starts going back and cataloging every wayward mark he’s seen on Billy in the last week. Nothing serious on the face. Had a pretty bad red bump when Tommy nailed him in the head with a basketball on Monday, and it had faded just as fast. But other than that? Nothing Steve can recall. Nothing he’s seen before and *known*.

He’s watching every minute twitch in Billy’s face when Billy suddenly turns back to him. It catches him off guard, those blue eyes of his widening.

“I was just asking if we can hang after school to work on it together,” he explains, searching Steve’s eyes like he’s honestly asking. “How about it? You free today?”

Steve only nods because he doesn’t trust his voice just yet. Can’t trust himself not to just blurt out a million questions about Neil and if he laid a hand on Billy.

About if Billy needed a place to stay for the night, to get away, to breathe, and found a locked window instead.

“Great!” he says, clapping Steve a little too hard on the back. There and gone. “See you at four?”

“Uh huh. Yeah. Yep. Perfect.”

Very smart reply. Incredibly smooth.

Another clap on the back and Billy’s turning out into the hall to walk straight past the girls angling for his attention. It would be funny if it wasn’t sad.

He offers a small smile in goodbye and follows Billy out, going the other direction to his next class when it hits him.

He has a date with Nancy at four. Bananarama shakes.

Steve wants to bang his head against a locker.

He’ll just have to reschedule with Nancy.

She won’t mind.

part viii: boil

Chapter Notes

I could not help writing the next chapter so here we are!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lunch brings with it two things.

One; Nancy's pissed. Or maybe miffed might be the better word.

And two; a few tables over, Billy's got his arm around a tall brunette and they're sitting awfully close for two people who aren't dating.

Steve's never seen her before.

Nancy stabs her fork in her lettuce a little too hard, the crunch bringing his attention back to her, where it rightfully should be. He shouldn't be so concerned with Billy and whatever girl of the week he's decided to try and hook.

Only they've got plans to meet after school and he supposedly already has a girlfriend back in California.

So, what gives?

"Steve."

He blinks, again turning back to his own girlfriend, who is definitely firmly in the realm of miffed-almost-pissed. If that's a thing. He hasn't ever seen Nancy get mad before, but he feels he might soon.

"We can go tomorrow, I promise. I know it's last minute. I honestly didn't have much of a choice."

"You always have a choice, Steve," she tells him, perfunct and logical. She spins her fork in her salad but doesn't actually take a bite. It's starting to look like rabbit food. "You really think it's smart, working with him? I know you two have history with each other."

History. Billy Hargrove was his first best friend in the world. The first friend to break his heart when he didn't know friends could even do that. His first kiss.

He frowns hard down into his mac and cheese, doing little more than stabbing his fork around his plate too.

She sighs. He sighs. They sound like a pair of worn out lazy chairs.

"It's just homework, and I really can't skip it. Might send the guy home early, who knows," he adds, because he just might. Letting the guy into his house isn't exactly conducive to him cutting ties and moving on with his life. "I really am sorry, Nancy."

Nevermind that if he doesn't do the work, he'll fail. He might *have* to stomach working with Billy

at his house for the next afternoon or two to avoid having to repeat junior year.

Nancy is still pouting but it's turned somewhat thoughtful now.

"If I was in your year I could help. Just stick it out. Who knows, maybe you two can work whatever it is out between you and be friends again?"

He wants to laugh. Or cry. He's not sure which, really.

"Oh, well...that's not really in the cards for us I think."

Nancy is about to say something else when like a bomb going off, Tommy jumps into the seat beside him, wringing his neck in what he must think is playful, but really just serves to agitate Steve. He was tired, confused...but now he's just annoyed.

He shovels a forkful of pasta in his mouth to keep from saying something stupid. Something mean.

Carol slinks into the space next to Nancy and, ever ignorant of the personal space of others, takes her plastic knife and sticks it into one of Nancy's apple slices. She sticks it between bubblegum pink lips and laughs.

"Heya, Nance," she singsongs.

Tommy has draped himself over Steve to the point he's just sticking his fingers into his food. He fingers a noodle and pops it between his teeth, grinning.

Steve tightens his hold on his fork.

"What's the king and the priss up to today?" he asks them, eyeing Nancy.

"Probably something stuffy," Carol surmises. "Something very conservative."

Tommy opens his mouth for the stolen apple slice Carol offers him. Steve is used to his friends behaving like this. It's their way of initiating someone new in their group, but...there hasn't *been* anyone new in years.

Not since Billy.

Now, seeing the way Nancy's mouth hangs open a little until her expression morphs into something shaded and bubbling, he wonders if that wasn't by design.

Nancy grabs her tray and stands primly, only looking at Steve when she says, "I'll just get a ride home from Jonathan. I'll see you tomorrow."

Jonathan? Jonathan who?

She's already gone when he catches back up to what Tommy's saying.

Tommy's eyes go wide. "Wonder what's got little high-and-mighty's panties in a twist."

He and Carol laugh, smug.

And Steve wonders, why. Why has he put up with them all these years? Was he really always so blind, so deaf? Did he never realize?

Or worse, has everyone else seen him the same way too?

Steve shrugs Tommy off. “You can really be an asshole, Tommy.”

Tommy’s mood falls instantly, going sour. “What? I’m just speaking the truth.”

Steve just watches Nancy hurry out of the cafeteria. It’s not too big, but in a room full of curious eyes, he knows how long of a walk it can really be.

“Not *our* fault Wheeler can’t hang with us. We’re too much for the princess.”

“I don’t know what you see in her.” Tommy grabs the fork out of Steve’s hand and proceeds to eat his mac and cheese like it’s been his all along. “Can’t be the sex,” he adds, mouth full.

Carol titters into her hand and Steve’s had enough.

Steve blinks, he’s stuck sitting and listening to Tommy and Carol, two of his oldest friends on earth badmouth the best person to ever happen to him. He blinks and Tommy’s wide eyes fill his vision, Steve’s got his fists twisted in Tommy’s shirt, and a number of lunch trays have been scattered to the floor.

Steve is so *mad*. So fucking mad.

The cafeteria is silent around them.

Tommy and Carol aren’t laughing now.

“Stevie, I just—”

Steve jostles him. Hoists him up and slams him back down just enough Tommy knows he’s not fucking around.

Steve looks up, away from Tommy’s surprised, red face beneath him. Sees the same surprise mirrored in most of the crowd around him. Sees it in—in Billy’s face, just across the way. Sees it settle into something serious. Dark.

He realizes suddenly what he’s doing now is something Billy would do—has done to others.

Steve lets Tommy go and straightens. Doesn’t know what to do with his hands.

The brunette is leaning into Billy, whispering something to him, lips probably pressed soft to his ear. He nods to whatever it is she says and Steve feels hollow.

Steve doesn’t look away from the pair of them. Says to Tommy, a little zoned out, a whole lot angry, “We’re done.”

And he leaves the cafeteria, wanting nothing more than to sit in his car and smoke the rest of lunch.

-

“Wow,” Robin says for the fifth time since finding him where he’s been hiding near his car since the whole lunch thing.

So what if he’s skipping next period? It’s not like he retains any of the information anyway.

He only just broke off his oldest friendship ever. Carol too, because if Tommy wasn’t around, she wouldn’t be. They come two in a pair and if you throw out one you might as well lose the other.

“You’re feeling sorry for yourself.” She takes the cigarette he’s been nursing—his third—and takes a single puff of her own before letting it drop to the cement. She stamps it out with her boot. “It’s not a good look on you.”

“Don’t pretend you’re not happy this happened. You’ve been gunning for them since we started talking.”

“Since before, actually,” she corrects. He gives her a look. “Hey now, I’m *just* saying...I get how big a thing it is what just happened. Breaking up is never easy.”

He rolls his eyes. Starts fishing around in his pocket for the pack so he can smoke another, but realizes it’s empty. He turns around, lets his forehead fall to the cool metal of the car and sighs heavily.

“We did *not* break up.”

“Who says ending things with a friend isn’t a breakup? It causes the same emotions.”

“Not really.” He’s never had a breakup with a girl as bad as—as a breaking off of a friendship. Like with Billy. Billy was, and remains, the worst. “They finally crossed the line with Nance. Said things that just aren’t...are never...it’s not worth going into all of it. They’re assholes like you said.”

Robin touches his shoulder, rubs lightly, if awkwardly. He sniffs a little, not so much startled to find he’s on the verge of tears as much as he is that Robin voluntarily touched him. She’s never been the type for physical affection.

“Sorry, bud.”

“Thanks.”

They’re both quiet for a long while. Robin pats his shoulder.

“Hey, you want to go make fun of the freshman running laps?”

Steve lifts his head, blows the fringe that falls in his eyes. “What?”

“The PE class running laps right now.” And sure enough, there was a class in the field. “Isn’t that like...a Steve Harrington pastime or something?”

She smiles and Steve shrugs her off, pushing at her arm. It makes them both laugh.

“You’re the worst.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to feed the dragon. I’ve never had one of you before,” she says. “Do I feed you cereal or pork chops or the souls of small crying children?” He slaps at her again and she dodges him. “So it is the children! I thought so!” She spins out of reach, cackling. “Watch out everybody! The jock hungers for freshman tears!”

“Oh my *god*, Robin!”

-

There’s no practice today, which is just as well. Steve isn’t sure what Tommy will do after lunch today, but he knows the guy isn’t one to back down from a fight he knows he can win. And he has won, several times, against Steve. And that wasn’t even anything serious. Little fights over the

years, play wrestling, whatever—it's not what Steve had done today.

It was a threat. A punctuation to too many years placating behavior he shouldn't have indulged. And Tommy is going to be pissed once it catches up to him that Steve was serious.

Steve was so mad. He's not used to being mad like that. Mad like Billy gets mad, and it's messed up. He's messed up.

It's not even a question of should he move forward with his life, it's a necessity. He doesn't like what the aftermath of Billy leaving town has done to him. Made him into this sad, sorry, yearning, angry *creature*. Sad for obvious reasons, sorry because he obviously knows he didn't do enough to keep Billy from leaving in the first place...yearning for what? For more—more *practice*? No way. And angry.

All of it just makes him angry.

The solution is moving on from all of it. Tommy, Carol, Billy. His own sadness.

He just needs to focus on Nancy and move on.

Just needs to move on.

Yeah.

-

The doorbell is ringing a second time when Steve finally gets the door open. It's Billy. Not that he expected anyone else.

Behind him the house is dark, and he sees Billy taking that in.

He closes the door, boxing himself in. In the street sits his car, and Steve can see his stepsister, Max, and the girl from lunch.

The girl from lunch, who's sitting in the driver's seat and revving the engine like she knows what she's doing.

Billy turns around at the sound, and it's strange seeing Billy reacting to his own car, grinning like he thinks it's cool. He gives a thumbs up and, what?

Like he's allowing this.

Billy never would have let Steve drive the Camaro. Not in a million years.

“I think that girl is stealing your car,” Steve says, because what else could it possibly be. “And Max.”

“Maxine's fine. Heather's just driving her to the arcade. She's gonna watch the brat while we work.”

It's only because he's distracted by the sight of the Camaro driving off without its owner that Steve doesn't refuse Billy as he pushes past him to get inside. It sets his side tingling, but even that's not enough to pull his attention fully away.

What the hell.

“H-Heather?” he asks, breathing the name. “Heather who?”

“Holloway. Close the door, it’s cold.” He does and turns to the sight of Billy adjusting the thermostat his dad is so strict about. “That should do it.”

He’s got his bag with him, and he slides it off his shoulder and onto the kitchen island. Hoists himself into the stool like he’s never missed a day of being here. Of dropping by after class to work on homework together, to help Steve study.

Steve feels like he’s walking through mud. His legs are slow, stuck.

The last people to mess with the thermostat were his dad, and himself...by way of Hopper.

Chief Hopper, who’d been here just a few feet away arguing with a concussed Billy about his dad beating on him.

Billy’s face is unblemished now. He’s setting his chemistry binder on the marble countertop and reaching back inside his bag.

He brings out a bar of soap, lopsided and blue.

They’re different people now.

“I—” he starts, walking over. He looks down at the soap. Billy made this. Billy said he ruined his kitchen and made his dad mad over this. Did his dad hit him for it? Make him spit up teeth and blood over it? Over homework? “Open your mouth.”

Billy lifts an eyebrow. “What?”

“Open your mouth. Come on, open up.”

Billy’s laughing smile fades until he rolls his eyes and obliges. His once missing tooth isn’t missing anymore. Steve knew that, he did. But it never really occurred to him now that Billy had to go somewhere, to someone and get that fixed.

Had to go and explain himself, explain how it happened. Had to sit in a dentist’s chair and lay out how his dad beat him so bad he knocked a tooth free. Maybe he didn’t explain at all. Maybe all he did was lie. Even though he knows Billy doesn’t like liars or lying.

But Billy knows how to toss around a fake smile. Knows how to fool people. People like Steve. Someone he used to share his loneliest moments with.

Billy’s become a liar. And Steve’s gotten wise.

They’re different people.

“I think you should say what you came to say and leave.”

Billy’s teeth click shut. His brow lowers, menacing. But Steve knows that look, he still knows Billy in spite of everything, and he’s not afraid of him. He never was. Maybe somehow, somewhere along the last half year, Billy forgot that about him.

“Actually, maybe you should just go. I only agreed to this because our teacher was right there.”

“Steve.”

Steve's still just looking down at Billy's handmade soap. How long did Billy work to make it? Did he fail a few times, or did he nail it right off the bat like he always does when they're messing with chemicals in class?

"I rescheduled a date with Nancy for this," he says to himself more than anyone else. "You should go. You know where the door is."

He hears Billy give an impatient little huff. He's heard it before, when Steve is being stubborn about something mostly. Or stupid.

He's not being stupid now. He's *not*.

God, he blew off his girlfriend for this.

He starts walking away, intending to loiter in the living room until he hears the front door open and shut. Then he can lock it, make something to eat, and shower, and—and go to bed. And probably not sleep because for all he's tried to ignore it all day, the dream from this morning is still just right there at the edge of his vision. He doesn't want to think about it.

It's why he has to do this.

It's why it has to be hard.

Of course it feels like a breakup, he thinks, and laughs under his breath.

Maybe Robin was onto something.

"Steve," Billy repeats, distant now. Then, louder, "Steve, come on! I do want to talk. Just...just come back. Please."

He doesn't, but he does stop. The thick mud his body insists he's walking through has drawn up to his knees, suctioning him to his mother's ever pristine carpet. He wants to kick at the whorls of white and cream, call her up and tell her it's an ugly design.

There's the rustling of plastic and then Billy is just there, whipping him around, fingers gripping hard at his shoulder, his bicep. The plastic hits his chest, and when he looks down all he sees is Billy holding something wrapped against him.

He brings his hands up, takes it. When Billy draws away, he sees it's a cookie. Just the one. It's got a label from the store, and when he reads it, he snorts. It's a snickerdoodle.

"I don't hate you, man. You're—you were my best friend."

Were.

They're different people.

When Steve doesn't say anything to his claim, Billy starts to fidget.

"I knew this was a stupid idea," Billy's saying quietly, running a hand over his chin. "I know it doesn't beat your recipe, but. It's the best I could think of on short notice."

"We're different people." Steve feels the plastic crinkle under his fingers.

"Yeah." Billy sighs. "Yeah."

Soap. Snickerdoodles. A brand new car left abandoned at the quarry because he was only hours into sixteen and scared for the boy who decided to hate him.

“Say what you’re gonna say,” Steve says, tone flat.

“Now’s really not the best time,” he says and Steve can only laugh. He might honestly be losing his mind. Billy holds his hands up. “I didn’t realize Heather was going to be here today, and then I had to deal with Maxine, and there was—there was just too much shit today. The thing at lunch with you and Hagan, and—”

“That didn’t have anything to do with you.” Why did he even care? Steve still doesn’t totally understand the dark look Billy was giving him then. “And you always drive her, what does that have to do with anything? You’re the one who *brought* them *here*.” He pushes the cookie back into Billy’s hands. “Stop—stop *bullshitting* me, Billy!”

“Steve, seriously. I thought we could work today and get this project shit done and over with and tomorrow we could talk.”

He really can’t believe Billy sometimes. He always had a way of doing what he wanted when he wanted, but it usually coincided with Steve’s tendency to do exactly the same thing. They worked around one another.

Right now, Steve needs Billy to do what he wants, not what Billy wants.

But Billy is just standing there, eyes big and open and pleading and Steve hates that look. He hates it to his core.

He takes a breath, because that same anger from lunch is bubbling inside him and he doesn’t want to pop.

“Why should I?”

“What does that mean?”

Steve closes his eyes, walks around Billy to the fridge. He pulls out a beer and pops the cap off on the edge of the counter and chugs a few gulps. It only settles his nerves a little, and that’s just great.

Billy’s staring at him when he’s done.

“You were fucked up when I saw you at Tina’s. You were a bastard to Robin. You called me a fag and you—you’ve never done that. And maybe, you know, maybe we’ve joked like that in the past. Maybe Tommy and you and everybody—maybe that’s just what we do. Or did. But maybe—maybe today I realized I don’t like being that guy. Maybe I can’t fucking stand it anymore. And I can’t stand it when people just spout bullshit at me all day every day and make me think I’m going crazy because I, what, get angry when it happens? You think I’m being stupid when I get mad my best friend calls me something I’m not? You know I’m not a f—that I’m *not* one, Billy. You know that. And I feel so goddamn stupid, I really do,” he admits, and it feels good and sour all at the same time. “I feel so stupid because I know now how everybody else felt when I did the same thing to them. Maybe I finally realized I’ve been the bad guy all along, and everybody around me was just fine with that. Maybe I’m just sick of it. Of Tommy and school and you and, and...”

“And what else?” Billy asks, and it’s so soft and wondering and wounded and Steve swallows down that anger all over again.

“Me. Maybe I’m sick of myself.” He takes another swig. “I’m just so *fucking* tired.”

Billy is standing still, strangely wordless as he watches Steve work on the beer in his hand.

Sixteen’s been a bad year.

“So don’t bullshit me, Billy,” he finally says. “I don’t have the energy for it.”

Billy sets the cookie down on the counter, next to his bar of soap. It’s going to make the marble waxy. He gently slides onto the stool again and lays his hands flat over his work.

“I had a plan today. I know it doesn’t seem like it...but I,” he says, inhaling fast. “I planned to come here, have Heather drop me off. She’d screw off for a few hours while I helped you make something so you won’t fail chem and be held back, and then.” He breathes out just as rough. “Then I’d say it was getting kind of late, and could we talk about things tomorrow. All of it. Just lay it all out. Every single thing. I thought you’d forget for a while today, while we were working. Forget who I am, and how I’ve been. Lately. But that—Christ. Obviously I fucked up my plan.”

Steve lifts his eyebrows. Brings the bottle to his lips and says, “You think?” But then Billy doesn’t say anything else and Steve drinks until there’s nothing left to drink. And he allows himself to wonder what if Billy is serious right now. What if he really did come here with a plan in mind, wanting to relive a little of what they used to have. That ease between them. What if he *does* know how awful he’s been? “So. We make some sad excuse for a science project and then we just go our separate ways?”

“Just until tomorrow, when we can really talk. I won’t have Maxine or anybody else around to—” He stops himself, licking his lips. Resetting. “And I mean, it won’t be sad if I have anything to say about it. I don’t want you to fail, man.”

“Nance offered to help me.”

“She’s not even in our year.”

“How do you know?”

Billy just ignores that, barreling into the next. “Steve. We’re in the same class. Let me do this. Tomorrow I’ll tell you whatever you want.”

“Anything?”

Billy claps his hands together. “Anything.”

Steve sets down the bottle.

Billy Hargrove is sitting in his kitchen.

He blew off his girlfriend for him to make excuses. And maybe it’s all hot air he’s blowing, or maybe he’s telling the truth. Maybe he means it.

This morning he woke up hard, thinking of Billy’s mouth on his skin.

Steve opens the fridge back up and grabs two more beers.

And he sits down on the other side of the island.

“What kind of science project were you thinking?”

Billy seems to relax a little, gesturing while he talks. "I was thinking luminol."

"Lumi-what?"

Billy grins.

He doesn't touch the beer.

Chapter End Notes

Luminol is that blue light liquid stuff they use to find bodily fluids under black light.

part ix: break

Chapter Notes

Sorry I've been so busy and so tired I've had zero braincells left to write. Hopefully that changes in the next month!

Let me know what you think of this chapter? Some big changes ahead for these two~

Steve wakes up early, unintentional and syrup-slow. Sleep clings to him even as he drags himself through a shower, getting dressed, grabbing something to eat. Eggs on toast doesn't do much to wake up his tired bones and he wonders why. Why is he always so tired.

The last handful of months catch up to his brain eventually, like they always do. His toast has gone cold before he catches himself stuck on the loop of yesterday. Of Billy sitting here in his kitchen, in this seat, a shadow of what used to be.

Between agreeing to have Billy come back over today, having to deal with Tommy after yesterday's whole lunch fiasco, and Nancy's inevitable anger with him for repeatedly blowing her off, Steve wants to just crawl back under his covers and sleep.

So he does.

-

He gets up around noon already wide awake. He hops out of bed and pads down the stairs feeling marginally more alive than he has in a long time, but he chalks it up to just sleeping in for once. And gratefully, no nightmares.

No dream-Billy's to run amok in his head. To wake him up sweat-drenched and wanting and—

No.

He has a few hours until Billy shows up, wanting to probably make even more excuses to get out of what he promised Steve yesterday. He'll likely show up with that girl, Heather. Make some pathetic excuse to find a way to have her join them while Steve struggles through whatever that Luminol science stuff Billy mentioned. He'll probably have to sit and watch them moon over each other, whispering secrets like he'd witnessed Heather do at lunch.

Heather, who Steve's never seen before in Hawkins. Heather, who showed up right after Billy said he got a girlfriend in California. A girlfriend who'd be joining him soon.

A girlfriend who whispered in Billy's ear while he looked at Steve so, so—

Steve goes to the phone and finds his favorite pizza place on the sticky note on the wall. He dials and orders a large pepperoni, all for himself.

He's going to eat until his stomach hurts and watch a movie.

Then he'll think about everything else.

Anything else.

-

Kurt Russell's only just used his flamethrower when loud knocking jolts Steve from his seat. He'd nearly forgotten what the afternoon held outside of just lazing around.

He sighs and pauses the tape, not bothering to shut off the television before lugging himself to the front door.

The knocking gets louder and faster until he flips the lock and swings the door wide, feeling just a tinge better when Billy startles, faltering when his fist meets nothing but air.

And oh, he's pissed.

"What the fuck, Harrington," he bites out, pushing past him as he strides inside. "You sick or just decided to run away from your responsibilities today?"

Steve rolls his eyes, knowing it's more Billy fluffing his own ego than anything real. Out front is the familiar blue Camaro, all lean steel and powerful engine, parked behind Steve's car and empty.

No Heather. No Max. Just like Billy had told him.

"A little of both if I'm being honest," he calls back, turning and shutting the door behind him. "Oh. I can order another if you want?"

Inside, Billy's stopped behind the couch, eyes glued to the almost empty pizza box. Then he takes in the mess surrounding it. The case of beer Steve got a little tipsy working his way through and a couple of bags of M&Ms he'd picked up from the store earlier that week.

He feels a little sick just thinking about the idea of more pizza, but he's not so much of an asshole that he'd refuse Billy food. If they're going to be working on homework for the next few hours, he'll probably want dinner at some point.

And besides, if Neil is the same as he used to be—which Steve is willing to bet his inheritance on that that's the case—Billy needs all the warm meals he can get. Even if it's a meal of warm grease and cheese.

Billy swings his bag from his shoulder, letting it dangle at his side. He gestures at the mess.

"Looks like you had fun while you skipped. What, did you have your new side piece over, throw a little party?" He almost spits the word out. Like the two of them haven't gone to a hundred parties before.

He knows what a party Steve throws looks like and this isn't it.

But before he can answer, Billy huffs dryly on his way into the kitchen.

And, what?

"Uh. No? I just felt like sleeping in. Didn't want to deal with, uh—with Tommy's drama today."

Billy makes himself at home at the kitchen island like he had yesterday, pulling out books and paper and a plastic bag from Melvald's. He drops his bag to the tiled floor and starts dumping the contents out. There's bottles and rags and other supplies and a glass Steve doesn't know the purpose for. He starts grouping them.

Against his better judgment, he feels self-conscious over the mess now. Maybe Billy thinks he's sloppy. Maybe he turned into a neat freak while he was gone.

Steve goes to the living room and starts piling trash inside the pizza box. Beer bottles and all. He balances most of it on a trip to the trash, not looking Billy's way lest he meet something like disgust.

“So? You want me to order us another or not?” He gets no answer. He manages to get almost everything in the can in one go, bending over to get the rest. Still no answer. He bites the bullet and faces Billy, moving to lean against the island counter, all casual.

But Billy's determinedly not looking his way, instead pouring liquid into the glass cup, blue eyes focused on his work. After each pour, he eyeballs it and writes a measurement down on a piece of paper. After that he adds some powder.

“Billy.”

Nothing.

“Hargrove.”

Billy's mouth deepens at the corners, the hint of a frown.

“If you drove out here to be an asshole about helping me with this chem project, don't bother. Sure, you offered, but I can figure something out on my own. Besides, I kinda want to finish my movie.”

Finally, after a long few minutes of silence, Billy breaks. Glares at Steve before reaching out to pull the stool out beside him as loudly as he can.

“Kurt can fucking wait his turn. You got shit grades. It's embarrassing.” Then, “I could go for a cheese.”

In spite of himself, Steve smiles. It's more like the Billy he used to know.

Nancy's words come back to him. Maybe...maybe they *can* be friends again. One day.

He's here, isn't he?

That has to mean something.

Steve goes to the phone and makes the order. Then he takes his place next to Billy and tries to wrap his head around the swirl of numbers on the page.

-

They've managed to come up with a hypothesis and make the clear liquid turn dark after a few rounds on the stovetop by the time Billy leans back and cracks his neck. It's been off the heat for a while, and their notes are starting to resemble something smart-sounding. Billy takes his third slice of pizza for the afternoon and jams half of it into his mouth, cheek going round.

He says around his food, “So we've proposed and proven half of your project. Shit worked.” More chewing. “Now we do the fun part, actually making the stuff.”

“More like *your* project. You're doing the work.” Billy waves that off. “What *is* Luminol, by the way?”

“You never watch those late night crime shows?”

“I mean, sure. Sometimes?”

Billy sighs, meeting Steve's eyes. He's been dodgy since he arrived. Hasn't wanted to meet him head on. Billy may be in a decent mood, be a tinier bit more like he used to be, but there's still an underlying unease Steve can sense in him. Every movement is a little too jerky. Careful to avoid Steve if he moves too close to take up a bowl or grab the pencil.

Earlier, their fingers brushed reaching for the same slice of pizza and Steve ended up relenting, put off by how fast Billy was to move away.

So he doesn't want to touch Steve. Fine. No big deal.

He's not throwing punches or calling him names, so Steve figures it's just Billy being weird about him skipping class.

“Well you know when they get a blacklight and the crime scene lights up like the fourth of July?” He reaches across to the stuff he poured out on the table earlier and picks up what looks like a blocky flashlight. “This is the stuff.”

“So what, we have to get blood on something?” Steve asks, unable to think of much beyond the night Billy came crashing back into his life at Tina's. The way he knows just how hard Billy can punch.

Billy smiles a little before looking away. “What, you afraid to bleed a little for a good grade?” When Steve doesn't mollify him with an answer, he sits back, taking Steve in. “Don't worry, Harrington. We just have to spray it on a piece of carpet or counter or whatever and it'll show old stains and shit. It's basically a party trick.”

“Oh.” That's a relief, honestly. More than Steve would have thought. “How long does it take?”

“A while. Needs time to get hot is all.”

“Then why do you keep taking it off the burner?” Steve asks as Billy slides from his seat and walks their concoction back to the pot on the stove.

“Because Harrington, it's a process.” He throws Steve a smirk over his shoulder. He twists the dial and twirls on his heel, grabbing the pizza box up in both hands before heading for the living room.

“Where are you going?”

“You said you want to finish your movie, didn't you? Or would you rather stare at bubbles all afternoon?”

He'd rather not have to do *anything* all afternoon, but the idea of taking his eyes off their project seems dangerous, given his track record.

Still, he stands, if wary.

“Last time I wasn't paying attention to a science project, I almost blew myself up.”

Billy moves over when Steve approaches to make room on the couch for him. At least he's not plastering himself to the opposite end of the couch.

Still, there's over a foot of space between their legs when he sinks back in the plush cushions. A

year ago Billy would have been close enough to him to share his body heat. Would have bumped shoulders with him as he leaned forward for more pizza. Would have slapped at his knee and made some lame joke about ice aliens and argued with Steve about if they were more monster than alien.

He would say both.

It feels strange still, even though he's had so much time to process how things are different between them. Nancy offering him her hopes for the best seem stuck between possibly to slim now that he's spent a few more hours with the guy.

He just can't figure it out.

It hits him all at once just then that maybe he should just *ask*. Ask Billy what happened. Get the story again, but *more*. Because he could tell there was more Billy wasn't saying that first time. Get Billy to be honest. About that morning, with Hopper, about California, about Neil. About Heather and who she is to him. Maybe he could salvage—

Billy picks up the remote and with a click of a button, Steve's million bright ideas die on the tail of a flamethrower.

-

Billy gets up a couple times to adjust the heat or stir their mixture. Every time he comes back he just hums an affirmative to Steve's questioning gaze.

Nothing's blown up yet at least.

Steve finds himself relaxing more with every hum, until he's blinking sleep awake, suddenly bone tired.

He yawns three times over the course of a minute. On screen a head skitters up a wall.

Billy yawns and swears. “Cut it out.”

Steve yawns again. He laughs a little, wiping moisture from the corners of his eyes. “Sorry. Must not have slept as well as I thought.”

“That's what fucking your chick all night will do to a guy,” Billy mutters, something in his voice prickly. It's so left field, Steve sputters out a true laugh. Billy turns a strange look on him. “What's up with you?”

“I'm sorry—It's just,” Steve says, shaking his head. “Did something crawl up your ass today and die?”

As if to prove him right, Billy sits up straighter. “You're the one bragging about having prissy Wheeler over all night and day. Seriously man,” Billy says, gesturing to the table, then the room at large, “not everyone's got a big empty house to throw ragers in pretty as they please whenever they want.”

It's got to be a joke, how much Billy's brought up this imaginary party.

Steve takes the controller and pauses the movie.

“Billy. I told you a bunch, I just felt like being a lazy sack of shit today. No party, no Nancy. She's pissed at me anyway.”

Billy's eyes narrow. "Why's the priss pissed?"

Steve shoves him lightly in the arm without thinking about it. "Don't call her that. She thinks I blew her off to hang out with you."

"Well, did you?"

"...Yeah. Kind of."

Billy tilts his head, curls falling across his forehead. Humming, he reaches out and takes the remote from Steve, this time not flinching away when their fingers tangle for all of a moment.

He clicks the movie back on.

"Her loss," he says, and tosses the remote back on the table. "Just thought it was weird, her skipping. Thought you must've corrupted her, seeing as how her friend was all pissy thinking Wheeler was with you. Kinda chewed me out, which is more than I can say for over half this town."

"Her...you mean Barb?" Steve just looks at Billy, wondering what made him talk to *Barb*. "I wouldn't take it personal, she barely tolerates me. She'd hate you." For a heartbeat he wonders if he might've just tripped over and broken the strange peace between them by sticking his foot in his mouth like he constantly does.

But Billy just huffs, like he agrees.

"Yeah, I got that message loud and clear." Billy fingers the hem of his shirt where it rests over the ridge of his belt. "So you really didn't have your little girlfriend over for some orgy get together?"

He can't help it. He reaches over and socks Billy in the arm, making him wince. He deserves a lot more.

"What the fuck was that, Steve?"

"Everything that comes out of your mouth one-ups itself on grossness. Seriously, how disgusting do you think I am? Shit's not that deep. Just drop it."

"Orgies aren't gross. They're cool."

"Says the guy who wouldn't even kiss the first girl who went down on him." Steve scoffs, narrowly avoiding the punch Billy tries to land on his shoulder in retaliation.

He doesn't know why that's the first thing that comes to mind.

"That's different," Billy says, unaffected. "Orgies are what every guy dreams of."

He laughs, breathless at the audacity of it. "What? Not even close."

"Yeah sure, just ask every skin mag in print."

"That's porn, man."

"Yeah," Billy intones, like that's the point. "What, like you don't like porn? I remember you practically *begging* to get your hands on that one Playboy spread I snagged a couple years ago."

Steve twists in his seat, rolling his eyes. "I was a kid!"

“Yeah and she had a cowboy hat on and not much else.”

Steve goes hot in the face, sliding down a little in his seat. Billy laughs.

“Shut up. That's a magazine, not real life.”

“Yeeshaw,” Billy adds, laughing all over again.

Steve throws a pillow at him. Billy grabs it mid-strike and hugs it against his chest.

“So you didn't throw some massive orgy with every hot girl in town.”

“Nope.” Steve sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. “No way. Nancy is my *girlfriend*, asshole.”

Billy shrugs again.

“Age and the shit life throws at you has zero to do with each other.”

Something about his tone has Steve looking at him a little longer than he usually allows himself. To linger on Billy Hargrove these days is like sticking your fingers over an open flame. It's only a matter of time.

But Billy goes on, deciding not to burn him.

“So no wild and out orgy. Fine. But you also didn't make sweet love to the priss, even though she skipped. Wonder what she was up to.”

Steve swallows, feels weird about that. It really *isn't* like Nance to skip, for anything. If she was going to be out for a day or two, she always called to let him know.

He hopes she's alright, and tells himself he'll call her later.

“Hagan was looking for you.” Billy tells him, changing gears like he hasn't been hounding Steve all afternoon about what he did all day. And just like that, the joking tone of the last conversation is gone, replaced by something less teasing, less prying. “What was that all about anyway? You looked like you were about to wring the guy's neck.”

“Almost did,” he mutters, remembering it. Remembers Billy watching it happen. “He was being a dick about Nancy.”

“Ah. Makes sense. Better watch my mouth or I might be next, huh?”

It's so casual. Easy. Like Billy wasn't punching the shit out of him a few months ago.

“Maybe. Depends on how wide you open it.”

Billy tosses the pillow back at Steve, smacks him across the face with no real malice. He's grinning when Steve recovers, grabbing at it too last minute to snatch it back. Billy pushes it under his arm, tucking it into his opposite side. Kicks his feet up on Steve's mother's coffee table.

“You've always had the bigger mouth, Steve.”

He thinks about roses and his mother's garden and a plate of cookies, and how he still hasn't eaten the snickerdoodle Billy bought him. It's in the kitchen shoved away in the silverware drawer over the forks because he got sick of looking at it.

Is Heather your girlfriend, he almost asks. Even opens his mouth to start.

Instead, Billy points flippantly at the television. The group is arguing. Steve's been hardly paying attention.

"Heather always goes gaga over Kurt Russell."

Steve blinks back at the TV, lifting an eyebrow. He feels suddenly small, wants to hide and sleep like he did earlier. But Billy is still here, and their project is still in the works. He can't just ask Billy to leave because he's suddenly getting what, cold feet?

"Okay?"

"Apparently they think he's a stud."

Steve nods along, wondering why Billy's all over the place today. Maybe he's high or maybe he's nervous too.

But Steve's seen Billy nervous, and it never looked like this.

Instead of dwelling on all the ways Billy is different than before he left, he sighs and decides to just stick it out until he feels better...or their project is done and Billy leaves again. Steve can deal with his own anxiety once he's alone.

"He's a movie star, of course he's good looking."

Billy grunts. "Heather says it's the hair. Chicks go nuts for a brunette."

"Brunettes are pretty to guys. Guess it's the same for girls."

"Says the brunette."

"Calling me pretty?"

"You said brunettes are pretty. Think you're calling yourself that." And Billy turns, looks at him, and smiles.

Steve can't help rolling his eyes. "And how many times have you called me pretty boy? That nickname never stuck, by the way."

"Takes a certain attitude to pull it off," Billy says like that makes sense, and maybe it should. Steve still doesn't totally understand it. "Can you believe Heather's seen this flick more than me?"

"I mean, it's a good movie. Plenty of girls like it—"

"Bet Wheeler gets her panties all in a twist over big ol' Kurt too."

Again with the Nancy stuff. Steve stands up, frustrated. Feels too big for his own skin. It's the anxiety clawing away at him, building up into something familiar that will keep him up all night again. He doesn't want to talk about Nancy with Billy.

Nancy is *Steve's*. She's his girlfriend. She's sweet and charming and funny and smarter than he'll ever be. He doesn't want any of the good he feels when he's with Nancy, when he's thinking about Nancy, to be spoiled by Billy.

"Grab me a coke?"

Steve glowers towards the fridge but does as asked. He got up with no real goal in mind. Just couldn't stand sitting in one place anymore. Had to get up and move.

He checks on the mixture. The heat is so low it's almost off, but the darkness has begun to bleed away into something clearer. He wonders what it'll look like when it's finished.

He grabs two cokes. At the last second he slides open the silverware drawer and pulls the snickerdoodle out.

As he's sitting back down, he hands Billy his drink before settling in. Commits to being more relaxed. More normal. If Billy's even noticed.

He used to, is the thing.

Steve tears open the packaging and takes a bite out of the cookie. Brushes stray crumbs from his chest. He feels a prickle at the edge of his vision, turns and catches Billy staring at him, intense, like the day before at lunch.

He breaks off a piece and offers it over, but Billy shakes his head, no. Steve eats the rest in silence, hoping Billy finally got whatever it was out of his system.

It's a few minutes into the next action scene when Billy says, "Bet Wheeler loves this scene. Bet she's got a poster right over her bed, to give her sweet dreams."

"No actually, she's got one of Tom Cruise."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah."

He huffs. "That makes sense."

Steve finishes the cookie while Billy keeps talking. Says these offhand, strange things. Things that get weirder, more sexual, until Steve is nursing his own coke even though he's feeling a little sick to his stomach from all the carbs and sugar and Billy just leans back.

Says, "You know girls love when you get them off while they're talking about some hot stud they like to fantasize about? Shit turns them on so bad. Last time I got a girl talking about some Hollywood stud, she creamed herself. Right through her panties. Hottest thing ever."

"*Billy.*"

"What? You never tried that?"

He doesn't even want to look at him—even though he can tell Billy is looking at him. Trying to goad him into replying, probably so he can tease some more.

Just sometimes he's not in the mood, and he gets tired, and he just gets so fed up. Especially when it comes to Billy. Even *if* a small—probably very, very large—part of himself still hopes they can be friends again.

Hanging out with Robin isn't like this. Hanging out with Nancy or even Barb isn't like this. And Barb really *can't* stand him.

Which should tell him everything he needs to know, right?

“Harrington—”

“Hey, so maybe we should check on the project? You wanna do that?”

Billy doesn't answer for a beat. But finally he gets up, sets his own coke down, and heads into the kitchen. Steve can hear him tinkering for a while. Hears him mumble something.

Billy comes back and Steve hopes he's about to announce that the Luminol is done and they can start wrapping the afternoon up.

But instead all he does is walk in front of Steve as he comes back around, hand lingering near his crotch and—and he adjusts himself as he passes by.

And he sits down, spreads his legs wide, and just sits there like he *isn't*.

Like he didn't just walk in front of Steve with a hard-on.

Because that's what he *saw*.

“Yeah,” Billy mutters, eyes on the screen. “Girls love that shit. Think they like working a guy up until he can't stand it anymore. Until the only thing he can think about doing is getting his hands on her until she's only thinking about him.”

Steve realizes he's broken his own promise to himself of not to look Billy's way. Now that he's watching, he sees Billy brazenly palm himself over his jeans, like they've done this before. Like this is normal.

Like Steve didn't wake up hard and rutting into his own sheets the day before.

Which Billy *can't* know, right? It wasn't like he climbed up Steve's house in the early dawn hours just to perch in front of his window like some kind of creep.

They both know he keeps his window locked now.

So no, he can't know. It's impossible.

Something shameful and embarrassing and *his* until the day he dies. A secret he will literally be buried with.

It was just his brain playing mean tricks on him. Manipulating his sadness and anger over the whole situation until it was something that resembled a little too close to whatever *this* is.

“Billy, you're—”

What? Drunk? He didn't drink any alcohol. High? Maybe. Probably. Hopefully.

“You ever do that?” he asks again. He looks over, hooks Steve's eyes with his own, fisher's baubles. “No? You should try it out sometime.”

Billy's burning blue eyes flick down his torso, hover over his lap. When he returns to Steve's eyes again, Steve's stomach flips, familiar heat pooling where he doesn't want it to.

“What are you doing?”

“What's it look like? I'm just letting off a little steam. Probably talked myself up too much,” Billy says, like it was an honest to god accident. Like he didn't mean to go on and on about how much

his girlfriend likes Kurt Russell or apparently how much she talks about him in the bedroom. “You don’t mind.”

Steve scoffs. But he doesn’t look away, not from Billy’s face. If he looks any lower, he—he can’t. He won’t.

Sure, they kissed a few times over the years. Sure, he got hard that one time from it, but—but watching Billy touch himself, so obviously unbothered by doing it next to Steve, is worlds different than looking at skin mags together. Or kissing sometimes.

Or a stupid, irrational dream.

“Wanna practice?” A surprise sound leaves him and Billy smiles a little crookedly his way. “What? This shit’s normal. Talking about sex does that.”

“I—I—Billy—”

“Stop thinking so much. How’s this any different than any of the other stuff?”

“Other stuff?” he asks, feeling smaller and smaller with every passing second.

“How we used to,” he says, moving his palm in a circle until he groans, “How we used to practice.”

“We were kids.”

“We were *friends*.”

“Friends do this together?” he asks, and he doesn’t mean for it to be an actual question. Because Tommy’s never asked to make out. Tommy’s never started rubbing his erection when he got bored one afternoon.

Tommy never got *hard* around him.

But then, Tommy isn’t Billy.

And Billy’s always been a little wild.

“Come on. Think about it. Wheeler whispering all sweet in your ear about how she wants Tom to touch her. Only *you’re* the one actually doing it. You’re letting her live out a little fantasy.”

Steve doesn’t exactly want to think about Tom Cruise when he’s in the mood. But he supposes there is something attractive about the trust of the whole thing. That she would ask him to help her with something so personal.

His dick gives a little kick and before he even realizes his hand has moved to his lap, he hears Billy give an appreciative groan.

“Hell yeah. You’re getting the picture now. Shit’s hot as fuck.”

“Just shut up.”

“It’s just practice, Harrington.”

It’s his last name that does it. That tips him over from tired and almost fed up to pissed off.

Maybe his problem is he just needs to jerk off. Get his head back on straight, clear his mind.

Fine.

Steve turns away, looks up at the ceiling. Grinds his palm against the base of his dick.

He hears Billy suck in a breath. He closes his eyes.

“That’s it. Bet you I just opened a whole new world for you.”

“Do you ever stop talking?”

“No. You know that.”

He laughs. He can’t help that either.

“Race you.”

“Huh.” Steve blinks, turns to see Billy popping the button of his jeans open and—and slipping his hand into his briefs. He’s pulling the band away from tan skin and Steve looks quickly away again before he can see exactly what Billy’s doing.

He hears Billy spit and then a sigh of pleasure—then wet slicked skin sliding and Steve can’t stop the little strangled sound that worms its way from his throat.

“Feels better like this. Bet I can finish before you.”

He can feel his pulse through his pants, which is never great. He aches. “When—when is being first ever a good thing?”

“When it’s a race, duh.”

He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what to feel, or think, or *do*.

Then Billy says, “I’m not looking. It’s just a dumb game, man. Practice.”

For what, he wonders.

But he aches and it hurts and he needs to just not think anymore, about anything.

He undoes his belt and shoves his pants down only far enough he has room to take his erection out of his underwear. He doesn’t spit on his own skin, because he’s not *gross* like Billy is.

He listens to Billy’s breathing. The curse he mutters as he resumes stroking himself.

He sounds so *wet*. Like a girl—

Steve feels himself pulse, dribble a little precum out like it’s nothing. He uses it to ease the way and sets a pace he knows works quick.

It’s a race, and he’s competitive. And Billy’s the worst, the best at egging him on when it comes to beating one another at old games.

Practice. Practice, sure.

“That’s it, pretty boy. Come on. Get there.”

He imagines Billy climbing through his window, crawling into bed behind him—

He can't.

“Point of a race isn't to help the other person win, I thought?”

“This helping? Me talking to you like you're a girl?” He can almost hear the way Billy licks his lips. “Want me to talk you up? Say how—how big you are? How good he'd—how good Kurt would make you feel?”

Steve scrunches his face up. “No—*no*.”

“Bet you love a strong hand around you, huh?” And it's—it's quieter than the rest of all the filthy Billy's spouted. Like he's not sure what to say. “Bet you love when a girl wraps her pretty little hand around your pretty little cock until you're just begging to slip inside her.”

Christ. “Shut *up*.”

A breathless laugh leaves Billy beside him. “You like me talking about your little—Oh.”

The slick sounds have ceased.

Steve blinks again, wondering what's wrong. If something happened. A sinking feeling has him jolting in place, snapping to Billy's face to see if he's been tricked somehow, so cruelly.

But Billy's fixated on his lap, on how he's paused holding himself. He feels more warmth pulse out of him, and he moans.

Billy's eyes latch onto his, and he bites his bottom lip.

“Not little, then,” he almost whispers, and resumes his own pace without looking away.

And Steve—he can't. He can't, not anymore. He holds Billy's eyes and they race.

Billy gasps out of nowhere, lips red and bitten slick, he can see the indents. “Shit. I'm—I'm close—”

Steve sits up, body deciding where he's going before his brain even knows.

Billy makes an aborted attempt at leaning forward, falls to the side a bit.

His lips are parted, his eyes steady on Steve's mouth.

He falls apart just like that, braced on an elbow, close enough that Steve can feel the ghost of his breath across his overheated face.

“Shit.” Steve's close, he's so close. “Shit—”

Billy startles with a grunt when Steve turns and falls into him, nudging Billy's face up with his nose until their mouths meet, and Steve moans, full-bodied and too loud as Billy immediately licks past his teeth.

Steve seizes up just like that, their chests pressed together, the feel of Billy's hands gripping hard at his shoulders, his lower back as Steve makes a mess between them.

He can't stop himself, and he knows it's a pattern. He's helpless really, when it comes to listening to himself.

He kisses Billy long and deep, angles himself between Billy's legs and keeps kissing him.

It's nothing they've ever done before. And it's certainly not practice for anything Steve's ever needed help with.

Billy moans sweet and clutches at Steve a little stiltedly, unsure. So different than the loud asshole who was bragging about everything he's done in the bedroom only minutes before.

And Steve realizes he wants more of *this* Billy.

The Billy beneath him who's clinging to him, who's keening into his mouth, who's thigh is shaking beside his—

Until he's shoving Steve off with a shout, like he's been electrocuted.

Steve lands hard between the table and the couch, his chin getting a bad case of rug burn on the way down. His hip lands the hardest.

When he pops back up, wondering what the hell just happened, he sees Billy already sitting up, eyes wide and fixed on the mess on his shirt. He wipes at it with his hands, makes it so much worse.

“You can borrow a shirt—”

“Shut the fuck up, Harrington,” Billy hisses.

Ice settles under his skin. Steve feels his face fall.

He hadn't realized how unbothered he was by what just happened until that moment.

And a few things make sense that hadn't before. Things he didn't want to.

Billy shoves away before Steve can push himself to his feet. He rubs the throb away in his hip, ignoring the stinging along his chin. Billy's more important, because he looks ready to bolt. He looks furious.

But he looks scared too, and Steve's never really thought of Billy as someone who could get scared.

Not so easily.

They've kissed before. It never scared Billy so bad.

So why now?

“Billy, it's just,” he tries, thinking of the least inflammatory thing he might say, “it's just practice. Come here, sit back down. Let's just finish the movie—”

Billy rounds on him, charges back into his space and hits him square in the nose.

Steve splutters. It surprises him more than it hurts, and makes him fall back until he's sitting on the couch again. He knows he's bleeding because he can see red on Billy's knuckles.

Billy looks shocked, like he didn't expect himself to punch Steve either.

Then he turns and goes into the kitchen.

Steve isn't exactly sure what the hell that was, other than Billy is freaking out more than Steve is—a whole lot more, which is reason enough to freak out. Later. Much later.

But he can't just let this go. He's not willing to lose six plus months all over again.

He follows Billy, holding his nose as he goes.

Billy is standing, shoulders tense, facing the stove.

Steve stops at the island. "Billy, can you...can we just talk? For once?"

"I've talked enough." Under his breath he mutters, "I can never keep my fucking mouth shut around you."

He's red in the face. He's—he's blushing. His shoulders square off and he grimaces like he's said too much, again.

Steve thinks of Billy suggesting they practice, every single time. Billy the one sneaking through his window. Billy the one showing up hurt worse than Steve's ever seen him to try and make it for his sixteenth birthday.

Billy leaving and then coming back, different. Angrier.

At Steve.

"Oh."

Billy turns on him, eyes wild. "Oh? What, *oh*?"

Steve walks around the island, stopping only when Billy takes a step backward.

"You like me."

Billy scoffs. Goes even redder.

"You've liked me a long time."

"Shut the fuck up. No I haven't."

Steve walks closer, until Billy's pressed back against the corner of the counter, trapped. He's looking anywhere but Steve.

"You like me, Billy."

"No I fucking don't." He tries to press even further away when Steve's less than a foot in front of him. "No I don't, Harrington. Fuck off."

"Billy—"

"I'm fucking warning you." He starts looking around, at the counters.

"Can we just—"

Billy snatches the closest thing he can reach. It's a plate.

Steve stumbles back.

Warmth splits open at his scalp. He blinks liquid away, confused why it's raining.

He remembers he's inside. That Billy's got a piece of ceramic in quaking fingers. There's a blurry edge to him, to *both* of him.

Steve says, "Ow," clutches his head. Tries to will his vision to stop doubling.

"I fucking warned you," Billy tells him, and it's wavery.

Steve's biggest mistake is he tries again, to talk, to open his mouth, says Billy's name—

And Billy snaps. Fists are landing on him in a flurry, and Steve tries to defend himself, tries to get in more than two good hits, but Billy's always been bigger, stronger, meaner than him.

And Steve's always been a little slow to keep up. And he thinks it's never been more clear than when he's on his back on the tile, Billy straddling him, a couple of his teeth feeling a little more loose than they used to be, and warmth and pain littering his whole face—he's made a mistake in trying to be friends with Billy Hargrove.

He should have just stuck to watering the roses.

And he's crying. Just like that. And it's embarrassing, even when he's in the middle of having his teeth shoved down his throat, he's *embarrassed*, because even in spite of everything else, everything physical, this fucking hurts.

"You were my best fucking friend," Steve says between hits, between trying to push Billy off him, because fighting back never really went his way when it came to Billy Hargrove.

And that's what stops him in the end. What has Billy looking down at him, at his handiwork. Like he's just realized what he's done. What he's been doing.

In a breath, Billy's weight is off him. The blows have ceased to land.

Billy turns his rage on Steve's kitchen and his mother's pristine catalogue-esque decor, and Steve can't find it in him to care. He just lays there and focuses on Billy's voice, his shouting, the way things sound when he breaks them. Focuses on the tears leaking steady down his own temples, drying cool in his hairline.

But he stays put, above all, because if he intervenes, Billy might just kill him.

But all things must end, and Steve knows that. Knows it more than anything, in the way he's been listening to any chance of a friendship being repaired between them crumble into dust. Billy eventually calms, half sobbing. He collapses to the kitchen floor when Steve first cornered him and covers his face with his hands.

Steve tilts his head, watches Billy from the floor.

"There's no girl. There's no fucking girlfriend in California, Harrington."

"H-Heather," he tries, but it sounds like a gurgle. He swallows several times but it all tastes coppery.

"Heather's from Hawkins, she's not—fuck. What does it even matter?"

He laughs, and even Steve isn't stupid enough to admit it doesn't sound deranged.

“I didn’t run away to California. That pig chief got the state involved. Had me sent back to live with my mom while they looked into Neil. But turns out she didn’t want me either. Didn’t know what to do with me when she left the first time—turns out not much changes when your fag of a kid turns into a fag of a teenager. Said I was old enough to figure things out myself. Sent me back when Indiana couldn’t find shit wrong with Neil.”

He blinks away more tears.

“Nobody fucking wants me, Steve. Not even my own mother. So there. There's my sob story. I'm stuck in this bumfuck nowhere town until I graduate or Neil kills me. Whichever comes first.”

Billy finally looks at Steve then, sight trailing over the damage he’d done.

Steve very slowly raises himself up on stiff elbows. Everything everywhere hurts. He takes a deep breath or five, and lifts himself up until he’s sitting against the bottom of the island counter.

Billy just laughs again. It cuts off as abruptly as it came.

“Steve, I—” He stops, swallowing. Steve hears his throat click. Finally, he says, “You know...I think if you were dead, things wouldn’t be so hard for me. I’d be normal.”

It settles over him like cement. Threatens to drag him into something small and crushed. And then, almost like relief, everything goes numb.

Steve wipes at his eyes, wicking away what he tells himself will be the last tears he ever cries over Billy.

He was right before, about not knowing who Billy was anymore.

Maybe California was when it happened. Or, no. It was before he left. Before he was sent away. The friend he knew died when Hopper first walked into his house and Billy had looked up at Steve, betrayed.

This was his fault.

He just had to live with that.

Steve forces himself to stand up, even though he feels ready to crack apart like an eggshell. He forces himself to look at Billy, to show nothing.

“Get out.”

Billy chews his lip.

He’s up and grabbing his bag and is out the door before Steve counts to twenty.

The front door slams closed and he sags, wondering if it's worth it to call an ambulance or just pop a few Tylenol and sleep it off.

That’s when he sees it.

Billy left his soap.

When he turns around, in the chaos of his destroyed kitchen, Billy didn’t lay a finger on the Luminol.

It's clear.

The heat is off.

part x: bomb

Chapter Notes

This chapter is heavy and from Billy's POV.

The thing about his anger is it's never been fast.

His has always been volcanic. A steady build up over hours, days, weeks or months, always inevitably coming to a hot red tipping point. That last little push and all bets are off.

For him, it's a relief. To finally be given the excuse to explode. To tell himself it's not really his fault. Wasn't really him that's broken all those noses and twisted arms and stained all shades of skin with so much red and black and blue.

It's not *his* fault.

It's not.

He's volcanic, and when it's over everyone else is left to clear the ash.

He goes back to normal. To those routine hours, days, weeks and months that it takes pretending to be the perfect son, the perfect student, the perfect stud on campus. And everyone who doesn't matter forgets just how terrible the heat before the ash can be.

Everyone but the ones he can't help but think about. Obsess over. Fear.

Neil and Steve. Maxine.

His mother, who barely makes the list after his recent time spent with her.

She'd been thinner. Absentminded. Distracted by things she saw that no one else did. Maybe she was pretending too. Maybe she was building up to blow apart, he'd wondered. But she just fizzled out and became tired. A smothered grenade he didn't recognize.

She used to throw plates and silverware. Furniture.

Defense.

Neil's anger builds too. But Neil's is always a slow burn, a terrible drawl into a lasting sting that hurts longer than the immediate flash of fire ever does. Can't even come close. His father finds buttons, unthreads them with a practiced hand shaped into a needlepoint, before ripping off each one until all that's left are tatters.

Tactical.

Billy simply explodes. Destroys entirely. Saves his obsessions the trouble of ever needing to simmer for days at a time, unraveling every new emotional blow like he's always been left to deal with.

He simply bites and tears and bleeds. Then he moves to the next.

Offense.

A real beast doesn't need to eat. It just needs to hunt.

"And is that what you think you are?" the doctor asks him quietly, patient in spite of the shame coloring his cheeks. He can hear Maxine's bored voice pitched high from the other side of the wall, bored with having to wait for Billy to be done with his appointment. "A beast?"

He shrugs.

She nods. He can see it from his peripheral vision. He's kept his head down, only enough he wouldn't need to look her in the eye.

Dr. Toll is all big city and feminine grace. She speaks with a surety he's never seen in Susan. Moves quick and determined like Max tends to do. But she's kind. He can tell. Just can.

He's always preferred female doctors. They just feel safer.

Not that Neil ever gave him much choice. Neil set Billy up with his own primary back in California. A rough handed man with cold hands and a pack of cigarettes in his coat pocket as he told Billy over the years for various fevers, breaks, and bruises that all he had to do was keep his head down and be a good boy and keep going to church.

Hawkins' doctors weren't much better.

But it's 11AM and he's been in Indianapolis for over two hours.

Susan made him this appointment. Last week, after a plate slipped while he was washing the dishes and all he could see was Steve, bleeding. He slipped away for a while. Came back to a trashed, glass-littered sink.

Neil waited for him to come back to himself. To be aware of the punishment he was ultimately due.

"How's your sleep?"

"Shitty."

Dr. Toll hums, amused maybe. "Define 'shitty.'"

In the brief moment he closes his eyes, he sees Steve's face again, bloodied and betrayed and worst of all, *resigned*. Glass cuts slivers into his hands. He sees red all over and lets the ash rain down on him for the first time in his life.

That was a hatchet he sent spiraling through the air, only for it to land in the last person he wanted. The one he intended.

He's so goddamn stupid.

"I have nightmares," he admits. "Bad ones."

"About eating," she asks, "or hunting?"

He swallows, pained. Why is she even humoring him?

Billy can't look at her. "Hunting."

She's quiet as she writes her notes. She hums quietly as she does it, which Billy finds odd. Like she's taking her time for some reason. Like she's enjoying herself.

Something cold prickles at the back of his neck, raising a clammy sweat at his hairline—but he's not feeling cornered. She's not making fun of him.

But he still can't calm down, even though he's trying. He's *trying*. Why is he *like* this?

"I just—" he starts, and feels outside of himself, an invader inside his own body. Talking isn't his *thing*. "I can't stop. I never can. I just get pissed and explode and hurt people. I don't know why."

She puts down her pen. "You mentioned the first time it happened was around eleven or twelve?"

"Yeah." He thinks back during a game of baseball. A kid stole second from him and he'd looked up into the stands and saw Neil glaring down at the field. Like his eyes might open a pit and swallow his only son whole. Then Billy broke three of the kid's fingers. The kid had to wear an eyepatch for two months. Neil had sweet talked the coach into letting Billy off with a week suspension. Then he'd taken Billy out for ice cream. "Yeah. Around then."

"And your current injuries," she says, and Billy flinches. "These aren't from your...hunting?"

The lie jumps easily to his tongue. To spit out a vitriolic *you should see the other guy* with a laugh he's practiced in his vanity mirror. But that prickling over his skin tells him to look up. Meet her eyes.

She's not glaring at him. She's not frowning. She's just...there. Listening to him. With genuine interest.

She's not sad or pissed or feeling sorry for him. It's like she just wants to know.

"My dad."

She doesn't react in any way he can see. "Did your usual physician do those stitches?"

A throb starts at his temple as if on cue. "No. Went to the ER."

"Did they question him?"

"I drove myself."

Her hand lowers. She points at the cast encasing his left wrist and half his hand. "And that?"

She glances back up at the stitches he's sporting over his forehead.

"Can I take a look?"

He shrugs again.

She stands and pulls on a pair of gloves. The snap of the rubber has him remembering plenty of nights spent in the ER, alone, surrounded by the scent of rubbing alcohol and copper, wishing he could go to school the next day.

After standing and setting her clipboard on her stool, she approaches him. She's focused on his forehead, rubbery fingers prodding gently at the shitty stitch job.

The small town staff threatened to get the police involved when he wasn't budging on their

probing questions. Billy had screamed every terrible thing he could come up with because like hell he was ever going to willingly be in a room with Chief Hopper ever again. He thinks fear made the doctor do a rush job.

He'd scar. But that was normal.

"Wiggle your fingers for me?"

He does.

"Cast doesn't feel too tight or itchy?"

He shrugs again.

She nods. Sits back down after moving her clipboard to the counter at the back of the room. She peels her gloves off and tosses them into the trash by the door.

"The ER kind of sucks, doesn't it?"

He lifts a brow. "Uh. Yeah, sure."

"I hate the wait times. In school, doctors have to do rotations to get their hours in. I did a few in emergency, though I was focused more on critical care. Some of the stuff you see in there." She shakes her head. "Some of the scariest and silliest situations you'll ever see under one roof, I'll tell you that much."

It's weird. He didn't think much on what doctors did before they became, well. Doctors.

"Like what?"

She shrugs. "You want the silly or the scary?"

"Silly first, I guess."

She grins. "You'd be surprised how many people come in, terrified and embarrassed because they... *misplaced* something."

"Like what?" Billy doesn't get it. "Their car keys? What does that even mean?"

"People sometimes get a little too excited when they're in the bedroom. They happen to, well. Misplace certain shaped items they need help extracting."

Billy's mind works. Certain shaped items? Extract-

Oh.

He feels heat flood his face. He can't help but laugh at the idea.

"Like up their-up their asses?" Then, because he can't ever keep his stupid mouth shut, "Guys or girls?"

She gives him a chastising look, but her amusement doesn't fade. Doesn't tell him off for his language. "All sorts. Sometimes excitement can be a little too exciting, is all. I liked those cases because I got to help people and we all had a laugh."

He can't picture ever sticking something up his ass only to be stupid enough to get it stuck and

then have to go to the ER and ask for someone to remove it. Because then they'd *know* . And they'd tell Neil. And he'd wind up right back in the ER for it.

But this doctor was smiling about it, like she had fond memories of helping people who did exactly that.

Came to her for help with something too embarrassing and—and *shameful* .

He can't imagine doing that.

But...he's here now, isn't he?"

Can she see it on him? See it in the way he dresses, the way his hair is curled and coiffed, the way he sits, holds himself, breathes? The way he speaks, maybe? Or the piercing he stubbornly went ahead and got when he was fourteen because he was young and stupid and felt just a little less closed in when he could escape to the best friend he never expected to become the safe haven he had.

But all that's over.

It makes him want to hit something. He doesn't, flexes his fingers instead. Looks back at Toll, expecting that familiar ugly judgment to rear its head.

But something whispers she's still not laughing at him. Not picking him apart like he's some freak science experiment to figure out.

"Now how about a scary one?"

He nods, because he doesn't trust his voice not to crack.

"A girl came in once. It was around four in the afternoon. She was maybe ten years old. Her hair had been ripped out in large patches across her head and there were bruises all along her spine and hips. She'd been dragged down the stairs by her hair. Tossed around. Her mom brought her in, screaming, because her husband was angry their kids had been play wrestling and the girl had accidentally knocked a small hole in the drywall."

Billy can't breathe. He knows how it hurts to fall down the stairs. To *trip* . He knows what it feels like having his hair pulled, but never—Neil's never actually ripped his hair from the root.

The strength and rage to do that—

To a child—

Seeing the burning in his eyes, she goes on. "I cared for her, calmed her mother the best I could. I called the police. And you know what happened a little over a month later?"

He shook his head, no.

"The girl came back with broken ribs and a swollen face. She finally died after coding twice."

"W-why?" he stutters out, enraged all at once for some kid he couldn't even picture. Instead, he sees Maxine, with her round freckled face and her angry little glower she reserves solely for him. If Neil *ever* – "Why didn't the cops do something?"

"They did. After." She holds his stare, his anger. "A lot of the time the protections put in place for society don't do their job until it's too late. I was so angry. I was heartbroken. I felt like there was

no point to anything. How could someone do that to their own child? If I couldn't help her, could I help anybody?"

Billy feels too big for his own skin. He needs to stand, to pace. Move around like a wild animal in a cage. Needs to get something firm and fragile in his hands so he can smash it against the ground, make it small, make it red.

Make everything about this *easier*.

Then a hand falls over his, her fingers gently clasping the ones he has tensed, curled around his cast.

"Have you ever heard of something called intermittent explosive disorder?" she asks him, and it's a record scratch, fries his brain as he tries to remember if he has or not.

"I don't think so?"

"It's marked by frequent, seemingly random and unproportional outbursts of oftentimes extreme anger and violence. I've heard it described by those who don't suffer from it as feeling like they're struggling to stand in the eye of an ever changing hurricane. It can be hard to manage for the person going through it as well as those around them."

Steve, underneath his aching knuckles, split open like a pomegranate spilling dark seeds, staining everything. His skin. His clothes. His memory.

Maxine, with her red knees after he *told* her a hundred times to take it slow. Her board snapping clean and loud under his hands and over his knee as she sobbed and stared up at him, skinned knees tight against her chest. Terrified.

Neil, angry when he accused Billy of not watching Maxine close enough as she learned to skate. That her wipe out was his fault. That Billy was irresponsible and—and Neil watching as Billy tore apart his room, breaking everything in sight except his own father because Neil was the one thing he couldn't quite figure out how to hurt like he did.

Neil, breaking Billy's nose that night.

And Neil, so many years later, leaving Billy with a slash across his temple and a broken wrist after taking a brick to the Camaro's windshield, Steve's face and the smell of chemicals stirring over the stove still stinging the back of his sinuses.

Mild mannered, mousey Susan, daring to tell him she'd made a call, made him this appointment. Begged him, shivering in her low heels in the doorway of his room, to give it a try.

Him, breaking his stereo right after she left for work, barely holding the rage back until she was gone to do it.

It sounds like *him*, and he hates it. Hates it. Hates it almost more than—

He doesn't want to hurt someone again like he's hurt so many others. Like he's hurt Maxine.

Like he's hurt Steve.

He's tired of breaking everything he touches.

"Did that asshole have it? The...the explosive disorder?"

She regards him a long moment. “No. He was just an abuser. And sometimes that leaves scars so deep it takes years to dig them out. To begin to heal. Sometimes when people like that go on to have families, they pass some traits down to their children. Traits that might not show up until they’re a little older. Sometimes the things we feel, the things we *do*, are due to other causes.”

“Like what?”

It barely comes out a whisper.

“Long term trauma to the brain,” she says, point blank. Still not judging, or implying. Just a statement of fact. “Or any combination of both. The human mind and body is tricky to figure out, but I like to think medicine can help.”

“Like what, pills?”

“Not always. There’s different kinds of therapy, meditation, journaling—”

“None of that’s medicine, though.”

She tilts her head. “Oh really?”

“Medicine is like that awful stuff you drink for a bad cough, or shots, or good old fashioned pills.” He holds up his arm. “A cast. Stitches.”

“And why do you think different methods of getting your thoughts out and into the world isn’t medicine?”

“Because it’s just not.”

“Well, if you know so much what do you think you should be prescribed today?”

“Nothing,” he barks. “I’m fine.”

The silence between them hangs.

Dr. Toll is still holding his fingers. He doesn’t know why he hasn’t pulled away yet.

“You could also talk to your friends.”

“I don’t have any friends.”

“Billy,” she says, squeezing his fingers a final time before moving away to grab something from one of the drawers behind her. “What do you want to do after high school?”

“Huh?”

“After school. What do you want to do when you’re eighteen and legally an adult?”

He can’t figure her line of questioning. “What’s that got to do with anything about today?”

“You said you’re on the basketball team. Ever think about what a scholarship could mean?”

“I—I don’t think that far ahead.”

“Because you don’t know if you’ll live to see it, right?”

Billy goes tense all over, feeling adrift, yet still chained down. Left to swim in a choppy circle he

can't get away from.

“I don't know.” It's hard to admit. “Why's it matter?”

“Because having dreams and goals keeps us alive. It's something to keep going for. They keep you focused on the future instead of bogged down and lost in the present.”

He almost never thinks about what life could be without Neil over his shoulder. He had a taste of it when he was sent back to live with his mom but she was mentally checked out to the point Billy still wonders if it was drugs or something else.

But she'd eventually found just enough awareness to kick him to the curb, so his focus switched from obsessing over her headspace to obsessing over how to avoid Neil's wrath now that the court cleared him.

If not even a judge could help, what the hell could a doctor do?

But.

She's been speaking to him all morning like he's a person worth caring about. Like he isn't some dick-loving piece of shit freak who deserves worse than the worst thing someone could come up with.

She's just been...a person.

A person treating him like another person.

She's not sent him a mean look once. Hasn't asked him to give her something in exchange for her time.

She's just...been normal.

He can't remember a time when someone treated him like he was normal.

Bitterly, like a viper at the meat of his heart, he thinks of Steve before pushing him away.

That was never real. It was never going to be real. It was over.

He made sure of that.

“It's either me or him,” he finally tells her, muttering it aloud like the poisonous thought it's always been. Billy or Neil. Neil or Billy. “He's going to win.”

The doctor turns back to him, and in her hand is a folder. It's open and inside is a spread of sheets and a colorful pamphlet advertising the larger hospital they're in. A network.

The titles are big and bold, and hook him in different places, pulling him in different directions. Doesn't know whether to be mad or relieved, or confused more than ever.

Recovering From Intermittent Anger Disorder; Your Next Steps

Resources for Domestic Violence Survivors

Transitioning From Teen to Adult and What to Prepare For

Domestic Violence and How to Break the Cycle

Ways to Deescalate Anger and How to Conquer Your Triggers

How Psychotherapy Can Help Your Teen

Billy stares down at sheet after sheet after sheet, his face heating more with each one and feeling smaller too.

He's pathetic.

He really does have a problem. It's spelled out plain as day under his fingers when he takes the folder from her. Therapy. Not even just the regular kind, either. *Psycho*-therapy.

He's a psycho.

Psychotic.

Intermittent explosive disorder.

At least there's a fucking name for it.

He lets out a slow breath, feeling defeated yet strangely a little lighter.

"What do I do now?"

When he looks up, she's smiling at him.

-

In the end he, Susan, and Maxine get breakfast at a small diner after his appointment. He'd spent four hours inside talking about his problems. His nightmares, his anger, his likes and dislikes, his—his fucking *crush* on Steve Harrington and how he fucked that up. How much of a monster he was. Is.

It was like a fucking floodgate opened. He sat there and unleashed.

She'd only listened through his shame, unmoved by the confirmation she was speaking with a f— with someone like him.

When he was done, when he had to stop and catch his breath to keep from crying, she told him nothing is ever set in stone.

Then she wrote him a prescription for two low-dose meds and made him promise to start writing down his thoughts in a journal when he felt anything less or more than content. The idea was to purge the bad and revisit the good.

She also said she'd be referring him to a psychotherapist who specializes in teens like him, another doc in Indy. He supposes it can't be any worse than what he gets in Hawkins, so he accepts it without argument.

Now, he's poking around a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon as he and Susan listen to Maxine ramble on about her friends and how annoying it was waiting for Billy for so long, and what was he doing in there anyway, and what was going to happen now that Neil broke his wrist—

His fork clatters to the plate. Susan shushes her daughter as he stands, mutters something about needing air before stomping out to the parking lot. Ten minutes later they're all in Susan's car on the highway heading back to Hawkins.

He's sitting in the backseat, looking out the window when a familiar song catches his attention. Heavy guitar thrums low from the speakers up front and he watches Susan carefully as she finds a good volume; high enough to hear, low enough to focus on the road.

"You like this song, don't you, Billy?" she asks, and finds his eyes in the rearview mirror.

He swallows, wet pricking at his eyes.

He looks away from Susan's soft smile.

part xi: fog

Chapter Notes

Only one more chapter left! (And I promise it's a happy ending.)

For a while I've been wanting to go back and add specific warnings per chapter in the end notes when applicable for not only this fic, but all of what I've written. Let me know if that's something you'd like to see as a reader.

Also please don't worry too much about the birthday dates/timeline because I personally cannot keep track of those and this fic was started before Billy's birthday was revealed. I tried my best.

*Potential spoilers in the end chapter note.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Billy wags the pen, bounces it between his index and middle fingers. Journaling is hard. Harder than he thought it would be.

He wouldn't have even started it, didn't even consider it, until Maxine had dumped a small, brown leather journal and a bunch of dollar store pens on his bed one afternoon. He'd been laying down listening to music, taking advantage of the rare Saturday his dad got called in to work to cover somebody else's shift.

"I know you aren't doing what your doctor told you to."

He was frozen lying there, forced to peer up into those all-seeing eyes of hers. She didn't know shit from sticks but she was perceptive.

"I heard through the wall when I was in the waiting room."

Of course she did. "Get the fuck out of my room, nerd."

She didn't move. "Do it. Please."

"Don't recall my life being any business of yours, least of all what I choose to spend my time doing."

She didn't budge an inch. Her chin quivered, a dangerous warning of what was to come. He hated when her chin wobbled.

It usually preceded him getting a new bruise or four.

But Neil wasn't here, and Maxine wasn't outright blubbering. So, that was something.

"Spit it out, I'm busy."

"I don't know how to help you."

Billy blinked. Slipped his headphones off to better hear her.

“You’re always so angry,” she said. “And it makes *me* angry and—and I don’t want to be angry like you. You’re scary when you’re mad, and I know it’s your dad’s fault, mostly. But you’re gonna be eighteen soon enough and then you’ll be gone and—”

“Hey, hey, whoa.” He had to sit up, because she’d started squeezing out fat tears. But she wasn’t exactly crying, was the thing. That wasn’t something he’d seen from her before. Usually it was all loud shouting and woe-is-me sobbing. “Stop.”

He put his hands out, awkwardly trying to get her to do exactly that.

“He’ll kill you, Billy.” That stopped him, hands hovering. She’d never said it out loud before. Had never addressed it. Not since before they moved so many years before. “So please...please just do what the doctor says. Just do it.”

Back then, he’d watched Maxine leave and proceeded to stew in his own slow-broiling rage at her assumption that what Neil did to him was *his* fault. Like he needed to get control over himself to keep Neil from having a reason. But what she didn’t understand is that Neil rarely needed a reason, and never a good one.

He’d shoved his lamp on the floor. Cracked the bulb and strained part of the wiring. Narrowly avoided Neil throwing a fit when he got home later that night and saw Billy’s light flickering when he’d poked his head in.

So now here he was, trying to follow the pipsqueak’s orders.

Intermittent explosive disorder, he writes. *It’s been a month of the pills and this writing bullshit, but the real kicker is I think it’s actually helping.*

What are you even supposed to write about?

I’m still angry all the time, though. I hate everything. I hate Maxine and her assumptions and how Neil never turns his anger on her. I hate Susan for being spineless. I hate Neil for hating my mom. I hate my mom for never wanting me enough. I hate Steve for—

The thing is, Neil knows Billy hates him. If Neil were to find this journal project of his, he’d likely squeak by with what he’d already written. It’s nothing his smart mouth hasn’t already managed to blurt at some point in their miserable lives living under the same roof. But Steve.

Neil doesn’t know a goddamn thing about Steve. Far as Neil knows, Steve was the nameless, nosy kid who popped by one afternoon with cookies Neil threw away before dinner.

If he caught wind of a boy Billy was friends with—or used to be, at this point—*in writing*, then Billy was screwed. Forever.

He omits saying anything else. He scribbles over Steve’s name until it’s a black mess of ink and wrinkled paper.

He continues on the next line.

I’d usually be celebrating with Carol, but I screwed that up. I can’t ever go back.

He huffs, sending out a silent thanks to Carol for becoming the substitute for what would be meant for Steve.

Carol doesn’t talk to me. Doesn’t look at me. Avoids me in—

Gym. But he can't say that, can he? Girls weren't on the basketball team.

Avoids me in class. Ignores my existence. It's so fucking weird. After I got back from California, I thought we were getting somewhere. Knew it was stupid to lie about a girl back west, but I figured it'd make her want to talk to me again. Faster. Make her feel like I'd forgotten about her.

He stumbles over the words, reading back what he's written three times over.

He sounds so fucking stupid.

Childish.

It worked. Then I managed to do what I always do. I fucked up all over again.

He slams the journal closed, shoves it under his mattress and chews on the end of the pen until it's time for school.

He takes two pills that morning, just for good measure.

-

It's the same as it's been since he fought Steve. Since he showed up soon after with a cast and some stitches.

He gets the cast off in a few days. The stitches have already healed into a nice scar.

Neil always lets him off the hook for a while when it's bad enough.

He's been sailing for long enough. Sooner or later, Neil will find a reason. Billy knows it's better to just give him one.

But he keeps thinking of Max, silently crying as she tossed some pens at him.

So he's been popping the doc's pills and writing his stupid thoughts down and staying largely out of trouble.

But within minutes of arriving at his locker, he's overheard there's a party at Tina's next Friday.

Everyone will be there he overhears next, and like a hawk homing in on a mouse in a field, he catches sight of Steve just at the other end of the hall making moon eyes at Nancy Wheeler as he talks and talk and talks.

She's not happy.

But, eventually, she nods. And Billy sees from afar the same sort of smile Steve used to give him.

-

The hours crawl by, hungry.

Billy breezes through every class he doesn't share with Steve. He hurries through the halls, cautious only on turns where he doesn't know if Steve is heading his way.

He bumps shoulders with Wheeler, just once.

She says excuse me, until she looks up and sees who it is. He offers her a tight smile, because he's

not about to get Steve's attention again by pissing off the girlfriend.

She frowns, an unpleasant wrinkle forming between her eyebrows. She steps to the left. He steps to the right. They do it again.

She sighs, places her hands on his biceps and moves him gently out of her way with a tiny amused huff.

Then she's gone.

He goes to his next class.

Lunch he spends in his car avoiding Tommy and Heather. Tommy for his eagerness and Heather for her concern. He smokes and tries not to think about what comes later.

Chem is hell. It's been hell since Steve's kitchen.

He'd shown up the next day, smart enough to catch on that Billy had finished the project for him before they'd fought. He brought it in and ended up scraping by with a passing grade.

But then it meant Steve giving him the one and only acknowledgement he's given Billy since the fight.

A single nod.

That's it.

Since then it's been a mix of sitting in tense silence, at least on Billy's end, for an hour until the bell rang, and Steve skipping class entirely.

Any assigned partner work Billy does on his own. Let's Steve sign his name at the end of class. It's the least Billy owes him.

Today he hopes Steve's skipped. He's been thinking too much about the fight. About Steve showing up to school the next day swollen and bruised. Had sat next to Billy and didn't spare him a single look past the nod.

That first day was the hardest.

Now, his stomach flips the same time as it drops when Steve deigns to walk in the room. He's busy with his backpack, looking for his book and papers.

Today might be the day Billy breaks first.

He slaps his homework on the teacher's desk, turns with those big brown eyes sweeping easily and effortlessly over Billy like he's not even there, and walks right back out of the room.

The teacher is pissed.

And Billy is too.

-

In gym, Steve isn't there.

Billy's been benched until his cast is removed, so he usually spends the hour watching Steve run

around playing ball. It's the one reprieve he allows himself. During practice, Steve doesn't look at him, but it's at least because he doesn't have a reason to.

-

The days drag on.

He gets his cast off.

He pops his pills.

He writes in his stupid journal.

Neil leaves him alone.

And Steve ignores him.

-

Billy feels it coming on.

-

He sees Steve in the parking lot before school. He usually does.

Steve likes spending the extra time with Wheeler. Likes making googoo eyes at the princess while she talks about class or her stuffy choice in clothing or whatever it must be.

Billy's had to stand by and pretend it doesn't matter when Steve spins Wheeler through the air, his arms tight around her small waist. That it doesn't matter when he opens the passenger door to the beamer while Wheeler climbs in, as they head off to whatever date night they have planned.

That it doesn't matter that Steve's attention is on someone else now. That he's kissing someone else. That they're probably doing so much more.

He wonders if Wheeler feels the same as Billy does, when Steve kisses her.

If Steve looks just as delicious, just as destroyed as he had when he fell apart beside Billy on that couch.

-

The weekend is a blur. Neil grumbles about everything and nothing and Billy recognizes it for the doomsday clock counting down that it is.

-

He has an appointment on Monday afternoon, so he misses chem and gym to drive into the city to meet with Dr. Toll.

He brings his journal because she asked him to.

She asks him questions. He answers them. She skims through his writing, picking up on the fact he replaced Steve's name with Carol's. Easy to match up the details in your head when they don't match up on paper.

There's no real reason to lie to her. She isn't dangerous.

Everything, everywhere else is.

“Have you given any more thought to what you might want to do after high school is over?”

“Not really.”

“Did you read the material I—”

“Yeah, yeah I did.”

It's too loud in the small exam room. He feels like the air he's breathing is thick. Metallic.

“There's power in decision making. Being able to set small goals and—”

A laugh that sounds too mean lurches from him. He can't help it.

“You think setting a goal for yourself is funny?”

“I think there's no point.”

“Why?”

“Because Neil is—because I...”

What? What is he trying to say. To pin down.

It's on the tip of his tongue. A poison pill he's always held precarious and precious between his molars. But having to name it? How the hell do you name something you've always lived with, a something that's never had a name.

It's never needed one.

What is it that Neil gives him, every waking moment? The thing that dogs his dreams. The feeling that's sent him raging, crying, and wasted in turns.

That dread at the back of his skull. The cold sweat at his neck. The heavy palpitations of his heart after dinner. The resignation when he hears his father's footsteps in the hall.

“I'm,” he swallows, again and again. He wishes he could see Steve later. “I'm afraid.”

He shivers as Dr. Toll holds his gaze. She offers him a delicate nod.

“Your situation isn't forever. It'll end one day. You'll graduate and move out and you'll live a long and full life full of choices that make you happy. Not him.”

He's can't think of an after. Life is waking up and getting through the day without getting hit and trying not to hit anybody else. It's staring after Steve in the halls and wondering, pleading with his own memories to not fuck up and apologize. Make it matter. Make the past disappear.

But he can't do that.

“Have you considered coming out?”

He blanks. Confusion sweeps through him.

“Come out of what?”

“Come out to your father. Take control back by being up front with him. Let him know he has no power over that part of you.”

“Like...like tell him I *am* g—” He inhales sharply. He can't even say the goddamn word. “That I'm everything he's always thought? The thing that makes him hate me?”

“It doesn't have to be now. Or even soon. Maybe once you move out. Or go to college. The point is your identity is yours. Your truth is your own. He doesn't own that part of you.”

It's hippie bullshit is what she's spouting. His palms sweat. What isn't she fucking getting?

“I can't,” he grinds out. “That's just what he wants. A reason good enough to finally kill me.”

Lines appear around her mouth. She writes something down, tears the piece of paper off, and holds it out.

“If it's that serious, then you need to call this number.”

He half expects it to say 911. But it's a normal number.

“Whose is it?”

“A social worker I work closely with—”

He drops it.

“No. No fucking way. That'll make everything worse. Just—”

God. God, he's an idiot for ever coming here. For thinking a doctor could actually help him. How fucking dare her for not getting it, for not trying hard enough, for not helping him. She's a doctor for fuck's sake, that's her job.

Nobody can help him out of his situation. He knows that. He's *known* that.

She keeps talking. So many words he doesn't hear, that hold no real meaning. It doesn't matter, he tells himself. It doesn't fucking matter.

It's just talking. That's all they're doing. Nothing is set in stone.

She says those words, over and over again, in so many different ways. They all mean the same thing in the end.

There's a hand on his shoulder. Breathing, in and out. His chest is seizing up. Caving in. He's stuck.

Breathe, somebody, somewhere tells him.

So he does. He breathes. He breathes instead of shoving his fist through the wall like his muscles ache to do. He breathes and she says more placating things he doesn't hear. He gets his journal back and he gets a refill for his prescription and he's gone.

Life goes on.

The lot isn't packed when he pulls up, but it's getting there. He listens to Maxine struggle with her backpack and whatever new annoyance she has lodged between her teeth for the nerds she always seems to complain about. There's wheels on blacktop and a door shutting just a little too hard. He barely winces as the chassis rides the wave, sending him swaying a smidge.

He smokes. Watches a few lanes across as Steve stands with Tommy and Carol and Wheeler—and he's mad at something. Billy can tell.

He's had that anger thrown at him more than a few times.

He thought Steve washed his hands of Tommy and Carol. Social leeches more than anything. Easy to use. To manipulate. To make fun of. And to pass the time when no better options present themselves.

But it's Wheeler's presence throwing him. Her tall friend hovers nearby, freckled face all pinched and magnified under her massive frames.

The town creep is standing between Steve's car and, well. Steve. There's paper strewn all over.

He's shaking something around. It's got a strap. Waves it through the air—

And then he's dropping it on the ground. Billy thinks he drops it, it happens so smoothly.

But then Steve is laughing.

It isn't like him, is the thing.

It's only after Billy's locked his car and is walking by that he realizes it was a camera Steve smashed.

Steve and the goons are already heading inside the school, so it's not like Billy has any reason to linger, really. But Billy's never really gotten the thing everybody has against Byers. The guy's just skinny, needs a good haircut.

He used to buy pot off him before Munson staked his claim out by the trailer park. Easier with no cops to come sniffing their porky snouts around. And the trailer park was in general Hawkins' no man land.

When Neil first dragged him out to Hawkins, Billy remembers seeing Byers around the middle school sporting the occasional and too familiar black eye. Hunched shoulders. Fists ready to prove a point that he always did very well.

Billy always left him alone.

Byers casts him a furtive, nearly accusatory look as he comes to a stop.

“Seems Harrington's got a bug up his ass this morning. You go pawing at his girl or something?”

And sure, Billy hasn't missed the looks he and the princess toss each other when the other isn't looking.

A sigh as Byers collects the plastic detritus at his feet. “What do you want, Hargrove?”

The breeze picks up, and Billy eyes the papers as they pancake over their shoes. Photos.

Billy squints. He picks one up while Byers goes to grab them.

It's Steve's pool. At night.

Wheeler is in this one, drinking a beer while her friend looks dour beside her. He thinks the blurry smudge to the right is Tommy.

Byers snatches the photo back.

Okay so maybe the guy really *is* a creep.

Before Billy can say a thing, Byers is hurrying off, all anxious shoulders and tense legs.

Billy shakes his head and steels himself for the day.

-

He thought it was a one off.

A fluke. A bad mood.

A good reason. Because Byers had decided to do a late night stalker photo shoot and Billy knows if he was in Steve's place he'd have smashed a whole lot more than the guy's camera.

What would Billy have done, if he was in those photos? If he was still allowed in Steve's life enough to be invited over to one of his typical get-togethers?

If he had to sit by and watch him get little priss Nancy Wheeler to drink.

So he doesn't blame Steve, not at all. In fact kind of likes when Steve does something unexpected.

Saying yes to Billy's *practice* time and again being chief among them.

But it's not a one off. It's all goddamn day.

Steve seems to be everywhere.

Billy overhears him being a prick to some freshman who did something to make Wheeler drop her book. Gets wind of Steve leaving some nerd in near tears for whatever reason between class shortly before lunch.

He draws a crowd during lunch. Tells a story of some party from a year before that Billy remembers only because Steve was about to get it in with some chick who puked all over his nice polo. He'd spent an hour complaining about it, pouting as he and Billy cleaned up his house after. It wasn't the same story he blew up and bragged about for the entire cafeteria to hear, sans the hookup.

There's the girl he's been hanging with more recently. An argument after lunch. Billy sees Buckley—and yeah, he still feels shitty about what he said to her, but what the hell was he supposed to do to get her to back the fuck off—trying to get a word in edgewise and Steve just blows her off. Ignores her.

It's not like him.

None of it is.

Not the Steve he knows.

Knew. Or, fuck.

Steve enters chem before he does, and Billy has half a mind to skip. He's not ready for whatever mood Steve's in to be directed at him. For whatever reason, the guy's hellbent on getting attention today. All eyes on him as he plays up the cool guy act.

Steve's always been cool, so Billy doesn't fucking get it.

He grinds his teeth and decides not to give Neil a reason by missing more class than he already has.

He breathes.

-

Steve ignores him in favor of talking with everyone, and anyone else.

He's charming their teacher. He's flirting with Tina, but in a meaningless way. He's talking about some date he's taking Wheeler on this weekend with Chris, the guy who sits at the back of the class and never says a damn thing.

Billy slips up. Mumbles something because he's just so fucking sick of watching the show.

He feels eyes on him, heavy. Like high beams in thick fog. And all his stupid brain can come up with is, *finally*.

“What was that?” Steve asks, and it punches out of him, faux smile painted on.

Steve hasn't said a thing to him in so long.

It's strange how startling it is, to have all that attention on him again.

He clears his throat. Keeps writing his chem notes. “I said, you'd think the guy's bipolar.”

“Who?”

“You know who, Harrington.”

It's automatic. It's always served to piss Steve off, just a little. Steve is Harrington and Harrington is Steve, it's all the same to Billy. There's only one Steve Harrington. What Billy calls him shouldn't matter. But the fact that it does, that it *still* does, is icing on a very measly cake.

And this shouldn't be their first conversation after so long, after what Billy did to him, but it is. And he's tired and equal parts morbidly intrigued and wary of the trail of carnage Steve has left throughout Hawkins High today.

“You must be bipolar because for months on end you mope around like a bitch and then today you're all smiles and laughs and broken cameras. Telling stories that didn't happen, and making your poor girl sit through it all.”

And she had, was the other thing. Had Steve's arm thrown around her shoulders as she sat there, shrunken and mousey at his side like she was just praying for a chance to sneak off where she wouldn't be noticed.

Steve's face twists more and more as he keeps talking, a frown appearing at the mention of the party. They both remember, then. Good.

“Look who's talking.”

The class is watching now. Listening. Waiting for the show to really start.

Billy keeps writing notes on elemental reactions. Feels not too dissimilar to a flame over fuel.

“Please, enlighten me. You *are* the dancing monkey after all. Today you have all the answers.”

He can tell Steve hates that. That he's probably grinding his teeth trying to think of a comeback.

“Boys.”

It's a warning from the teacher. More than what they deserve and not nearly enough to matter to either of them.

Steve taps his pencil. Faces Billy in his seat.

“Says the guy who's my best friend one day and then beats me up the next.”

It's personal. Steve has made it personal.

Billy turns slowly. Steve's face gives nothing away. Billy can't tell if he regrets that, if he means it, or if he just doesn't care anymore.

But why would he mention it at all if it didn't matter?

“That's enough now,” their teacher says, clapping once to try and bring attention away from the main event.

But nothing is going to stop them. Not now.

Not ever.

It feels like salt in an open wound.

They're going to do this forever.

What this is—how it feels, how Billy feels...it'll never end.

“I'm—” he starts, his voice dying off as Steve eggs him on with uninterested eyes.

And he's what, sorry?

The word barely scratches the surface.

He wished Steve dead.

That doesn't just go away.

He breathes.

It's never been fast.

Until it is.

Intermittent.

Moments between.

Explosive—destructive. Potassium in water. Open flame to oxygen. Corrosive, like rust.

Two kids who became friends because their houses happened to be next door to one another. Happenstance and a plate of warm cookies made by a mother who gave a shit.

A kid with a big mouth.

Too big, especially now.

Billy hates himself for being in love.

He stands. Takes nothing with him.

He leaves.

-

He sits in his car.

He breathes and he breathes and he fucking breathes and he fucking—

-

Gym isn't as bad as chem.

It's worse.

Steve rides his ass the entire time.

Billy wonders where this fire was when he first joined the team. Newly removed from the bench, Billy's arm feels weak and shaky in turns. But he tries to keep up. He does. Forces himself to. Because Steve isn't letting him slack off. Steve isn't letting him gain a goddamn inch.

The second Billy gets out from under Steve's dogged defense, Steve slaps the ball away. Dribbles and passes like it's the air he breathes. He's moving through water, all loose limbs and sure footing. He's sweating through his shirt and his hair is fucked to hell.

He sticks his tongue out the whole time, breathless and flushed and victorious.

He's so—

Billy's chest aches.

-

It continues like that all week.

He dares to think this is the new normal he'll have to settle into until summer. A couple more months, he'll have all summer to figure out what to do. Avoid Steve, obviously. Pretend it isn't as big as it feels. Pretend it doesn't matter until it really doesn't.

And maybe then he'll actually go on to graduate high school and have a life. A real one. Where he's in control.

It's delicate and light and he writes it all down.

He breathes.

-

It's Friday.

They're in the showers, which is Billy's personal hell for multiple reasons. But at this particular moment in time it's Steve taking the shower right next to him, Tommy falling in on the other side. They soap up and talk about mostly nothing.

Then Steve turns to Billy.

“Shit game today. Wonder if you're taking it seriously at all.”

Billy keeps massaging his scalp. “I play like I always have. You just decided to get ‘roided up this week. Trying to make up for your skinny legs.”

It makes Steve laugh, but it's short and mean.

“Your arm is your weak spot. You'd do better not defending with that side. Could barely get the ball from me all week. All those muscles and no strength? Maybe you should work out more.”

His nails dig into his scalp.

“I haven't used that arm in a while, if you don't remember. What, couldn't fit that in your head next to all the air taking up space?”

Billy dunks his head under the spray, mostly to avoid seeing whatever hateful look Steve is likely giving him.

“You'd think you'd be used to it by now.”

No.

He meets Steve's eyes immediately, doesn't even register when he opened them, the water and soap stinging. There's just no way. Steve isn't like this. Doesn't *do* this.

This shit is Billy's domain. He gets to be the mean son of a bitch.

Steve on his sixteenth birthday. In his headlights. So fucking angry at Billy for being late.

Anger melting away into tears and panic when he realized what Neil had done.

They've never talked about Neil. No in any real way that means anything.

Steve tried, once. A few times.

Billy only the once.

I'm stuck in this bumfuck nowhere town until I graduate or Neil kills me. Whichever comes first.

It's the most direct, no bullshit detail he's ever given Steve, ever given anyone who wasn't Dr. Toll—and isn't that a miracle in itself—and it's not even close to a real explanation. To him actually laying out beat by beat just how much he and his father despise one another.

But it's not—it wasn't ever whatever the hell this is now.

This is my fault, he thinks.

But all his stupid, corrosive mind can think to shoot back is, "Fuck you."

Steve just smiles. The lopsided, tired smile Billy's seen too many times to count.

And he says, "Well, not everybody gets what they want, do they?"

Billy can only stand there under the spray. He's barely registered what Steve's said. He can only possibly mean one thing. He's—the bastard is actually mocking him for—for—

Steve fell apart next to him. Steve came into his own fist and then kissed Billy—*he'd* kissed Billy. Billy merely reciprocated. Under the bullshit guise of practice, because Billy's afraid, he's always been afraid. Of everything and everyone. Most of all, the paradise wrapped up all neat and pretty in a Steve Harrington shaped package.

Billy's always been afraid of his own messed up head, his own twisted around heart. But Steve's never said no, not really. Steve's never been so fucking cruel.

Steve's friends with *Buckley* for fuck's sake. He pulled that girl's card the second he saw her. Surely, Steve must know. Right?

Tommy laughs as they both finish rinsing. As they move on to other topics. More important things than making digs at Billy and Steve's secret. No, no. Not Steve's. He gets that now.

He's been a fool.

Steve slaps Billy's tap off when he's done. Billy stays standing there.

He isn't proud of it, but he watches Steve walk away.

The soap in his eyes stings.

-

It's Friday night.

Tina hugged him and pressed a wet kiss to his cheek when he showed up. Shoved a beer in his hand that he traded moments later for tequila. He wanted the thump of the bass guitar playing over the speakers to seep into his nerves, string him out, string him up.

A half hour into the party, he doesn't miss Steve showing up with the priss on his arm, despite already being halfway to blackout drunk. He's about to go to town on a keg. The crowd is cheering him on. Tommy is rambling gossip and praise into his ear, a tumor hanging off his side all night long.

The crowd is cheering *keg*, is cheering *Billy*, and Billy blinks and he's upside down. Tommy and some other clown are holding his calves in an iron grip. He's dizzy. He drinks and drinks and drinks.

Time skips.

He's face to face with Steve.

Steve is so fucking angry. Defiant. And why? For what? Maybe because Billy's a fool, always has been, probably always will be. That's not Steve's problem anymore.

Wheeler isn't impressed.

Time skips again.

He's getting blown by some blonde in Tina's parents' bedroom.

He moves away when she wants to kiss him after.

He knows it's stupid, but he always thought that—

Time stutters, jumps forward. He's standing over the front lawn, vomit staining the grass at his feet an ugly bile bland and smelling like rancid shit. Feels like a failure for always drinking until he's numb, or nearly. Knows it's because he can't stop replaying Steve slapping his shower off, over and over and over—

He finds a beer and cracks the tab. Sips it to settle his stomach under the too-warm breeze and midnight moon of Hawkins.

Commotion from inside.

Wheeler comes stumbling out, her hand clasping at Byers' elbow—and when did he even show up? They get into a beat up old car and disappear down the street.

More commotion minutes later. Cheering. Very loud cheering.

Keg, keg, keg.

Billy spins, feeling marginally more sober and confused because *he's* the keg king tonight.

Then he hears the name. *The* name. And he understands.

Can only fucking laugh.

-

He avoids the background and the chaotic energy of the crowd until he has to piss. The nuclear cloud fuzzing his brain has cleared enough he's mostly sober. He'll have a hell of a headache come the morning, but that's a problem for later.

He finds the bathroom. He shoves the door open with the toe of his boot all while unzipping his fly. Kicks the door closed again. He stands over the bowl and sighs.

He hears a snuffle and groan and his stream jumps. He swears and rights himself so he doesn't cover Tina's poor bathroom in piss.

He looks over his shoulder. Steve is laying in the tub on his back, still looking prim and polished even after his record breaking keg stand.

His eyes are squeezed shut, then his hands cover his face. He mumbles something Billy can't make out.

Billy turns back around to focus on emptying his bladder. "Care to share with the class, Harrington?"

He shakes and zips up and flushes. Moves to the mirror to pretend to fix his hair, to look busy.

Then, loud and sudden, Steve moans out, “Why can't you just leave me the hell alone.”

He pulls a curl too hard. Sweeps it away. It bounces right back in place.

Steve must lower his hands because his voice sounds clearer when he says, “You weren't there.”

“Sad I missed your keg stand? So sorry.”

“No,” he says, and the syllable drags. “You weren't there. You missed it. Science and—and practice.”

Billy turns until he can lean up against the sink. He crosses his arms.

“Excuse me?”

“You skipped. You—you just left. You always leave. Everybody always leaves.”

He snuffles again. Billy sees a tear slide down his cheek.

“You're drunk, Harrington. Really drunk.”

Those squinted eyes open enough to glare up at him. “Stop calling me that. I hate it when you call me that. I don't want you to call me that anymore. It's not my name.”

It is, he doesn't argue. Doesn't miss it for the chance it is. “We don't always get what we want. Harrington.”

Steve wipes at his eyes. Keeps glaring. “Oh fuck you.”

“No, *Harrington*, fuck you. You've been up my ass all week. Actually, you've been up everyone's asses.”

“Fuck you,” he mutters.

Billy flips him off. “You've been acting like a total asshole.”

“Oh please,” Steve says, the words slurring. He starts to move, to push himself up on the lip of the tub, but he flops back down, slides back in place. “You're the asshole. You've been a raging asshole for like, a whole *year*. I deserve a few weeks, at least.”

“Well maybe I wouldn't have had to be such an asshole if *you* hadn't gone and ratted me out to that fucking cop!”

He's shouting by the end.

Steve is just *looking* at him.

Someone knocks on the door, and Billy is quick to lock it and shout, “Go find a bush to shit in! It's occupied!”

“You...think I wanted what happened to...happen?” Steve breathes. “You blame me for what the state did to you?”

“What Hopper did to me, yeah.” He doesn't. “Yeah, sure. You calling that pig ruined my fucking life.”

Nevermind that Maxine had called the chief out multiple times before Steve ever did.

Why is he *like this*.

More tears slip out. And there it is again, the guilt. The indescribable want to return to those last hours between getting the call his mom was gonna take him, to the moment he woke up in bed beside Steve for the last time and told himself he needed to go. That there was no going back.

He just wanted to stay in that moment forever. He wanted to sink back down under the covers and wake Steve up with a kiss.

Old dead things, his wants.

Steve's throat works, all devastating angles as he tries to get up again. He ends up straddling the tub's edge, facing the linoleum wall. He's not looking at Billy anymore.

"I was afraid your dad had..." Steve taps his knuckles on the tub. "When you fell out of your car... at the quarry," he says, slow and with difficulty as he fights past the alcohol, "I thought you died. You looked dead."

Steve wobbles as he uses the wall to stand up all the way. He sways precariously as he steps over the lip of the tub to be on equal ground with Billy. He crowds in Billy's space, doesn't let Billy have an inch.

Steve meets his eyes, then quickly lets his gaze slide down. Want and guilt swell dangerous and low in Billy's gut, a sick feeling.

Billy breaks out in a sweat the longer Steve stands there saying nothing.

"Don't hate me for saving your life."

"That's bullshit," Billy snaps and Steve—he winces. Flinches, really.

Steve hadn't even flinched when Billy had been hitting him on the floor of his kitchen.

Clammy fingers go to his wrist, squeeze.

"Not that," Steve whispers. "Just, please. Not that."

His hand drops, slips away. Billy's wrist burns.

"It's in the past. It doesn't matter anymore. We're different people now, Steve."

Steve breathes out, shaky. Billy can relate.

"I think you were right," he says, and Billy's heart sinks. "I've been making this harder. I do that, I know. It's all bullshit. It is. I've always been slower, too stupid to catch on when it's a lost cause. Guess everybody saw it before I did."

When he breathes in next, he hiccups. Laughs and Billy can hear how drained he is, can hear the frustration.

"It's bullshit. I'm bullshit."

Billy can't let Steve think like this. He's not stupid. The words are stuck in the back of his throat again, heavy and useless. Why can't he just say it? Why can't he just suck it up and tell Steve that

he's the world's fucking biggest and most terrible lying son of a bitch?

But then Steve is sticking a hand in his coat pocket, is turning the lock and opening the door. Is saying, "Man, I'm drunk." Is laughing again, and sniffing again, and walking away.

And he leaves Billy alone. Again.

-

Steve pretends the conversation in Tina's bathroom never happened.

He misses Steve's seventeenth birthday. He knows when it is. He skips that day. Steve doesn't give him any hint that he expected Billy to remember the next day in chem, so he has no reason to bring it up.

I've never missed a birthday. Carol's matters more than mine.

He writes and writes. He breathes.

It eats at him. He's never missed a birthday. And given how the last one went...some part of him wants to make it up to Steve. Show him things are different. But they have been, they are. Nothing is the same.

And all the while, their new normal hasn't changed.

-

His anger's never been fast until it is.

But Neil beats him to it.

Another month comes and goes, maybe longer.

It's been a mix of Steve largely ignoring him or mumbling a toneless reply to the occasional question Billy aims his way in class, avoiding Billy in gym entirely, and Billy skipping when he doesn't feel like dealing with any of it. Steve generally acknowledging him is more than Billy could have hoped for, but the lapse between kills off the bittersweet aftertaste of the attention. Steve's moods have always been prone to their ups and downs, but lately they've been untenable.

Summer looms. Just a few more short weeks and he won't have to see Steve's face for months. He can convince someone in admin to give him a schedule of classes free of Steve entirely for next year. Plead the case of it being better for everyone if they never had to see each other.

He's even been considering giving up basketball. He can just join some other sport. Or get his exercise in at the rec center the next town over.

It's weeks of going back and forth, wrestling with himself and his own whims.

It only happens because he's lowered his guard. Because Maxine saunters into his room on a Sunday afternoon, a rare stretch of hours he gets to himself. Demands to be driven around and dropped off at one of her local haunts. It's raining, she tells him. She needs the car.

It happens because he snaps back at her. Something curt. Stupid. Irrelevant.

He can't even remember what he said.

He only remembers the hurt twisting her face.

How she spits back, “You’re such an asshole! This is why nobody wants you!”

And it just...hits wrong. Slides under his skin and stings. Pierces. Rips into muscle.

It’s long, loud minutes of him and Max shouting back and forth until Neil is shouldering the door open, his hands already fisted and covered in grease up to the elbow from working on his truck.

The door lands against his dresser with a slam, silencing the two of them so thoroughly, he can hear Maxine’s small hiccup of fear at the sight of his father looming.

Billy steps in front of her and then Neil does what he does best.

-

It’s the lull between impact when the pain hits its peak. A crescendo breaking out into a sheet of red rain dripping into his eyes, a splash of black at the edges of his vision, the puddle of his own fast-bruising flesh swelling against the scrape of the carpet. The way Maxine screams is the thunder. Neil’s eyes are the lightning.

He spits every foul thing Billy’s ever thought about himself as he just lies there, wallowing, allowing himself a moment to saturate in the hurt.

The fear went the second Neil started swinging. The leadup to these moments is always the worst part, and Neil’s favorite. Probably. Billy’s always suspected he likes the suspense, the way he can sow fear in his only son so expertly like he does with every woman he dupes.

Women and children, those are Neil’s favorite targets.

He can smell the black grease smeared into his skin. His bedroom is stained in streaks of it. In the midst of it all, his dresser had been tipped over. His ashtray was sent careening into the window, an attempt from Billy to get his dad away from Max. Max, looking so small and ashen in the doorway, never shutting her mouth or stuffing her lungs the whole fucking time. Susan, missing in action as usual.

Fear is the prelude. Hurt is the midpoint. The after is what Billy hates the most.

He hates the routine of it. Fear, pain, nothing. Pretend it never happened. Return to normal. Clean up, avoid the hospital if he can help it, and keep going about their lives like a son didn’t just get beat by his father.

It was fine before. Before Neil decided he got tired of only having Billy to beat on after his mother left. Decided he wanted another wife. Another toy to toss around after the honeymoon phase blipped out. Only this time, his newest distraction had a tagalong.

It used to be fine. It used to be just what they *did*. Until Maxine showed up, tiny and more breakable than Billy ever was.

He knows it like he knows he’ll never be able to pursue sports professionally because his back and his knees are shit from all the times he’s had to heal over the years.

When Neil gets tired of Billy he’ll just go for Max.

Max, who’s trying to reach him, but can’t because Neil’s hand is planted against her chest. His

hand is nearly the size of her rib cage. If he ever went after Max how he goes for Billy, she'd go flying across the room.

And she's so much more stupid, so much *braver* than he is. She'd talk back. Fight back. Would go down harder than Billy ever has.

He can't.

He hates this part.

He hates it so much.

Hates that now, instead of relishing the way Neil is breathing hard, is winding down, is getting ready to give his last little lecture before letting Billy go free to vanish for the rest of the day to lick his wounds—all Billy can think about is Maxine, screaming. Is Dr. Toll telling him there's another side of this shit life. Of Steve Harrington's mouth against his. Of Steve Harrington crying alone in a bathtub.

He'll be seventeen soon.

One more year.

He can't do this shit anymore.

Neil narrows his eyes. "What's so funny?"

He can't stop. It's never been his best quality. Some people sob when they break. He laughs.

It's always been an ugly sound. Has always freaked people out, made them afraid. Made them whisper behind his back. It's happened when he's blackout drunk and can't even remember the fight the night before. It's happened on the bleachers. It's happened in the halls. It's happened before Hawkins and it's happened after. It'll probably always happen.

It happened less when Steve was around to rein him in, lure him back into his shining orbit.

He lost that a long time ago. He's been drifting in the void for months.

It happens now, as blood coats his teeth from a bit tongue, as he singsongs, "So what if I am?"

He can read the question in Neil's dark eyes.

Billy rolls onto his back, smiles up at the man who never wanted him. "So what if I am a faggot like you keep telling me? What then?"

The endless screaming stops. His ears ring. Maxine goes still, eyes flitting up and down, back and forth, wondering what's next.

And Neil isn't saying anything, is the thing. Not what Billy expected, wonders what's next himself. He doesn't know.

This is uncharted territory for them both.

Neil's hammock hand grasps Maxine's wrist, crushing her as she yelps. He drags her out of the room, and practically tosses her across the threshold before he shuts Billy's door.

The sound is jarring in the quiet. It bounces around Billy's ears like a ricochet bullet.

Neil removed the lock years ago. Replaced it with a wonky knob and a latch on the outside. Anyone could walk in. Not everyone could freely walk out.

The door doesn't open.

“Stand.”

Billy laughs again, the sound abruptly cut when Neil bends to fist his shirt collar. Gets him up on his knees and then his feet to shove him against the wall.

He doesn't think he's ever seen his father so furious. So angry he's gone quiet.

“You have one more chance,” Neil warns, low. “My good mood might convince me I didn't just hear what I think I did.”

Good mood. Sure.

Billy purses his lips. Sounds the words out long and slow, because Neil isn't stupid, but he's never been smart either. He's a security guard for fuck's sake.

Later, Billy will wonder why his first instinct wasn't to just walk it all back. Pretend he never said a damn thing.

“I'm gay, pops. You raised a real winner with me. Got just what you asked the stork for—”

Neil shoves him again, but it's not so hard as before.

This is new. Dangerous in its unpredictability. He has no idea what's going on in his dad's head.

Billy holds his breath until he can't. It gusts out all at once, rustling his dad's resolve. Neil blinks and lets him go.

He settles back on his own two feet, every joint and nerve hurting in tandem. He tries not to wince as he cradles his ribs. Something's broken, somewhere. It hurts to breathe. The sound of it whistles inside his head.

“Get out.”

Billy huffs, because—

“Don't make me repeat myself,” Neil says. “I told myself after the war I wouldn't, not again. And looking at you now, boy, I don't know what I'll do.”

Everything hurts too much. He can't concentrate on what Neil's saying. Told himself he wouldn't do what again? Neil *never* talked about Vietnam. He can't grasp it. The meaning. The way Neil hasn't run his own voice raw shouting the words down at him. Can't see that great past the blood in his eyes. Can't feel anything but blinding white *everywhere*.

But his blood is still pumping. His legs are still working, somehow. He's still alive.

It's raining.

It's getting dark.

He hasn't even got his shoes on. Or socks.

He looks over to his nightstand where his keys are—but they're missing. He blinks, skating across the bed, the mess on the floor.

He moves too fast. Moves wrong. He gasps, needing to brace himself on the wall to avoid falling to his knees from the wave of nausea pummeling through him. Definitely a rib.

Neil takes a step back. Fists the doorknob. He stares Billy down before looking beyond him. Somewhere over his ear.

“I'm going to go get a pack of cigarettes. If you're not gone when I get back, there'll be hell to pay.”

Billy can only stand there, hunched.

“Am I understood?”

Billy grunts an affirmative. He can't stomach the usual words he has to force out every time Neil leaves him be.

Thankfully, he doesn't push it. He swings the door open and leaves like nothing even happened.

Billy moves.

He drops to the floor, ribs be damned. He pushes things aside he doesn't need, tosses what he might on his bed. Underwear, clothes, homework. Someone's shoving his shoes at him and it's Max—impossibly small Maxine with her small white face and her big blue eyes, lighter than he's ever seen them.

She goes to his closet after he takes the shoes to shove them on—gets his go-bag out, and his suitcase that's been collecting dust since they moved to Hawkins, and gets to packing whatever she can reach.

He finds his meds.

She doesn't ask questions.

She does find his keys.

-

The quarry is biting cold even through the multiple layers he swaddled himself in after ditching his house.

Or, not his. Not anymore.

If it wasn't for Maxine, he wouldn't have his favorite leather jacket and zip up, or his one decent pair of boots. He grabbed random shit. Maxine had the clarity of mind to go for things that would keep him warm, sane. She went for socks when he was slapping around for his pack of cigs.

He's down to two cigarettes.

It's fucking cold and Indiana is as shitty as it's ever been, in this single moment. Billy kicks his legs where they dangle over the cliff's edge, the water far below an ink stain in a larger blot. The wind whines through the trees and skates over the centuries-worth of old rock.

He wonders what shut this place down. Since he's been in Hawkins, it's never been used. It's

always been the place the cool kids go. Then when he was old enough, the place he would dance and get drunk and make out with girls two grades above him.

He's not far from where he drove down to meet Steve. He can see it a few dozen feet below him, a ridge they sometimes met up at when they each needed to get away. To blow off steam. To just shoot the shit without anyone overhearing or getting in their way, to tell them to stop drinking or stop smoking or stop being.

Sometimes he wants to wonder what would have happened if Steve never called the chief that day. If he'd just let Billy lay low for a few days and recover like he always did on his own. It wasn't that bad back then. It was only bad because Steve saw it for what it was, all because Billy had the stupid determination not to let Steve down on his birthday.

Hell of a sweet sixteen.

He fucked up.

He made a mistake.

He never should have left. Or at least, never should have come back so mean. Cruel down to the marrow.

I look at you sometimes and I see him. That's not your fault, honey. I'm so sorry.

His eyes sting. From the haphazard way he scrubbed at the crusting blood over his brow or the fresh tears the recent memory of his mother's words brings he's not sure.

California turned to shit like everything else in his life. He's still not sure why he's surprised by that. Everything he touches turns sour. Rots through his fingers.

His old friends. His mom. Maxine. Steve.

He takes a long, burning drag, shuts his eyes.

The rain is a drizzle now, barely anything as it patters along his hood, slowly soaking through the cotton. He tries not to count each wet dot as his jeans go from light to dark.

He takes another drag. Opens his eyes and looks back down. Gravity plays war with his gut as his vision doubles for an instant.

He decides, no. Maxine finds her way to the quarry often enough. He doesn't want her to see that.

-

He stops and buys a six pack of beer. Must look some kind of way because he doesn't even get asked for the fake ID he keeps on hand.

He drives in circles for a little while.

Lands on the high school parking lot, because he likes his usual spot. It didn't matter when it was already so late, but. He was always able to see the beamer parked just across from him.

The lot is empty. It's raining a little more in earnest now. He parks but leaves the wipers going. The sound is almost soothing.

He drinks his way through three and a half beers, thinking about keeping his breathing soft.

Thinking about Steve. About the first time they ever kissed. The last time, too.

He thinks about his own stupid heart. Wishes it never belonged to him. Wishes Steve had never been dumb enough to say yes to his game.

He imagines what it would have been like to kiss Steve, to keep kissing him. To be allowed that. Imagines how it would have felt to have Steve *want* that. To want *him*. What it would feel like to sit and watch a movie in his living room and hold hands. To eat out after. To go back to Steve's house and fall asleep together.

He thinks of the smell of Steve's sheets. That easy comfort. The early morning light falling along his mole-dotted skin.

He uncaps the bottle of pills and finishes his fourth beer.

-

Cold. A drag. Leather.

"Come on. Come on."

His head falls the other way. More leather. It's sticky against his cheek.

His wrist is cold. He grabs at his sleeve. Someone takes his arm and sets it back in his lap.

"Wake up. Come on, what did you take? What are these for, huh? How many were in here?"

Fingers along his face, his neck. Poking him. He groans, but no sound reaches his ears. He tries again, his voice is a scrape.

More poking, he turns away. Again, more pressure.

"Your pulse isn't..." His face is tilted back, more aggressively. Sudden. A sound of a smack.

He tries to touch his cheek. It hurts in a distant way. "Th'fuck?"

"There he is," comes a voice he can't place.

Around it, behind it—echoing it maybe—is the rain. It's pouring. That's water on his wrist. On his leg. His cheek, his neck.

A weight across his lap. He blinks, or tries to. One eyelid flutters while the other stays glued shut. Who glued his goddamn eye?

A rattle. A plastic cap being ripped off. He didn't like to leave that stuff just lying around. The pressure leaves him. He turns toward it, curious.

"Please don't tell me it was the whole bottle?" the voice asks, and it's swimmy. Glances off him and bounces around his head like his thoughts have been all night. "Come on. Billy? Can you hear what I'm saying? No, no, don't close your eyes. Keep them open."

He tries. When had the other one closed?

"Can't."

It's what he tries to say. It doesn't sound like the word he means.

Light pierces his brain. He grimaces, head lolling back.

A hand yanks him right back. Fingers pry open his eyelids one at a time.

It's Wheeler.

He laughs. It sounds like a gurgle.

Then his throat tastes sour and bubbly and he's coughing. Wheeler swears, which might be the first time in her life for all he knows.

He can't catch his breath.

Hears Wheeler staunchly state, "Sorry," before shoving her fingers down his throat.

Then he's bent in half and retching for what feels like hours. Still, her fingers press. Her nails scratch him raw.

The whole time, her other hand stays on his back, constant between his shoulder blades.

Pills and beer and that morning's breakfast all come up fast.

He paws at her elbow, gets her hand drawing back. She flicks her hand off to the side out of view, her other hand ever present.

He keeps his eyes shut when she lets out a little sound of surprise at the mess between their shoes.

"That's a lot of pills."

"Uh-huh."

"You with me?"

"Sure."

"You need the hospital."

He shakes his head. Already the fog is clearing. Everything is patchy. His cheek still stings from where she slapped him. He swallowed three month's worth.

He can't even get this right.

He doesn't need the hospital. He needs the quarry. Maxine will just have to deal with a life full of trauma. Boo fucking hoo.

"Billy," comes Wheeler's voice, soft but firm. "Can you walk?"

He can't take her softness anymore. The touch of her hand feels too heavy.

"Sure I fucking can," he slurs, barely understandable.

"Then prove it." Her hand only presses harder, is joined by another at his waist.

He wants to pull away, to push her away, to run, to get back in his car and do a doughnut as he drives off into the night. He doesn't want to be walked to Wheeler's princess-mobile station wagon, one of his shoes covered in his own bile, having to be held because his legs just don't seem to want to work right.

Her car is parked at an awkward angle. One door wide open.

Some of his things are on the ground. Wheeler toes them out of the way, indelicate and stubborn about it as she shoulders him to the station wagon's passenger seat. He at least tries to help her get the door open.

She unceremoniously dumps him there, out of breath enough for him to be offended. He lifts his legs up to readjust himself in the seat, and his fucking eyes squeeze out a tear or two because he can't even manage that. Wheeler takes pity on him and moves his legs one at a time, thigh first.

"Don't move," she tells him after she's buckled him in. She shuts the door and shields her eyes from the rain as she jogs back to his car.

And she starts tidying up. Getting his things inside. The beer bottles, his book bag, a few books, the box Maxine had tossed him from his vanity. His mother's jewelry, the few things of makeup he kept hidden from Neil, his weed and spare cash and his—his fucking journal.

Dr. Toll's journal.

Wheeler's got her prissy little hands on his most vile secrets and she—she places it in his car like all the rest. She makes sure to lock it and shut the door and then she's back and handing his keys over.

"We can come back and get it later, okay?"

He doesn't even acknowledge it. He knows nobody's looking for him. Neil isn't going to come after him after what Billy confessed to tonight.

"Time's it?"

"Oh, it's..." As she gets herself situated, she checks the rear view mirror and hits the gearshift, backing up at a speed that has his nerves jumping as much as his unsettled stomach. "It's just a little past one in the morning. I'm never usually out this late," she admits, turning sharply onto the main road. "I'm practicing to get my license and it's just easier at night, you know?"

She merges into the left lane and doesn't signal before snapping on the turn. Billy wonders if he failed at offing himself only to die by Wheeler's hand.

It would fucking figure.

Then he recognizes the street they're on. And where it goes.

"No hospital."

"You need—"

"No fuckin' doctor—"

"Nope." Her hand shoots out and fists in his zip up. She holds on even with her eyes on the road. "You're in my car. You're going to follow my rules. And rule number one is I take you to the hospital and you don't complain."

He sits up and Wheeler presses him right back into the seat. She holds up a finger.

"Stay. It's good you got the pills up, but you need a doctor, Billy."

"No fucking—"

“Why?” she asks him suddenly. The hospital looms in the distance, not particularly big, but tall enough with its shining red neon sign for the ER blazing in the darkness. “Because you don’t want anyone to find out your dad did that to you?”

He whips around. It still feels slow, sluggish. Everything feels like he’s trudging waist-deep through mud.

She glances at him, her mouth all pursed and frowny.

His anger then is slow, drudgy. “Steve better not’ve—”

“He didn’t.” It’s all she says as she pulls into the ER parking lot. She finds a spot right up front. Inside he can see two people, one of them staff. She turns her key and the station wagon goes quiet. “I figured it out on my own.”

And what is there to say to that?

He didn’t think anyone ever paid him so much attention.

“Why d’you care?”

She grips the steering wheel at ten and two and frowns out the windshield.

“It’s not that I don’t, but,” she pauses. “Steve does.”

And then she’s opening the door and rounding the other side to help Billy out.

-

He doesn’t meet the receptionist’s eye. He doesn’t meet the nurse’s, or the doctor’s when he and Wheeler are ushered back to an exam room. They’re either lax on rules or think they’re a thing because nobody pesters Wheeler to leave.

Why she isn’t just up and taking off, he can’t figure. But it hardly matters anyway.

She’s dutiful and silent as they ask him questions. She answers for him when his mouth doesn’t want to cooperate with his tongue. It’s only a few questions between the front desk and the exam room before he’s given an IV and a host of monitoring equipment. He has to breathe into a stupid mechanism that whirs every few minutes. It hurts.

“Keep doing it,” she orders. He does, but only because she keeps pushing the damn thing at his mouth.

They give him something. To counteract what he took and then, later, for the pain. He dozes. He dreams. He wakes now and again between the doctor and a rotating carousel of nurses. They ask him things, take X-rays, ask him more.

They ask him why he’s so hurt.

Wheeler fends that one off a little too well for him to be comfortable.

They ask him why he tried to OD.

Wheeler doesn’t have an answer for that.

He can’t give them one either.

-

Billy wakes up in a different room where dawn light creeps through the drawn blinds. He glances around, feeling much less like a balloon with rubber lips and more like himself with a hell of a headache. A look up tells him he's on what must be his second bag of saline.

He spies Wheeler in the hall from his cracked door. She's on the phone with someone. She's got the wire curled around her fingers.

-

He's drinking from the cup of water at the hospital table when Wheeler returns. She moves to help him but stops when he glares at her.

After rolling her eyes, she says, "They said you have three broken ribs. The rest is all surface level mostly. They stitched up your eyelid and cheek."

So that's why he was bleeding so much.

"They said for broken ribs to heal, there's really nothing—"

"Yeah, yeah, Wheeler. I know. Nothing for it. I've had worse."

It's a reflex. *You should see the other guy* usually came next. But she knows. She knows because she figured it out on her own.

"I know what I'm dealing with," he adds. Because he fucking *feels* bad. "You can head out, go back to whatever it is Nancy Wheeler has to do on..." The clock reads past eight. Fuck. "Wait, why aren't you at school?"

She looks at him like he's stupid. She gestures at the room at large.

"I'm not going to just leave you here like this."

"Aren't your parents gonna flip when they realize you never came home?"

"Oh. I just told them I stayed over at Barb's for the night."

"Ballsy, princess."

Her lips tilt up. She looks almost bashful. "They really don't care what I get up to, honestly."

They lapse into silence. Billy feels awkward. He's vulnerable, at the mercy of his...his *whatever's* girlfriend. Steve hasn't even seen him this messed up for this long.

He's certainly never had to stick his fingers down Billy's throat.

Billy winces remembering it. "Sorry about your hand. For, you know."

"It just kind of happened." A strained smile. "I almost didn't pull over, but you were half out of your car. You were kind of freaking out. Throwing all your things around."

He doesn't remember any of that.

"I don't remember that."

“One of the nurses said that might happen. They, uh. Also wanted to call the police and report it since you’re underage.”

He tenses up, the pain in his ribs going sharp even through the pain meds.

“I said I would call. I haven’t,” she says, “yet. You should do it.”

“The last thing I’m doing is calling the police.”

“Billy, they can help you. The chief, Hopper. He’s—”

“No. No fucking way!” He slaps his hand down, sending the water everywhere.

He curses and grabs the hospital sheet to try and sponge at it. He tears up again, because he’s useless and angry, and all for *what?*

“No,” he repeats, empty. “No pigs.”

“Hopper is *good*. He—”

“Wheeler,” he bites out. He knows Hopper is a good guy. That’s why it’s a shit idea. It makes everything so much harder. “Stop talking about shit you know nothing about.”

She does, but barely.

-

It’s not too much longer—helped along by Billy’s stubborn refusal to report his injuries or talk much past saying he wanted to get going—before he’s discharged.

He’s still slightly off his feet, but he’s able to get into the car by himself.

He expects Wheeler to go straight to school. To dump his ass off at the camaro and head to class.

Instead, she pulls through McDonald’s and orders them both breakfast. She shoves an orange juice his way and sips at a Coke as she drives, janky and edging too far to the right of every lane.

“Where we headed, Knight Rider?”

“I’m taking you somewhere safe.”

“Safe? Safest place is my car right now.”

She hums and keeps driving.

Billy nurses his fries, too focused on how wonderful the salt tastes to realize when exactly she turns into Loch Nora.

“Wheeler.”

“It’s better than your dad’s house.”

Yeah, but barely. Steve’s house is the second worst place she could take him, really. But how can he explain that?

“Me and Harrington aren’t friends, Wheeler. What, you expect him to just let me crash on his couch?”

“I know you two had a fight. A few of them.” She sends a stern glance his way. “I don’t know the whole story of what happened between you two. But before we broke up it was like all he could talk about was you. He misses you. I think you both need to sit down and talk things out.”

His brain skips. “You broke up?”

“It wasn’t my finest moment.”

“You broke up with *him*?”

She sighs. “It was the party a while back. You were there. Of course, I’m mad at him. I’m mad at myself. I...it’s complicated, a lot of moving parts. Stuff that doesn’t really matter right now.”

“He won’t be there,” he says, thinking back to the moments in the halls and the cafeteria when Wheeler was missing in action. How the hell did he miss that? “He’ll be at school.”

She slows as they approach the Harrington household, huge and imposing on its individual drive in.

The beamer is parked out front.

“He knows you’re coming.” Then Wheeler just says, like it’s nothing, “Steve never really looked at me the way he looks at you. Or maybe it was just too much when he did.”

It can’t be what it sounds like. Paying attention to bruises and cuts was one thing, but this? She couldn’t. She *can’t*.

She parks in front of Steve’s house.

She catches sight of the glare he has trained on her. “I’m not your enemy, Billy.”

After everything that’s happened in the last twenty-four hours, it’s too much. Too much to process.

The knock on the window catches him off guard, has him gasping in pain as he turns and sees Steve, smiling a little warily at them both. His worst nightmare come true, given recent events.

Then his eyes land on Billy’s face and Billy knows he’s in for it.

“And neither is he,” Wheeler says softly just as Steve opens Billy’s door.

Those deep brown eyes roam over his face, the bruising, the stitches, the swelling.

“Jesus, dude. I only have so many bags of frozen peas.”

-

Billy’s wasting time on the second floor landing. He left under the pretense of going to clean up in the bathroom, but he’s listening in on Steve and Wheeler hashing it out in the kitchen.

“I can’t picture him being nice through all the hospital stuff. He wasn’t too much of a jerk to you, was he?”

“I handled it. He’s just scared I think.”

There’s a scoff. “Billy doesn’t *do* scared.”

“Steve.”

There’s the sound of movement, some hushed exchange he can’t hear. He strains to keep his breathing as quiet as possible to get a picture of what he can’t see.

“I just don’t get why he would *do* that. He’s never been—he’s never done something like that, Nance. Was it really the whole bottle?”

There’s no reply.

Then Steve’s groaning. “God. What the fuck. What the *fuck*. Nance, you—you saved him, you know that?”

“You would have done the same thing.”

“I don’t know if I would have.”

It hurts. Makes his breath catch. He feels sick.

But he gets it. It’s no less than he deserves.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself,” Wheeler says. “I don’t even like the guy and I can clearly see he needs a friend. He needs you. You need him too. You’ve been so...so *mean* since he came back. Like you’re playing into the fanfare of *King Steve*. You weren’t that guy when we started going steady. *That* Steve would have stopped, no questions asked.”

“Nance...”

“I don’t really get it, and I know we aren’t on the best terms right now...but this is serious, Steve. You didn’t see how he was when I found him.”

“...How was he?”

“He was sobbing. Throwing things in the air. Shouting. It wasn’t until I got close enough I realized how hurt he was. He just kept begging me not to call the police, then he passed out. That’s when I saw the empty bottles.”

Billy doesn’t remember any of that. He thought people swallowed their poison and passed the fuck out, forever. It would figure he’d embarrass himself and freak the fuck out before kicking the bucket.

He should have just gone to the goddamn quarry.

There’s more movement, and then Wheeler walks into view. She’s heading for the entry, Steve hot on her heels.

Billy steps out of sight, leaning back against the wall.

“Just help him. You’ve been miserable and moody for months, and he’s at rock bottom. Fix your friendship.”

“I...” a big sigh. “I don’t know how.”

Billy bites his tongue. Swallows down the surge of hope that flutters through him. That Steve might want to fix things. That maybe whatever threads of friendship Billy tried to burn away aren’t ash like he thought.

“Talk to him. Make him listen. He’s not as tough as he thinks he is.”

“You don’t think anyone’s as tough as they think they are.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Maybe I am.”

“You’re not happy, Steve. You haven’t been for a while. We weren’t happy together. I didn’t know how to fix that.”

“We could have tried.”

“We’d been trying. It didn’t happen like you and your friends think it did.”

“I know that.” Then, less biting, “Sorry. Sorry, I. Shit, I’m sorry. I know.”

“Oh, Steve.”

“No, no. I’m fine. Or, I will be. I guess.”

“You know it’s okay if you...What Tommy said. If you’re, you know—”

“Stop. Just please stop.”

The door creaks open after a few long moments. The same creak it’s had for years.

“Hey, Nancy?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. And I am, you know. Sorry. For everything.”

“I know, Steve.”

The door shuts and Billy doesn’t hear Steve move again for a long time.

He bites his own bitterness away and goes to finally shower.

-

When Billy cracks the door open to the hall, he sees a fresh change of clothes folded neatly at his feet. His heart flips painfully. He takes them and changes again, glad to be rid of his bloodied clothing.

When he pads downstairs, Steve’s missing in action. He’s too winded from maneuvering to get himself clean in the shower and doing the stairs twice so he just figures Steve went to school and left Billy to his own devices.

He sets himself on the couch, determined to steal an hour or two of shuteye before he makes the trek to the high school to get his car. He’ll be gone and out of Steve’s hair before he even realizes he’s gone.

Then he can figure out what the hell he’s going to do.

-

Billy jerks awake.

“Sorry! Sorry, I was trying not to wake you. Just go back to sleep, man.”

He looks around, sight bleary and head pounding.

Steve’s leaving the kitchen with a sandwich and a drink in hand, looking guilty.

He gestures at the coffee table.

“Your car’s in the drive, by the way. I know how you worry about it.”

Sure enough, his car keys are laying on the coffee table a foot away from him.

He won’t have to walk all that way.

He won’t have to hurt so much getting it done.

“Oh, hey, uh. What are you doing? You should be resting.”

Billy’s on his feet, keys in hand, by the time Steve’s got his lunch somewhere on a flat surface. He needs to see it. See the mess he made. Needs to know if he ruined the interior. If he’ll have to get her cleaned before taking off.

Steve doesn’t exactly do much to stop him from opening the door, even though he’s developed a bit of a wince and wheeze with every step he takes. Now that he’s showered and gotten a few hours of sleep in, his body is waking up to the hell it’s been through the last day or so. If he stops now, he won’t be able to keep going. It’ll hurt too much.

The camaro is shining blue outside in the morning sun in the Harrington driveway. The beamer’s been moved to the street, which isn’t something Steve had to bother doing. He’ll just have to move it back when Billy leaves.

He walks out, barefoot, ignoring Steve’s complaints behind him as he goes.

He braces himself for the damage.

He shields his eyes and peers through the window. Bites his tongue, expecting the worst.

It’s pristine.

He can’t get the door open fast enough.

The beer and pill bottles are missing. His school bag is on the floor of the passenger seat and he can tell by the bulge that his books were placed back inside. He leans down in spite of his broken ribs and sees the ashtray’s been cleaned out.

The backseat is the same.

There’s not a single piece of trash anywhere. Zero evidence of the havoc he wreaked the night before while he was barely conscious enough to do it.

Steve approaches him, hands on his hips with a wary expression across his face.

“I went through the car wash on third, if that’s okay. You know, the place with that big fake dinosaur outside, with the weird eyes? They have those self-serve vacuums and everything. I

figured it'd be better than coming back to...you know. She drives smooth."

Billy takes a closer look. There's not a speck of dust on the leather seats. The carpeted flooring is spotless. The wheel and dash glitter in the light. Now that he's looking for it, when he inhales he smells a faint trace of lemon.

When Billy straightens and turns to meet Steve's eyes, the wariness is tenfold. He starts fidgeting in a way Billy hasn't seen him fidget in months.

He hasn't let himself watch. And maybe Steve hasn't let his guard down enough in Billy's presence.

He misses him, right then. So fucking badly.

"I'm sorry. I know you're really picky about your car and who drives and all that. I promise I took every corner slow and double checked every blind spot--"

He's been so goddamn *stupid*.

Billy pulls Steve into his arms. Buries his face in his shoulder. Hears the surprise breeze out of Steve before his arms come up gingerly around Billy's middle, carefully avoiding his ribs.

"I'm sorry, Steve. I'm so fucking sorry."

He can't stop saying it. Over and over and over again. Runs the words into the ground he says them so much, and all the while Steve just holds him.

He hugs Steve so hard it hurts, but that's probably all him.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter content warning for: Neil beats Billy off screen in front of Max, Neil tosses Max out of Billy's room, failed suicide attempt where Billy takes three months of his prescribed pills and it does not work, ER visit, puking.

part xii: burn

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the years of love for this story borne of a little prompt. c:

I'll go back and add chapter content warnings later today.

My next projects are Harringrove week, the Steve Harrington bingo, and the Steddie big bang, THEN the rest of my shorter wips before I continue my season 4 time travel fic, and get into two big new harringrove fics. I'm also working on a WWII romance and harringrove fic which I am SO excited for.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Steve orders food and that afternoon, over far too many cartons of Chinese takeout on the kitchen island, he lays out five ground rules.

One, Billy doesn't go back to Neil's house. Easy. The stipulation is that Steve be allowed to go and get the rest of Billy's stuff at some point. Not so easy, but Billy is in no place to argue.

Two, he keeps Steve in the know about Max to keep her safe. That one's easy too. The only bad thing about leaving Neil's house is that his worst fears might come true. Max might be next on his father's radar.

Three, Billy keeps taking his meds, but Steve wants to dole them out. Wants to keep them in the kitchen where he can monitor them or some shit. Fine. As if it wasn't already embarrassing enough not succeeding in dying. He's already decided he's not going to try it again. With his luck, Wheeler would just find him again and they'd both have to do the same song and dance; fingers down throat, et cetera.

Life goes forward, or whatever.

Four, Steve wants to see the damage Billy's wearing when they're done eating. Not so easy. But inevitable, nevertheless. If Steve wants to play caretaker after the shit Billy's put him through, then he'll allow it. He owes Steve that and a hundred more simple, annoying, endlessly frustrating things. He'll be owing Steve the rest of his goddamn life.

And five, and the most ridiculous request in Billy's opinion, he has to practice positivity. Something about Steve's mom doing it when she went in and out of her little *retreats* across the world when tagging after her husband and keeping an eye peeled when his extramarital flings got to be a tad too much.

Billy has to look in a fucking mirror and tell himself he's worth it. That life is worth it.

Yeah, sure.

"I mean it, Billy." Steve chews and chews beneath a steady, unwavering stare. Unnerving, when he wants to be; that's Steve's specialty. Billy's seen him happy, giddy, on top of the world. He's seen him furious. He's seen him sobbing, beat blood-red. He's seen him hurt. He's seen him come. Nothing quite unsettles him so much as the way he looks now. Yeah, he fucking means it. "This

year has been awful. Just god-awful. I'm sick of it. Sick of the fighting and arguing. The never knowing where I stand with you. When Nancy called this morning I thought it was another nightmare. I have them all the time. You remember, how... Well."

He does. How can he ever forget? The countless nights he scaled the side of Steve's house to sneak through his window, crawl under the plaid covers and pretend the shared warmth didn't melt him to the marrow? The easy way Steve settled once he woke up shaking and saw Billy beside him.

It had been safe.

He always thought that once, he'd meant the same for Steve.

"They've been worse than ever. And I think given what happened the last time we were both in this kitchen, you can appreciate my honesty when I say I know it's your fault. The dreams, I mean."

Billy deserves it. Doesn't mean it still doesn't sting.

He takes the words for what they are. A punch hidden beneath an ocean-smooth voice, hardly a waver save for one. And he's not really sure what Steve means there.

Steve doesn't know where he stands? Steve is everything, and even with all the things that he is, Billy dares to want for more. He's a selfish fool.

"You were like my brother, man," Billy mutters, because those are the impossible words he's chosen to describe years of the most important person in his life.

He winces, looks away. Looks back up again, into that impermeable stare.

Steve chews and chews. "Brothers don't do the shit we've done."

And there it is. Out in the open, like it's so simple.

Billy swallows on a clump of noodles only half-chewed. It pinches on the way down. He can still feel the ghost of manicured nails scraping the back of his throat. The lurch of Steve's weight leaning toward him on the couch.

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want the truth. Everything. After last night—after what you did." He shakes his head and drops his fork back in a carton. "I'm *tired*, Billy. I'm so fucking tired, all the time. Aren't you tired?"

"I—I don't know—"

"You don't know if you're tired?" Steve lets out a harsh laugh. A harp string snapped. "Christ, Billy. You almost *die*, and you can't even—"

"I don't know how to tell you what I—*How* I feel," he cuts in, because what he can't handle right now is Steve's anger. He's earned maybe that much. Just for a little bit. "I don't even know the first thing."

It's a mistake keeping such a tight watch on him, because Billy sees the moment the anger drains away, leaving behind a sad little crumple in its wake.

"But it's me. Billy, it's just me. We...we used to tell each other everything."

He has to laugh at that, miserable and sodden as it is. "Not everything, Steve." He taps his own

fork on the counter, letting it drop too. “You couldn’t handle everything.”

“When Nance asked me if she could bring you here, I didn’t hesitate. I said yes. After everything you’ve done to me, all the shit we’ve traded between us? You think I can’t handle tough? Try me.”

“This is a little more than *tough*.”

“And? Is it worse than having to piece together my best friend getting beat by his own dad over years spent waiting for him to just tell me what was going on? Only for you to pour out in a bloody puddle at my feet? Is it worse than disappearing for months and coming back a total fucking asshole? Than being beat up again and again for *no good reason*? Is it worse than—than having to find out he almost died from someone else? That I wasn’t even there to—”

Steve’s voice goes thick, chokes off. He sniffs but doesn’t move those shining eyes from Billy’s face.

“You’re a fucking asshole and the only person who actually knows me enough to break my goddamn heart so bad that it makes the idea of not waking up in the morning sound pretty good. So yeah, Hargrove, I can fucking *do* tough.”

Billy feels that awful pinch again and it’s not from the food this time. Feels the heat of tears on his jaw before he can catch them in time to keep them from falling. If he’s made Steve feel one fraction of how he felt last night then he’s more rotten and unforgivable than he thought.

“You really know how to hurt a guy, Harrington,” Billy says weakly.

“Likewise.”

He can only snort at that.

Steve wipes at his left eye, roughly sweeping the back of his hand across his cheek.

“Tell me.”

“Fuck you,” Billy tells him, the words like hot lead at the pit of his stomach.

“Fuck *you*. Tell me.”

“Steve.”

“Fuck you.”

“Ste—”

“Fuck,” Steve says, never moving, never raising his voice, “you.”

Billy shakes his head. “You’re something.”

“And you’re fucked.”

“Great.”

Steve rolls his eyes. Picks at the noodles until he finds a decent one and flings it at Billy across the island. “Fine. I’ll go first since you’re being shy.”

Billy huffs again. He doesn’t even get what Steve’s doing, is the thing. He could sit back and

accept Billy's agreement to follow his rules like anyone else would have. Whatever he's pushing for, Billy doesn't understand.

"Tommy started a neat little rumor about me. Half the school thinks I'm gay since Nancy and I broke up."

"Huh?" It's a total flip. "What? When?"

"When you skipped. We got into it. Again," he adds and has the grace to look a little guilty about it. Billy thinks that's bullshit, that Tommy gets what's coming to him any day of the week.

"Started in on me about moping over you. Said it was. Well. He said a lot of stupid shit."

"No, tell me. What'd the prick say?"

Steve's still watching him, eyes redder than when they started this conversation. But there's something else there too. Waiting to see what Billy does maybe. Likely to see if he flips out again. Gives Steve a reason to kick him out.

Billy almost flinches at the idea. He knows Steve wouldn't...not after how he hugged him back. No. No, that was real.

Steve crosses his arms and asks, "Does it matter?"

"Why wouldn't it? You don't let dumb shit like that go. Word like that kills in a hick town like Hawkins."

"Because we've used it on others, right? We know the damage it can do."

He does flinch then. "Fuck that. That was stupid shit-talk. Bullshit you say whenever about whatever."

Something odd and a little forlorn passes over Steve's face. "It was more me than you."

He doesn't have a reply to that. Steve's not wrong.

"Tommy's got a big fucking mouth. Somebody needs to stuff a sock in it or something."

Steve's fingers tap at his bicep, anxiety making itself known. "But what if he's not...totally wrong?"

Another trill of laughter bubbles out of him. The idea is a nonstarter. "Steve, you're not *gay*."

Like that hasn't been a recurring thought for years for Billy. The number one reminder that no matter how much practice they do, for whatever bored and baseless reason Steve agrees to do it, it doesn't mean he's into guys. Into Billy.

They aren't the same.

"No. No, I." More erratic tapping, shifting eyes. Finally, like he can breathe again, those eyes are off him. "Girls and. I *do* like girls, a *lot* and—ugh. I think I maybe also want to—ugh, *jesus*. This is coming out all wrong."

He can see the struggle happen in real time. Steve's resolve has shaken apart into so many pieces. He's barely meeting Billy's eyes now, and it strikes him as anything but dishonest, untrue, not real.

This is real, Billy realizes. Hits him all at once. Steve's not fucking with him.

“I like both,” Steve finally settles on. Punctuates his statement with a tiny shrug.

No biggie.

“You like both,” Billy echoes.

The words ring in his ears. Both. Steve likes...both.

“Yeah. Girls and guys. Both. It’s a, uh...recent revelation. Kind of freaked me out if I’m being honest.”

“No shit.” Billy feels hollowed out, the sharp edge of a shovel sticking in between his ribs. “Maybe I just finally hit you one too many times.”

Steve huffs this time. “Yeah, trust me. I thought about that. Didn’t even know that was a thing people could do, you know? Like both? Wild.”

He looks far away just then, lost in a memory or maybe just enjoying the fact Billy hasn't jumped him for the confession.

“How’d you figure it out?”

“A friend.”

Billy waits for more of an explanation. When Steve doesn’t elaborate, he pries. “Which friend?”

“You keeping tabs?”

“Maybe I’m curious. Was it somebody we ever...you know. Bullshitted.”

Steve gives him a look that says maybe they *did*, and Billy feels more shit piled on all the rest.

“Someone I owe an apology to,” Steve mutters. He sighs heavily. “But yeah. I like both. Go me, I guess.”

Billy feels sick. Shaky. Unraveled from just three words.

“I—I need some air.” He stands on wobbling knees. He hopes Steve can’t tell.

It feels like years before he makes it out to Steve’s backyard. Serene, chilly, encroached on by trees that desperately need a trim before the next big storm. Branches will snap and fall with a thunder that will shake the house, keep Steve up all night for days. It’s happened before.

Cigarette smoke reaches his nose before long. He doesn’t move when he hears Steve flick a lighter shut, as his sneakers sketch against the pavement, when his knees pop as he sits beside Billy in front of the pool. Only he’s chosen to sit on the cement where Billy’s chosen the less freezing option of the pool lounge.

Steve scoots forward, breathes out smoke before turning and looking up at Billy with something less heavy in his eyes.

Billy almost thanks him for it, settles for just wordlessly accepting the cigarette like someone normal and not someone halfway decimated by the boy beside him.

“I’m sorry,” Steve blurts. “You literally just got back from the hospital and so much has happened. That was probably way too much—”

“I’m gay,” Billy whispers, and hates that it comes out one. He wants to shout it, throw a fist behind it because he knows that’s what’s on the other end for him once the words are out.

But all that happens is Billy takes another puff, remembers what Steve just told him. Lets Steve’s trust drown out his anxious thoughts.

A wrinkle appears between Steve’s eyebrows before it smooths over. He smiles, soft and small and so sweet.

Will it be enough? It’s not everything, not even close. Billy doesn’t have the strength for that. Not today.

But maybe one day.

Steve holds his hand out, index and middle fingers poised like he’s in some commercial while he waits for Billy to hand him back the smoke. Billy carefully places it in the crux and watches, transfixed, as Steve inhales and exhales all without turning away.

“Want to go rent a movie?”

And Billy shakes, and maybe lets another tear or two slide free. Says, “Sure.”

“Cool. But before we go, let me take a look at you. Maybe get some Icy Hot when we’re out.”

He keeps talking as he and Billy trade the cigarette back and forth. The fuzzy warmth of the nicotine and the soothing sound of Steve’s voice settle his nerves, nearly melt him down entirely.

-

Steve hasn’t said anything for several long, tense minutes.

Billy exhales, feels the sharp jab as his ribs expand. Steve’s frown tightens at the corners as he takes it in.

He knows what he looks like. He’s seen it a hundred times before. Maybe it hurts so bad this time because Wheeler had to watch him get picked over by the vultures in the ER. Maybe it’s because he promised himself—after dragging his ass into his car to leave Neil’s house as ordered—that it would be the last time. Maybe it’s because he doesn’t really believe his own convictions.

Maybe it just hurts because the pain Billy feels is reflected so clearly back at him as Steve can’t seem to decide where to settle his flickering gaze.

Neil uses his fists, his feet, his belt, his hatred. He uses furniture and lighters when he’s feeling particularly creative. This isn’t the worst it’s ever been. But it’s bad, and Billy doesn’t want Steve looking at him anymore. Doesn’t know why he agreed to do this after a meal, because all he feels like doing now is throwing it all back up.

He starts reaching for his shirt, but Steve shakes his head.

“There’s nothing to do for it.” Billy drops his shirt in the clump it was in on the edge of the sink. The cartons of takeout still need to be thrown away, they’re starting to stink up the kitchen. “It’s just a couple broken ribs. Looks worse than it is. I’ll be fine.”

Steve shakes his head again. Slow. Absent. Hooded eyes drag along the purple mottling on his side, the red blooms of broken capillaries, the way the violent patchwork disappears down his hip

where Billy knows it covers an ass cheek where it met Neil's boot.

“Steve, come on.” He goes for his shirt again and, thankfully, Steve lets him. Billy pulls it on with a grimace, but the hard look on Steve's face is still there when he's done. “Steve—”

Steve goes to his freezer and pulls out a bag of peas and two beers. He holds it out dutifully until Billy takes it, pressing it to the worst of the hurt and nearly whimpers from relief. Steve pops the beer's cap off on the edge of the counter and Billy nearly groans from something else. Something darker, secret and unspent.

Steve takes a quick swig. Holds out the unopened bottle. Billy nods and he pops the second cap off, effortless and pissed off. But Billy knows it's not directed at him.

They drink in silence until Steve shakes his head and says, “I fucking hate him.”

Billy huffs and holds his beer up. “Cheers to that.”

Steve taps their bottles together.

-

There's an unsaid sixth rule, one that's been clinging under Billy's skin before he ever even considered his mom sending him back to California was a possibility. It's been weighing on him, rolling down a hill quickly growing in size the longer he stays in one of Steve's guest rooms.

He has to make a decision what to do about his dad.

He can't go back. He can't for a multitude of reasons, but his latest fault takes the cake. He confessed his deepest secret in a moment of chaotic vulnerability, of immense weakness, of feeling in the moment there was nothing left to lose.

But there is. Now that Steve counts his pills and tells him *good boy* with a stupid, joking smile. Now that he can't think about leaping over the edge of the quarry without picturing Max's heart laid out *splat* beside him.

Neil is an inevitability. Billy can't just move in with Steve and forget his problems. He's not eighteen.

Neil will come to collect, one way or another. Whether that's in keeping tabs on Billy or dragging him back kicking and screaming. It's too much of a risk to leave it where it ended, with Neil threatening to add him to his 'Nam bodycount if he didn't leave.

He can handle himself. He's been dealing with his father for as long as he's been alive. But now there's the added risk of *Steve* .

Readded, really. He was always the biggest risk Billy could take.

If Neil finds out his queer only son is living with a guy...

He can't risk Steve.

He won't.

-

Hopper is an option. To Steve, who brings the chief up once and only once, then left it to stew and

die like the idea deserved. To Max, who pleads with him to tell the cops when he still picks her up and drops her off where she needs to go. He scans her for bruises, for worse. There's none he can see, but her undiminished spirit is the biggest sign Neil hasn't laid his hands on her. Yet.

The inevitability hovers along his skin like electricity, a live wire flopping mad in a rainstorm. It'll happen, it always does. It's just a matter of when.

But he can't. He just can't. The chief is a good guy, sure. Isn't like the pigs rolling around in their own shit back in California. Hopper still thinks his badge means something, and that makes him dangerous. Maybe even more so than Neil.

His mom doesn't want him. Neil is Neil. Hopper is a cop who will do the right thing, act by the book just like he'd done before.

It'll happen like he knows it will. He tells Hopper who will go back to the county who will probably go to the state and then where does that leave him? In a whitebread American household with its little picket fence that will look all too good on paper. They'll take Billy in. They'll play pretend a while. If they are who they seem to be, then yeah, they'll be better than Neil. But they'll get sick of him. Everyone always does. And perfect cookie-cutter families don't frame family photos with kids like Billy in them. He'll get bounced around. If they're just leeching the system for benefits...then Billy's off worse than before, and he'll run. And either turnout could have him as close as down the street from Max or across the goddamn state.

So. No cops.

And Steve won't wait forever.

-

He gives Max a knife. They play hooky for two hours at the old junkyard. He teaches her how to swing it open and closed, how to throw, how to stab, slash, slice. How to lose it and get it back. Makes her knick a finger to know what it feels like to fuck up. She loves it, he can tell.

She doesn't argue with him when he tells her why he's given it to her. Her eyes just go wet and he has to look away when she wipes at them with her raggedy sleeve.

“And don't use it on your nerd friends. Don't show it off. Only use it if you have to.”

She flips him off, kicks at his shin.

He takes her for ice cream. Flirts with the cashier to get a discount because money will be tight until he figures something out.

-

He has an appointment with Dr. Toll in a few days. He's not entirely sure he'll go. What is he supposed to do, tell her the *truth*? He'd be admitted and strapped in white in minutes.

“You good?” Steve asks quietly from his corner of the couch.

He's got mismatched socks on, legs tucked to the side of him, chin cupped in a palm as he leans on the armrest. Billy is sitting ramrod straight at the other end, distracted. They'd been doing homework but got tired, both from the endless problems and the looming end of the school year.

It'll be summer soon. Summer spent living under Steve's roof, pretending he doesn't want him so

bad he feels like he's constantly walking over coals.

Steve doused those embers when he told Billy to get out. And Billy accepted it then like he accepts it now. He won't hurt Steve again. He refuses. But he can't trust himself, no matter how badly he doesn't want to be like that at Steve ever again.

It's bad enough to know that Steve could go for a guy the same he could for a girl. For Billy? It would just confuse things worse than Billy's already confused them.

“Do I seem anything but?”

Steve blinks slow, juts his chin a little toward him. “You've been tapping for like twenty minutes.”

“Oh.” Billy stops bouncing his knee and realizes yeah, he has been. He's jittery with nerves.

“Guess I'm just thinking.”

“About?”

He sighs. “I don't want to do this right now, Harrington.”

Steve just rolls his eyes, good natured about it.

It's been a while since he came out to Steve. Since Steve came out to him. Technically. He supposes it counts. Right? He doesn't like the term. Coming out. Of what? The closet? The bathroom? The fucking glory hole he's heard rumors about in the end stall at The Hideaway?

So far, it's been fine. Might even go so far to say it's been good. They've not plucked each other's eyes out yet, but there's a buzzing under his skin like there usually tends to be. And it's been building.

His fuse has always been short when it comes to Steve. Especially since coming back and seeing little Nancy Wheeler all over him.

Steve's eyes are soft and unguarded. Normal. Like before, maybe. The eyes he looked to when he snuck in through Steve's window, Steve smiling and welcoming him in because it was normal. All so blissfully, typically *normal*.

We used to tell each other everything, he thinks, hearing Steve's voice overlapping the words.

Steve was safe. His safety.

Steve's letting him in. And that's all he's asking for in return.

But why is it still so hard? Like chewing glass.

He bleeds, holding Steve's gaze, and wishes he were someone better.

“I have a thing. A uh, a diagnosis. I mean. For how I...can be.”

Steve just nods, patient. “You mean the therapist you mentioned seeing?”

Billy closes his eyes briefly before looking back at the TV to watch without really focusing on anything. It's some daytime nothing. White noise.

“She said it's called intermittent explosive disorder. Means sometimes I can just...pop. Like a balloon with too much air.”

“Mm.”

“Says it's from like...extended neglect or some shit. From violence during childhood.”

“Oh.”

“Means I can just fucking snap,” he says, snapping lamely to punctuate it, paint the whole picture because he can't stomach turning to see the disgust Steve must have on his face. “And at the smallest shit, too. Not just the big stuff, the things someone should actually be angry about.”

Another little hum sounds off and Billy feels the buzz brighten.

“I feel like...like it's all the time and none of the time. Because it's *always* there. I'm not—I'm not normal. I'm not safe—”

It's startling, how fast the word sticks on the way out. He can't keep his anger under control, and he can't put a stopper on the tears. Ever. What the fuck is wrong with him? If he's not shouting or punching, he's laughing or sobbing.

“I feel like a goddamn rain stick,” he grits out. He sniffs, digging the heels of both palms in his eyes.

There's a snort, loud and short. Then a laugh. Then more.

He grinds his palms in and looks up finally, blearily, to see Steve laughing.

Before Billy can even open his mouth, Steve is shaking his head. “No, no, sorry. Shit, I'm not laughing at you. I just. A rain stick? The things that go all,” he says, miming flipping an invisible tube end over end while he makes a sound akin to a whale.

Billy can't believe him. “Because I—I can't fucking control it. I'm a blubbering mess one minute and the next I'm.” He stops, and chews the inside of his cheek as Steve winds down. “I almost killed you, Steve.”

“Hey, hey.” Steve reaches for him, the laughter gone in a blink. Billy leans away. Steve drops his hand. “Sorry. Well I mean, if you haven't noticed over the last several years, I think I have you beat.”

“What? I'm fucking trying to be serious here. Trying to, I don't know. Be honest or whatever the fuck you asked.”

Steve smiles sidelong at him.

“I don't know. I can't ever sleep. Like, ever. Nightmares come and go more often than Tommy takes to choose who to suck up to next. I have panic attacks at least once a week, and I'm an ugly crier.”

“You—you're not an ugly crier,” Billy says, like that's the most important thing out of any of it. Steve's smile fills out, before mellowing into something soft.

“Shucks, Hargrove.”

“Fuck off.”

The edges of Steve's smile stick around. “Those are what the meds are for though, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you feel like they help?”

And what a weird question to ask. Do they *feel* like they work and not *do they work*.

“Yeah. I mean, I think they have been.”

The smile returns, a sunbeam on the icy misery of Billy's existence.

“That's good! I mean, my mom? She's tried everything under the sun. I know you haven't seen it recently but her medicine cabinet is insane. Literally overflowing. I was thinking I need to start selling the surplus. Make it my new summer job.”

“But she's never around,” Billy says, because she isn't.

“You should see what she flies with.”

And Steve's parents, similar to Neil, haven't ever been a huge topic for them. Billy hasn't picked his brain over them, their relationship. Why they treat Steve like a backup air mattress you only bring out for guests.

Billy's never liked it. He thinks they're fine people, his dad not as mean as Steve seems to think he is, but then Steve's said Neil seemed fine back in the day too.

But then Steve's parents are never around long enough for Billy to get the whole Harrington parental unit experience.

He's simply always appreciated the freedom it allows, not having your folks around. Appreciated having Steve all to himself.

“Have any of them helped her?”

Steve shrugs. “Still batty. Still depressed. I...sometimes I think I'm turning out like her. Can't sleep, and when I do it's so hard sometimes I'm confused when I wake up. Like I don't recognize where I am? And I get sad. Like, you get angry? Like, *angry*. I get *sad*. So fucking sad. It's kind of pathetic actually.”

Billy just breathes. In, out. In, out, out.

“I don't think you're pathetic.”

Steve's throat bobs. “I'm just saying. Medicine is good, great, if it helps. If you want it to help. And to me, it seems like you do. So I think that's good, Billy. Really good. I'm uh. I'm proud of you. If that's not a weird thing to say?”

Honestly it's weird as hell and Billy wants to fucking cry. Or cry more.

“And you didn't kill me, so that's a plus,” Steve adds like an afterthought.

Billy wonders if it's a joke. The breadth of time before the punchline.

But Steve is just smiling now. Making a joke of the situation, not of Billy.

I'm not laughing at you.

Hell, maybe Steve *does* want to be friends again. Have things go back to how they were.

“I’m sorry,” Billy whispers. He can only ever seem to whisper those two words. “I’m not blaming the anger disorder or anything, I’m not gonna be chickenshit about it. But I’m sorry. I just...we get under each other’s skin so bad. I don’t know how to fix that. Fix my fucked up brain. I’m not safe to be around.”

Warmth covers his hand and it’s Steve’s fingers over his knuckles. He moves down the couch, still more than a foot of distance between them, but he pulls Billy’s hand away from his face at the same time.

Steve fiddles with him awkwardly for all of ten seconds and then they’re holding hands.

Billy’s chest thumps. He swallows.

Steve looks like he’s gearing up for more. For more earth-tilting, heavy things. He looks like he did when he stood in front of Billy on swaying feet, cheeks wet after Wheeler dumped him.

“I’m sorry too. Nancy says I need to work on my apologies, but I just know I *am*. Sorry. I know you, Billy. I tried to tell myself I didn’t, not anymore. But you’re still *you* and I’m still *me*. You can be dangerous, sure. But so can I. I hit back too, remember? You know how often I’ve fought with Tommy over the years.”

“Not like that. Not like what I did, what I *could* do—”

“Billy. I want my best friend back. I’ve really missed you.”

Billy sniffs again, hating his sinuses for not catching the memo.

He can’t stop staring at their hands. Steve’s is so warm, big. Holds Billy’s like he’s happy to do it.

Like he wants to.

This is real. It’s happening.

Positive self talk, right?

“So. Friends, huh?”

“If you want. I mean—”

“Yeah,” Billy cuts him off. If Steve believes it, then maybe it’s just one more thing Billy can owe him. Can give him. “Yeah. Sounds good. Sounds perfect. I want that too.”

Steve shines the full force of the sun on him, inescapable. He squeezes Billy’s fingers.

It’s only when Steve hops up, their hands sliding apart, that Billy finds that bright buzz has gone. It’s never fast until it is, and with one touch Steve’s rendered it dead in its tracks.

-

There’s a week and a half left of school.

They spend the days not unlike they used to. Before he left. He likes to get an early start and always wakes before Steve to go pick Max up. He parks across the street so he doesn’t have to see Neil and Neil doesn’t have to see him. Susan always waves, and it makes Billy’s chest go tight, his

stomach squirmy. They meet up and usually share a smoke before class starts, Steve still half asleep but with his hair perfectly coiffed as usual, dressed to impress. Billy distracts him from the way Wheeler holds hands with Jonathan Byers now, and Steve always, without fail, changes the subject before Billy can even ask.

They study like they used to. They dick around town like they used to. They watch movies and get takeout and eat Steve's attempts at cooking like they used to, a skill he's been nursing for years without his parents around to feed him.

It's so *normal*, Billy's addicted to it. It's almost perfect enough he can forget the lingering shadow of *something* between them. That buzz that ebbs and flows more gently the longer he's living with Steve.

He's doing better. He even rescheduled with Dr. Toll.

Billy's on autopilot, thinking about the next class, when Steve finds him in the hall. He looks good in khakis and a plain black sweater, teeth peeking white between his bitten down smile.

"So you know Samantha, the senior TA who grades chem?" he asks, practically bouncing.

"Obviously, Harrington."

Steve falls into step with him, careful about crowding him too close. His ribs were still sore as hell most of the time, but they'd mostly healed. But Steve still worries about bumping into him, hurting him unnecessarily.

People part like the sea for them as they walk to Billy's next class. He thinks it's mostly because Steve and his presence, the effortless *cool guy* energy he gives off in spades.

Billy's class is the opposite direction of Steve's, but he still hurried to catch up to him anyway. Just because he wanted to share the news.

Billy breathes in, out, tries to curb the flush he feels burning the tips of his ears.

"I just bumped into her and she told me I did really well on that last project you helped me with, and—" he spins, moving around a startled group of girls who ogle him.

"And?"

"I got a B, Billy! B for Billy!" Billy rolls his eyes at that. "Who would have thought, huh?"

Steve nearly brains a kid with a fist bump. Billy guides his arm out of the kid's way.

"Ah, so that's why you wanted to play nice and make up with me. So you'd pass chem and get to be King Steve, ruling over the senior class?"

Steve smacks his elbow, rolling his eyes as they come up to Billy's class. They park out front, Steve leaning a hip against the open door while Billy takes the threshold, creating an arch for everyone else wanting to grab their seat. He ignores the stares, the curiosity and whispers as they go by. He and Steve were on again off again as frequently as Tommy and Carol, and much more volatile about it. He honestly doesn't blame them for wondering if they were friends again or about to throw a punch.

It helps that Steve's been a lot better. A lot *nicer*.

And though he didn't witness it firsthand, apparently Steve even apologized to Byers for breaking his camera.

"*Obviously*, Hargrove. I was thinking we could get burgers out at Benny's later. If you want? My treat."

"Your treat? Shouldn't I be paying if we're celebrating you?"

"Well, I know money's kind of tight. So I'm happy to. Plus, it's your—"

Billy waves him off. It *is* tight. He hasn't decided what to do about it just yet, but that isn't Steve's business. He thinks of how much he can part with.

"But it's your birthday," Steve says, raising an eyebrow.

"What? It's not my birthday until..." He shakes himself. He's been so distracted. By his dad. By Steve. By Max and school and *plans* and, fuck.

Steve must read him like a book because his tone turns lighthearted. "Probably forgot since you rushed out of the house this morning. I had a whole thing planned."

He pouts until the smirk works its way back, and Billy punches him in the arm. "Screw you. You didn't plan anything."

"Maybe I did."

"Seriously, you...don't worry about that." He lowers his voice. "You're letting me crash at your place for a while, you don't have to get me anything else, man."

"But I—"

"Nope. You got a B and you're gonna be a senior like the rest of us, so I'm taking *you* out. I'll see you in chem, pretty boy."

"Not lunch?" he asks, confusion crossing his face.

"I gotta run an errand, but I'll be in class. Speaking of." The bell rings and Steve swears under his breath, giving Billy a pointed look before running back down the hall.

He tries to curb his smile the entire hour of class. He fails.

-

When he pulls up to the house, he can tell something is off.

Maxine is quick to catch on, leaning forward in her seat and glaring at the pillow on the front lawn like it'll help it make sense. All the blinds are drawn.

Neil's truck is parked in the driveway. Home early.

Billy parks across the street, a shiver crawling slow and cold down his neck.

"I'll walk you up," he decides, to Max's loud protests. "No butts."

Her angry unbuckling substitutes whatever she wants to say as he taps the wheel before getting out himself.

It's just a house, he tells himself. Neil won't do shit to him on the front lawn, not in the afternoon. Not where a neighbor might see.

Moments before he's about to knock, the door opens in one smooth movement. Susan's wide eyes and nervous smile greet them, only wearing more than when she takes Billy in.

Inside, it's dark. Too quiet.

Then, a loud bang and slurred yelling.

Susan flinches hard and closes the door most of the way again.

"Hey sweetheart," she aims at Max with only a modicum more warmth than her expression offers. Then, she says to Billy, "Your dad's had a few beers. Would it be too much to watch her until tonight, when he's gone to bed? It shouldn't be too long."

Neil doesn't start yelling after only a few beers. Something must have happened.

"But mom—"

"Maxine," she says quietly. "Please."

Max goes tight-lipped before stomping off back to the Camaro.

Her mother sighs as Billy scans her face.

"Has he...Has he done anything to you?" he croaks out.

"No, honey," Susan murmurs, looking so concerned for *him* in that moment he has to look down at her shoes. "No, he's just been having some issues at work, is all."

Is all. Like it's all it ever is.

There's more yelling from inside, words Billy has a hard time making out. Susan opens the screen door and squeezes herself out with a look over her shoulder.

"I'm making a plan," she says in a hush. "I've been looking at Forest Hills. I have a good friend who has a trailer there, and says it's affordable. I'm waiting to tell Max but I wanted you to know."

It's a lot to take in. Mousey little Susan, quiet and obedient, making a plan to leave his dad. If Neil finds out—

He thinks of the day Neil found out Billy's mother was divorcing him.

"He can't know," he tells her, heart pounding too fast. "He can't find out—"

Susan gives him a fast, firm hug. He can't remember a time she ever just went for it, holding him as tightly as she must hold Max. But it's only until Neil starts calling for her from somewhere in the back of the house.

Susan lets him go, touches his face. Then she's slinking back around the screen and inside before he even has a chance to process it. She reappears after a moment, a white envelope in hand.

"Happy birthday, Billy," she says, smiling before she's gone again, the lock clicking in place.

He hurries back to the Camaro in a sort of daze, thoughts fuzzy, stuck circling around Forest Hills,

the shitty trailer park just outside of town. That she's actually going to leave his dad. Susan made it a point to let him know Max didn't know her plans, which was just as well since the kid had a bad habit of blabbing.

He comes to when his buckle clicks in place. When it's Max beside him, demanding, "Why'd my mom hug you?"

He doesn't know. She's never tried to stop Neil, not with any kind of real effort. But she set him up with Toll, a pharmacy Neil doesn't know about. She hugged him like a woman hasn't hugged him since his mom did when he was little.

He blinks away the dread of that and refocuses on the dash, the leather gear under his palm. He pulls out onto the road, mapping out the turns to Benny's.

"Neil's on a bender and I'm supposed to meet Steve to grab a bite. Your mom wants you out of the house until he's passed out. You mind tagging along?"

He catches his own mistake before Max even says, "Why are you *asking* me? And what's that?"

She grabs the envelope and he doesn't even mind. Can hardly wrap his head around the fact Susan got him a card. She does, sometimes. But his birthday gifts have typically been a *here son, we all chipped in* kind of bullshit before Neil shoved a ten dollar bill his way and a card that was rarely signed. Susan usually just tried to make a decent dinner. And then he'd go hang with Steve, where he mattered.

"It's my birthday," he mutters, turning off Cherry.

He can't read Max's silence. She smooths her hands over the card but doesn't open it.

"Oh. I thought it was—"

"Don't worry about it."

"Billy, I'm sorry—"

"We're not doing this, shitbird. Just try not to gab Steve's ear off. He already has to put up with me."

"Fine," she scoffs. "Don't worry."

He huffs at that. "Even I forgot. We've both been distracted I guess."

She tucks the envelope, crispy and pristine, behind the cupholder.

"So is Steve taking you out on a date for your birthday?"

He nearly runs a red light.

"Nope. Not doing that either."

"What! I'm just asking—"

"No, you're not. You're being a nosy little busy body and sniffing around in business that doesn't concern you."

"But when you and your dad fought, you said—"

“Maxine!” he can’t help but shout, because he’s cornered, he’s always been cornered, and this isn’t something he ever wants to be cornered about. Neil is bad enough, but having to talk about *it* with someone who wasn’t Dr. Toll—who he barely talks about it to begin with—no fucking way.

Talking with Max has always been one of the hardest things he’s had to do, over and over and over. Nothing ever seems to come out of his mouth like he means it to, and she always either ends up hurt or pissed off, and vice versa.

He’s done it again now. He can feel her stewing in her own anger.

“Not *that*,” he relents. “Anything but that.”

“You know I don’t care about that stuff, right?”

God, he’s exhausted.

“Max—”

“I’m just saying don’t worry!” She swears under her breath, kicking a foot up on his seat like she knows he can’t stand. “You’re my big brother. I missed you when you were gone, you know. Liking boys doesn’t even matter.”

The buzz has grown, louder, deeper, evolved from honey bees to hornets, stinging and stinging and stinging.

-

He pulls up beside Steve’s shining BMW. Maxine opens the door but turns back at the last second and hugs him awkwardly from the side.

She says, “Happy birthday, dickhole.”

And then she’s gone, backpack forgotten in her seat.

He’s had too many hugs today. He’s still buzzy, tense and trying not to be because Steve and his new hyper focused fixation on Billy’s wellbeing will notice. Max disappears inside the diner and Billy tries to breathe.

He grabs the envelope and rips it open, finding a sparkling yellow card with a cartoon turtle crossing a finish line on the front.

Inside, it’s the expected Hallmark drivel that doesn’t mean anything, but below it Susan’s written, *Don’t grow up too fast. You have everything ahead of you. Happy birthday, Billy.*

She included a twenty dollar bill.

He shuts his brain down. Blinks hard as he sticks the card in his book bag where Max won’t go snooping.

At least now he can cover Max’s meal.

-

The diner isn’t packed when he walks inside. He offers the blonde hostess up front a charming smile he knows glitters and watches the blush spread over her cheeks. It calms the lava welling in his veins.

Until he catches sight of Steve waving at him from the back. Maxine's red head is down as she attacks a plastic bowl of fries.

The hostess hands him a menu and he makes his way back, already knowing the cheapest thing at Benny's is a plain burger, no extras. With the twenty Susan gave him he might spring for cheese and pickles. Maybe treat himself with a shake.

Steve smiles at him as Billy slides into the space beside Max, snaking a hand in the bowl to steal two fries. They're covered in cheese and garlic.

He flips the menu open and looks just for show.

"Oh, I already ordered," Steve tells him brightly and his stomach twists.

"Cuz you were in the car a while," Max explains.

He takes the menu from Billy and holds it out just as the waitress passes by. "Hope you don't mind? I got everybody the double decker burgers and another round of fries. You still like chocolate shakes, I hope?"

Billy nods, the tips of his fingers numb. There goes that twenty. Add the tip and...Billy counts numbers in his head and tries not to worry too much about how he'll afford gas.

Something taps against his shoe under the table. He blinks and Steve is sending him a nod of understanding, waves a hand like he's telling Billy not to worry about it.

Billy wants to worry. He needs to. It's his thing.

"You pick desert," Steve says, a peace offering without Billy having to say a word.

Steve's knee bumps his and stays there. Billy expects him to move away, to say something about the booth being too damn small, because it is with the way Max's elbow keeps digging into his arm. But Steve stays put. Billy throws his arm over the back of the seat behind Max's head.

"It's his birthday," Max states, business-like. "Did you get him something, Steve?"

"Who do you think I am, kid? Of course I did. What did you get him?"

"I got him something!" she squeaks out, and Billy watches a vein pop in her forehead.

He reaches down and flicks her. "She forgot."

"Oh hey, so did Billy. You're two peas in a pod." He laughs as he takes a fist full of fries, stuffing them in his mouth like an ape. Billy only tolerates it because he gets to watch Steve lick his fingers after.

"Gross."

"She hugged me, far as I'm concerned that's more than enough. Don't think I can stomach an actual gift."

Her face is red as a tomato. "Then consider that hug your only present!"

"Trust me, I will." He drags the bowl of fries away from Steve and eats one at a time. "Enough about me. This is supposed to be Harrington's big party."

“For what?”

“I passed chemistry,” he says, the pride rolling off him like radiation.

It sends a ripple through Billy. “Yep, the King gets to graduate with all the rest of us paupers after all.”

“It’s not graduation yet.”

“Okay, then the King isn’t getting held back. How about that?”

“Better,” Steve says, leaning forward to steal a fry from Billy’s fingers. He pops it between his teeth. “Last thing I wanted was to be stuck with Munson as the only senior not really a senior, you know?”

“Who’s Munson?”

“This guy who has to repeat his senior year next year. The school can’t shut up about it,” Billy explains.

“But you’ll be a senior for the first time I thought?”

“Potato, potato,” Steve says with a shrug. “It’s just embarrassing, is the point. I wouldn’t have passed if it wasn’t for your brother, so it’s really all his fault.”

“Guilty as charged,” he drawls, stealing a fry from Steve.

Max watches them swat at each other. “I’m glad you guys are friends again.”

Steve falters so Billy takes the opportunity to snatch his fry away and stick both in his mouth. He drags the bowl back for Max so she can eat and keep her trap shut.

“Yeah,” Steve says, looking at Billy, something held there in his eyes. It’s so heady he can almost put a name to it. “I am too.”

Billy bumps his knee with Steve’s and ignores the way his pulse flutters. “Yeah, yeah, enough with the warm and fuzzies.”

Their food arrives, burgers piled high with everything and more. Billy’s is almost too-hot, right off the stove with the cheese melted just right. Tastes so good it’s worth burning his tongue.

Steve watches him eat, knee a constant pressure beneath the table.

-

“Jesus, I’m stuffed.”

Billy laughs at how Steve holds his stomach. They’re out front, Max in the car already reading one of her comics. Billy offered to share a cigarette but Steve had waved it away, whining about being too full.

“You ate less than me.”

“I can never do a double patty,” he says with a pout. “Seriously, I feel like I gained five pounds.”

“Now you sound like Carol.”

Steve frowns. "Carol wishes she looked this good bloated."

"Carol wishes she looked as good as you, period."

His brain catches up with his mouth and he goes still. Then he's dropping his chin and staring out at the street, busy with after-school traffic, decidedly *not* looking anywhere near Steve.

Steve leans his weight against him. "So. You never said why you brought Max along. I didn't mind! I just figured she wanted to be at the arcade or something with the boys."

He ashes his cigarette. "Neil's drunk. Susan asked me to keep her busy until he hits the sack later." He shrugs. "I didn't even think of the arcade. I just...I didn't want to see him."

"Couldn't think."

"Yeah." He turns back when a hand bumps his for the smoke. Steve takes it and inhales, coughing a little with it. "Something about work troubles or some shit."

"Any idea what about?"

"Maybe he's about to get canned. Who knows."

"Damn. That's not good." Steve exhales a cloud of smoke. He reaches into his jacket pocket and brings out a little wrapped rectangle, no bow. "Happy birthday, by the way."

Billy accepts it, feeling the cool paper slide under his fingers. Billy has a good idea what he's holding, but he pretends to really consider it, feel the weight of it because Steve just looks so pleased with himself. Nervous too.

Billy rips the corner and tears the blue paper off all in one.

He reads the scrawl on the front. "You made me a mixtape?"

"Just give it a try?"

He flips it over and reads the tracklist, half of which is illegible. "You put Bonnie Tyler on here."

"She's got a top hit out right now!"

"And The Police? Steve."

"You can have your metalhead shit, let me have this."

"It's *my* gift though," he says on a smile.

"Just be happy I spared you any Madonna."

Billy waves the tape at him. He looks it back over, reading over Steve's smudged and tiny scribbling.

"Thanks. I like it."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

Steve looks away, shy and pleased before he clears his throat. "Hey, uh. Can I say something? I've

been thinking about it for a little bit.”

Billy shifts his weight, feeling uneasy. Maybe this is it and Steve’s finally going to tell him to beat it. A mixtape and a kick out the door. “Depends.”

“It’s nothing bad, promise. I was just thinking...if Max and her mom ever need a place to like, get away. From your dad, I mean. If they ever need somewhere to stay for a while, or just a few hours, or however long really. They can, you know. Stay. At my place. With you, I mean. Or without, too.”

He’s fidgeting again, all bird bones and hair ruffling. He’s looking at Billy like he’s afraid he’ll reject the idea. And honestly, Billy’s first thought is to flat out refuse. Say it’s too much. Say it’ll never be that bad, because he won’t let it be.

But how can he promise that now?

He breathes, in and out. Remembers how Steve had hugged him back, how it made everything else in Billy’s fucked up life fade away.

He grips the mixtape until it creaks.

“I know it’s a lot, and you always say you hate charity or whatever. But this isn’t that, okay? It’s really not,” Steve goes on, a chatterbox with no off button.

Billy plucks the cigarette back and finishes it off.

Steve just keeps going. Billy misses a lot of it, too caught up in the way the overcast light catches the blond strands in his hair. The way his favorite pair of moles dance along Steve’s cheekbone. The way the tendons in his neck flex and relax as he tilts his head and gestures wide with his hands. The way he’s so clearly out of his depth so often, and still manages to come across charming and sincere, and like he knows more about himself and all the secret things Billy could ever hope for without ever having to ask.

But he comes back to the conversation when Steve says, “My home is your home. You know that, right?”

He didn’t. He doesn’t. Because how can he know that, know such a precious, unheard of thing.

Billy feels like someone else is nodding his head for him. He can only stare at Steve, wondering why now.

Steve gives him a tentative smile.

“Is it okay if I tell Max?”

“Knock yourself out,” someone else says for him, through him. He’s a ghost in a bag full of bones, weightless. Adrift.

Steve rounds the car and makes a goofy face at the window until Max rolls it down, then Billy turns away, hears him ask how she’s doing, what she’s reading. Ask for suggestions for the boys so he can get some street cred, or whatever the equivalent is in nerd-speak.

Billy waits with held breath, the cigarette down to nothing in his fingers. He can pinpoint the moment the conversation turns serious, soft, more of that same nervous energy sprouting fresh.

My home is your home, he'd said, like he says it now. Billy wonders if Max will start laughing in his face. But he doesn't hear her say anything.

"I hope that's obvious," Steve is saying. "Like, even if Billy and me weren't friends for whatever reason—which is *not* gonna happen again—you, all three of you. My house is yours if you ever need it. Today, tomorrow, twenty years from next Tuesday. Okay?"

Billy wants to hop the bumper and kiss him.

He watches cars roll by and listens to Maxine sniffle.

-

Steve suggests Max walkie the kids and then Billy follows him to Dustin's house to pick him up. The others pile in at the Wheeler house, which Steve doesn't linger too long at thanks to the station wagon in the drive.

Billy remembers the way Wheeler slapped him, asked him to stay awake, how she parked like a bat out of hell just because she'd seen him flipping his shit. He owes her too.

"I'm *so* glad he's not dating Nancy anymore. She was always mad about nothing," Max comments, and Billy has to laugh.

"You and me both, pipsqueak."

She doesn't need to know Wheeler saved his life. That it needed saving in the first place.

He gives her a fist bump. It feels like a white flag.

The ride to the arcade is short, and spent with Max complaining about how little Mike is an asshole, and how Dustin and Lucas have an ongoing feud about nothing Billy can make sense of.

It's almost pleasant.

-

They have a couple more hours to kill before Billy knows his dad will be in bed, or at least getting ready for it. Billy gives Max a five for quarters while the other kids pester Steve for the same and more. It takes fifteen minutes for Steve to wrestle himself away so they can escape next door to Family Video.

Steve returns the tapes he and Billy worked through the last week and they pick out a few more. They're on a sci-fi kick. Steve mentions a French movie called *Entre Nous* his friend suggested, and Billy can already tell they'll be bored out of their minds.

Steve buys a box of M&Ms and they set up on a curb in front of the arcade while they wait, trading the candies back and forth.

Billy feels the buzzing pinch and sting, unsure, unsteady. He doesn't know if it's a good idea, not like he thought when he first decided on it during lunch at the mall when he couldn't find anything he could afford.

If Steve hates it, then oh well. He'll just brush it off, make some excuse.

He should have just made a mixtape.

Billy digs in his jacket pocket and grabs the thing, holding it out between them so that Steve can't mistake it's meant for him.

He considers the small lump of tissue paper for a moment.

“You got *me* a gift? Why?”

Because I can't repay you no matter how many lifetimes I manage to swindle away for myself, he thinks.

“Your uh, your birthday,” Billy explains. “I missed it.”

He sits there and chews on chocolate as Steve carefully peels away the tissue. Billy had swiped it from a display, so what. It was white and looked classy and he couldn't figure out how to get away with taking one of those little boxes too.

“...Oh.” Steve holds up the gold necklace, letting the chain dangle while cupping the pendant in a palm. “I can't take this.”

“Why not?”

Steve puffs his cheeks out. “You know why.”

“It was my mother's,” he explains. “You don't like it?”

“It's your *mom's*, Billy. It's too important. I can't take this from you.”

Billy folds it back into Steve's hand when he tries to hand it back. “It's a birthday gift, no returns.”

“Billy—”

“It's really the only good memory I have of her. She gave it to me when I was really little. We were at the beach. Said it was of a saint, for protection.” He watches Steve stare down at it, at the small figure etched in gold. “Don't know which saint. And it's not exactly like it *works* or anything...” he shrugs when Steve sends him a sharp look. “But it stuck around when she didn't, so I think it counts for something.”

Billy holds up the box of M&Ms when Steve tries to hand it back again. He ends up letting out a huff of frustration before slipping the necklace over his head. He looks down, his chin doubling as he runs a thumb over the pendant.

“This is way too much, man,” he mutters, still studying the thing. “Definitely no Bonnie Tyler.”

“I want you to have it. I know you get nervous and feel like you're alone sometimes...but this is a reminder that even when everyone else leaves, you've still got something to keep going for, right?”

That same sharp look zeroes in on him again and Billy weathers it. Steve searches his face.

“You're not planning something stupid, are you?” he deadpans, and Billy shoves their shoulders together.

“Don't be so dramatic, pretty boy. It's just a necklace.”

Billy hands him an M&M.

Steve takes it.

-

One by one, they drop the kids off, and Steve's car because, "I want to make sure he's not gonna give you trouble." Then Billy drives to his old house.

Max is tired, he can tell from the way she's getting off her game. Her rude interjections into their conversation are getting slower and less mean.

By the time they pull up across the street again, she's yawning.

The house is dark. The pillow is missing from the front yard.

Susan is out front drinking out of a mug. She waves at them, and Billy feels the tension leave his chest.

Max sighs as she grabs her bag and skateboard. "Thanks, Steve. Happy birthday, Billy."

"Let me walk you up," Steve suggests, but Billy holds a hand in front of him to keep him in his seat.

"Let me." He gets out and carries Max's bag for her.

In the small stretch of distance between his car and Max's mother, the dark doesn't feel so oppressive. Feels light. Like maybe he'll be able to escape Hawkins one day soon and leave the ugly fact of his father behind for good.

"You gave him your necklace," Max whispers.

"I did."

"You really like him?"

He knows Susan can't hear them. And Max still has that sleepy sheen to her voice, quiet and not like she's trying to get a rise out of him.

"I do."

She yawns again. "I do too."

Susan holds her arms open as Max meets her for a hug.

"Have a good time?"

"Yeah, real good. It was nice," she says and Billy feels the tightness return, like he can't hold everything that's inside him. He rubs at his chest. "I ate too much."

Susan laughs softly as Max goes inside, careful to not make a sound.

Billy hands her bag over to Susan, who sips at her coffee. He can smell the bitter heat a foot away.

"Everything good?"

She nods, her eyes drifting to where Steve sits in Billy's car, probably watching them interact like a hawk.

"How soon?" he asks, because it's been burning him all afternoon.

“By the end of summer, I hope. Is he nice?”

“Who?” he asks, even though he’s not stupid. She sips at her mug. “Yeah. He is.”

She nods again.

“I should have tried harder for you, Billy,” she says. “I’m sorry it took me so long.”

He can’t think of anything nice to say to that. She should be, is one. Another is don’t worry about it. Another is he’s never trusted anyone who wasn’t himself.

But he can’t make his mouth work. Can’t find his voice.

Susan steps into his space, wraps the arm holding the coffee around his shoulders carefully, and presses her lips to his cheek in a brief kiss.

“Drive safe, alright?”

He can only nod, then he’s turning briskly away and hurrying back to the car so he can get the hell out of Cherry.

He never wants to come back.

-

The ride back is quiet, but not uncomfortable. There’s just nothing to say.

He calls dibs on the shower when they get inside even though he doesn’t need to, Steve has his own after all. Steve says goodnight, thanks him again for his gift. Billy can’t even remember if he replied.

The water is too hot, burning his scalp, his shoulders, scalding his back. He wants to burn away, into nothing. Wants to be reborn again. Wake up like the last forever never happened so he can just be some guy named Billy Hargrove with nothing negative attached to him. He wants to start over, so everything doesn’t hurt so much.

He lowers the temp and accidentally shampoos his hair twice. He just can’t stop thinking of how almost in awe Steve was of Billy’s present. It *was* just a necklace. And it was so much more.

But does Steve even realize how much?

Billy has a rough idea of what to do over the summer. Much of it involves saving up, which requires a job. If he gets two, then maybe he’ll have enough to scrape by.

He just has to make it another year. Then he’ll be safe. Then Neil can’t touch him ever again, can’t use Steve against him if he does find out. Billy will be able to move on with his life and maybe live it, like everybody seems to keep telling him is a choice as much as it’s an inevitability.

He steps out, dries off, gets ready for bed. He’s beat, the emotional whiplash of the day taking more of a toll on him than he thought it would. The buzzing is a mumble now, but still there, and he just hopes he’ll be able to sleep through the whole night.

The hall light is on when he comes out. Steve’s door is cracked and the light is off, which means he’s in bed already. But if the other lights are on, then he must be feeling off too.

Billy talks himself down from checking on him. Steve doesn’t need him to do that. Out of their

new normal, that's one of the largest, most selfish things he never does anymore. Steve's bed is his own. Billy and him may be friends again, but not like that. Not anymore.

He tosses his clothes in the hamper Steve gave him, then crawls under the covers of his own borrowed bed. Billy's often thought the rest of the Harrington house feels like a hotel apart from the kitchen, living room, and Steve's room. The guest rooms are untouched, the beds made with crisp white sheets. Steve never steps foot into them, but he does now when he wants to listen to Billy's music or study together from Billy's textbooks instead of his own.

He still doesn't have *all* his things. Steve says he's just waiting for Billy to give him the go-ahead to go and get them when Neil's at work.

He tosses and turns, the buzzing growing louder.

He tries to think about nothing, and instead thinks about everything. Replays every moment from the day over in his head. Feels everything secondhand, slightly faded in parts and sharp as a knife in others.

Did he say goodnight back? Or had he been too wrapped up in his own head?

He sighs and flips back over, frowning when he sees it's only been eight minutes since he laid down.

Did he say it back?

Did Steve *really* like his gift? Or did he just accept it because he kind of had to?

"Fuck."

Billy tosses the covers off and lays there, in his briefs and scowling at the ceiling.

He won't. He can't. It's pathetic and embarrassing and worse of all, clingy.

He threads his fingers together over his stomach. Counts his breaths.

He hops up and pads out of the room and down the hall. To hell with being embarrassing and pathetic. He needs to know he said goodnight.

He stops and listens at Steve's door. He doesn't hear anything, which is a pain. He raps his knuckles against the wood.

Finally, "...Billy? You okay?"

Billy pushes the door open gently, and closes it again so the light doesn't let in. Steve is on his side, arm folded under his head. He's watching Billy with an eyebrow raised.

"I'm good. Just wanted to say goodnight."

"We did already."

Great. "Oh, cool."

"Yeah."

"Well." He stands there, feeling awkward and out of place. "Night."

“Want to stay?”

Billy stops dead. “What?”

Steve is tapping his fingers on his sheet, then switches to gripping the bend of his elbow. “It’s supposed to storm tonight. I don’t think I’m gonna sleep that great. Maybe...maybe you could stay? If you want.”

If he wants. It’s all he wants.

Maybe he already fell asleep and this is a dream.

“I could do that,” Billy murmurs and steps up to the bed.

Steve moves over, scooting back until there’s enough room. This is Steve’s side of the bed. When... *before*, he had his spot and Steve had his. He places his hand palm down on the sheet. It’s warm.

Something glints off Steve’s chest. He’s wearing Billy’s necklace still.

Billy forces his eyes up.

The room is a little humid from Steve’s shower. It smells faintly of his shampoo, and only more strongly of it when Billy slots himself under the covers. Steve’s pillow is slightly damp and smells like soap and *him* and Billy tries not to be too obvious about taking a deep breath in.

Steve is facing him still. Billy considers turning over, trying not to make this awkward. Nights spent exactly like this fill his mind, and all he can think about is how soft Steve’s lips always were.

He’s about to make good on his promise to himself not to confuse things and turn over when Steve reaches out and barely brushes two fingertips against his chin. They drop and land on his neck.

It’s only after Billy lets out a shaky breath that Steve’s warm hand moves, settles fully on the side of his neck, thumb on his jaw.

“Steve,” he says, his voice cracking. It sounds like a warning.

Steve holds his eyes. Drops his gaze to Billy’s mouth.

Billy leans in and kisses him.

Steve’s breath rushes out to meet him, pushing in as his fingers dig into Billy’s nape. Billy fists the sheets between them as Steve melds their mouths together. It must be a sweet dream indeed for it to feel so real.

Steve hums, the sound catching in his throat before he’s pulling back. His throat works as he holds Billy’s eyes. “Is this...is this practice?”

Nevermind that it’s Steve who touched him first. Steve who said stay. Steve, who’s looking like he’s ready to crack open like an egg.

“No,” Billy tells him, because how can it be, after everything? And then, because he owes Steve everything and more, and he’s trying to be honest, “I don’t want it to be.”

“Good.” Steve’s dark gaze drifts languid and all seeing over his face, back to his eyes. “Neither do I.”

It's Steve who leans back in, meets him where Billy is too stunned to. Not unlike the first time Steve agreed to his idea to practice, he can't help thinking it's happening. It's finally happening.

The thing about touching Steve is every touch feels like the first, feels like lightning barely capped in its own little electric bottle. Steve lights him up, burns him down to the root, to the heart, and manages to smooth away every small hurt all at once.

The sheets get pushed down the bed. It's Steve who presses against Billy, who shifts until a thigh is sliding over his and their chests are pressed together. Steve is wearing a shirt over his own briefs, and Billy wants it off.

He grabs at the hem and tugs until Steve is forced to break apart from him. His lips are slick and swollen and hungry between the instant he has to lift away for Billy to throw his shirt to the side and the moment he crashes back down. The pendant swings, catches against Billy's cheek. His hands slide up Billy's neck, into his hair, tugging as he moans, driving their hips together. Billy whines, is shocked at himself.

He wraps his arms tight around Steve's back, then remembers he can touch now. He's allowed to.

He runs his hands down, back up, back down again. He cups Steve's ass and squeezes and Steve breaks off, gasping loud above him.

"Oh my god. Oh my god, Billy."

They move together for what feels like an eternity. It stirs an overwhelming heat in the pit of Billy's stomach, feeling them both pressed together, hard and wanting more.

Steve keens again, removing his hands from Billy's hair to fist at either side of his head. He lifts his hips and breathes, ragged and undone. He smiles as Billy slides his hands back up to rub circles at his sides.

"I'm close," he whispers. Billy kisses the embarrassment from his tongue. "Sorry. God, it feels like I've never done this before."

"I mean, we haven't." He realizes almost too late that he's smiling just as wide back up at Steve. "You don't even know how much I want to see you fall apart again."

"Again, huh?"

Billy bites gently at his lower lip. "Do you think about it? That day on your couch."

Steve's hips stutter. He readjusts an arm, huffs into the next kiss.

"All the fucking time." The words come out on a moan. Billy never thought Steve would be so loud. He wants to flip them over, press Steve down into the bedding. But he wants to give him the space he needs to gather himself too. "I dream about it."

He grips Steve's hips and Steve leans his torso on Billy, kisses at his cheek. He gets distracted by his ear, then skims down to his neck and bites. Billy thrusts into the air between them, wanting Steve's full weight back where it should be.

But Steve is single minded as he kisses a stripe down his neck, to his chest. He smirks at whatever he sees and presses a sweet, lush kiss to Billy's pec right before he bites his nipple, and sucks.

Billy sees stars. Tangles his hands in Steve's thick hair and just holds him, doesn't want to pull his

scalp off from how good it feels. He bucks up and meets the plane of his stomach, and lets out a sigh of relief at finally having some friction to rut against.

Steve doesn't take the bait. He keeps sucking, moves to the other nipple and treats it the same. Billy feels close now, way too close. He doesn't even mind. Just wants Steve to keep doing whatever it is he's doing.

Then that mouth is moving lower and lower, and Billy raises his head to ask what Steve thinks he's doing.

Steve is looking up at him, and when they lock eyes, his smile is shy. Nervous. He taps along Billy's pelvis before inching into the band of his underwear.

"Is this okay?"

Billy stutters out a word even he doesn't understand. Then, "It's way more than okay."

Steve nods, looking seriously down at the bulge beneath his chin. "This I've definitely never done before."

His heart is about to beat right out of his throat. "Me either."

Steve is licking his lips. "Wait, really?"

"No?"

"You've never been...you mean you've never done this with a guy?"

Billy just shakes his head, no. He feels small.

"But you always seemed so..."

"So?"

"Like you knew what you were doing."

Billy shrugs, too focused on the small points of pressure Steve's fingertips make at his waist. The way he's throbbing so consistently, he might come just from having Steve ask him questions.

"It was just...it was us." He tries to wet his lips and only half succeeds. "It was you. It was always you, Steve."

His head is foggy, too addled by the way Steve's looking up at him, the way he's been touching him, the way he smiles now, like he knows exactly what Billy means to say. He probably does.

And then Steve is flipping his underwear down and gripping the base of his dick, squeezing as he considers the wetness that beads at the tip.

Billy throws his head back and squeezes his eyes shut tight. He refuses to finish the first time Steve ever touches him. Embarrassing wouldn't begin to cover it.

He isn't expecting it when Steve wraps his lips around him. Billy shivers, fighting not to thrust into the heat of his mouth. His hands find Steve's wrists and he wraps his fingers around them, just to hold. To know he's there and holding Billy down. Keeping him from floating away.

Steve takes his time, is slow about it. Is moaning every now and again. Billy peeks at him, and

watches Steve practically savoring it. He pulls off and licks at the tip and goes back down, taking him in deeper each time.

“Steve,” he croaks. “Steve, I’m not gonna—”

Steve hums and sucks hard, and Billy shatters. Grips at Steve’s wrists as his voice goes higher than he’s ever heard it.

He blinks and his head is flat on the pillow, he’s breathing hard. Blinks again and Steve’s face swims into view above him, grinning like mad.

Then he’s bending down and sharing the taste of Billy with himself. Billy sinks under the weight of him, circles his arms around his back and kisses Steve as deep as he’s always craved.

-

He wakes up only once in the night, and it’s to Steve wrapped in his arms from how they fell asleep together. The hair at his nape is sweaty, matted to his neck and he’s muttering something unintelligible, his limbs twitching. Billy can hear it raining outside, but nothing so bad as a storm. Still, Steve shakes.

Billy noses at his neck, lets his lips rest at the knob of his spine, and holds him.

-

Billy wakes with the sun first, his breath second. He needs to brush his teeth. Kind of wants to go down on Steve again just to refresh the taste. Return the favor twofold, threefold, more.

He knows he’s gross, but so is Steve, a little. So it doesn’t matter in the end.

Steve is sound asleep, motionless and splayed out. They’d turned over sometime in the night and now Steve’s on his back, an arm and leg tossed over Billy where he’s still half on his side. Billy’s arms are still around Steve’s middle.

Billy closes his eyes and nuzzles back into Steve’s shoulder, loving the way he smells, the way he feels, his warmth.

The stinging buzz is gone.

He decides this is it. This is all he’ll ever want or need for the rest of his life.

Then the doorbell rings.

It’s Saturday morning. Who the hell is ringing Steve’s doorbell on a Saturday morning.

His thoughts jump first to Max, but he tells himself that wouldn’t happen. She’d call first. It was too long of a ride on her skateboard.

“Steve,” he mutters, jostling him a little.

Steve hums.

“Steve,” Billy says a little louder, hating he has to actually get up. That he has to wake Steve up too. “Someone’s at the door.”

“I don’t wanna wear that shirt, mom,” Steve mumbles, sleep slurring the words into a mush. When

Billy kisses his shoulder and tweaks a nipple, his head jerks up. One eye is open and peering at Billy. "Babe."

The feeling the word sends through him has him overflowing, swollen on it. He hides his blubbery smile behind Steve's shoulder.

"Doorbell, pretty boy."

"Hmm. Call me that again," he mumbles, smiling lopsided and dreamy.

"Pretty boy, time to get your pretty ass up."

Steve turns over and kisses Billy the rest of the way awake.

The doorbell rings, again and again and again.

"Jesus."

"Told you."

"Don't wanna."

"You think it's the kids?"

"No? I..." Steve blinks, thinking. "Oh shit."

"Oh shit?"

"It's Robin."

"Huh?"

Steve leaps out of bed butt naked, bent in half as he grabs for whatever clothes he can reach. Billy hadn't realized last night that Steve just stripped and threw his clothes wherever they landed.

His hair flops all over the place, wild and out of control and perfect even as he still squints one eye half closed.

"Your friend, Robin? Band girl Robin?"

"Uh-huh!" Steve pulls on a dirty shirt with a sauce stain on the front and grimaces before pulling it off again. He tugs jeans and a different shirt on and goes into his bathroom. "I forgot I made plans with her today."

"Plans?" Billy sits up on his elbows, happy to watch Steve scramble as much as he's relieved it's not Max with an emergency.

There's lots of combing and styling as Steve elaborates. "Remember I said I owed someone an apology for being a dick? That was Robin. I wanted to talk and she finally said yes."

Steve starts in on the hairspray full force. Downstairs, Robin's ringing the doorbell like she thinks Steve's dead on the other side.

Billy remembers the weird French movie with the women on the cover. "She's the one who suggested that movie yesterday?"

“Yep!” Still more hairspray.

“Not even I use that much, man. Don’t make yourself a fire hazard.”

Steve pops out and grins at him. He closes his eyes and sprays more to prove a point.

“I owe her one too,” Billy says and it gets the hairspray to stop.

“I think she’d appreciate that. I would too.” He flips the can of hairspray like it’s a nunchuk before catching it again, seamless. “Let’s try not to double team her though. She’s gonna be pissed enough as it is with me.”

“Don’t worry, she’s not really my type.”

Steve blinks then makes a face. He goes back into the bathroom and starts running the sink. Billy hears the uncapping of his toothpaste. “Don’t be gross!”

“You said it, not me.”

Steve leans around the doorway, brush in mouth. Foam drips onto the carpet and he sighs, heading back to the sink. Billy hears him spit and rinse and spit again and settles further back into the pillows, thinking about the night before.

He feels...happy.

Steve returns, hands on his hips as he takes Billy in.

“You’re real tall from this angle.”

“I’m always tall.”

Billy reaches for his waist and finds a belt loop. He tugs and Steve smiles again as he gives in to pull of their lips touching.

“Is she trying to do a song?” Steve suddenly asks.

“The Imperial March, I think.”

“Which one is that again?”

“Darth Vader’s tune.”

Steve shakes his head into another kiss and Billy sighs with it. “Just come back to bed. We can apologize later.”

Steve kisses him once, twice, then drags himself away. “Nope. I’m being a responsible person. You should too. Put some pants on.”

“But being naked in your bed is so fun. I might stay like this forever.”

He wiggles his hips. Steve’s cheeks go pink.

Then there’s the sound of the door opening and Steve’s entire demeanor changes. He tenses up, listening.

Then, “I’m letting myself in, dingus! You better be decent!”

“Shit. I forgot I showed her the spare.”

“Why?” Billy asks, jumping up and trying to grab something of Steve’s that might fit him.

“She’s my friend!”

Billy swears and rifles through one of Steve’s dresser drawers for a pair of old pants. He finds a pair of navy jeans and tugs them on, too aware of how they’re just a little too long.

He’s still hunting for a shirt when Steve pulls his attention away by turning his face back for a final kiss. It’s a peck really. But he’s smiling when he draws away and Billy’s caught like a fish on a hook.

“We’ll continue this later?”

Billy knocks their noses together, skims his lips across Steve’s cheek. “Yeah we will.”

Steve noses at him right back. Then, like he just made the decision, he flicks Billy’s nipple and runs out of the room.

Billy just stands there for a moment. Then he hears the two of them downstairs trading hellos and whatever else.

He pulls on the first shirt he sees, runs his hands through his curls, and braces himself.

-

“I had to see it for myself. So you two finally kissed and made up, huh?”

She doesn’t *know*, but she doesn’t catch on to their nervousness about it, even with the awkward laughter. They haven’t discussed it. Haven’t discussed anything.

Billy can read it on him. Steve’s anxious, but not in any way that Billy’s worried what he’ll say later. Steve agreed it wasn’t practice. It wasn’t a game.

It was real.

He doesn’t think he’d feel so settled like he does if it was anything but.

But Robin is perceptive. He’s never spent long in her company, hasn’t ever had a reason to. But she’s like him, and that makes her aware in a way others won’t be.

Plus, she has a good reason to be wary of him. He certainly left an impression.

They’re in the kitchen. Steve is making a huge batch of scrambled eggs and Billy’s sitting at the island, watching Robin watch them.

They’re not even really talking about anything when Billy just can’t keep it in anymore.

“I’m gay.”

Robin blinks at him. Steve throws a somewhat bug eyed look over his shoulder.

“I’m a piece of shit,” he says next. “I’ve been a piece of shit. I said something stupid and mean to you and I shouldn’t have. I was being a hypocrite.”

Steve's looking at him like he's grown a second head.

Robin keeps blinking, eyes flitting to Steve then back to Billy. "I am...*also* gay," she states.

Now it's her turn to get the *look*.

"He knew?"

"Yeah. He know about you?"

"Yep."

Steve sighs and digs a spatula into the mess of eggs.

"And I like both, yippee."

"I taught him that," Robin says with pride, pulling a seat up beside Billy.

-

Billy excuses himself after breakfast so Steve and Robin can air it out and say what they need to say to each other. He used to be jealous of them, for about five minutes. Then he got over himself. Then he realized Robin really was into girls and it hadn't just been a drunk bout of staring at another girl's tits at a party.

He goes and picks up some groceries, a few more packs of cigarettes. He's parked out front of Melvald's and counts the cash he has on hand, adds up the rest he has in the bank.

He doesn't like the number he ends up with.

There's a *hiring now* sign in the window of Melvald's. He knows Byers' mom works there, she's the one who rang him up. She's a nice lady, tiny, smokes like a chimney.

He would apply, if Neil didn't shop at Melvald's every other day like clockwork.

-

Back at Steve's house, he walks in on Robin arguing with Steve about a tragic love story. He puts what little groceries he bought away and tosses the extra pack of smokes to Steve on his way to the couch. He sits on Steve's other side, and tries to catch the topic.

"It's *romance*, Steve! It's the most tragic love story of all time!"

"I already said I'm gonna watch it, I didn't ask you to walk me through every scene."

"It's French!" she exclaims.

"It's French," Steve agrees, sinking back in the cushions.

"It's women in love, how can you not be interested in that?"

Steve sighs, like it's a point she's already made several times. Billy perks up. "It's about lesbians?"

"It's a war movie and they're friends apparently," Steve provides, flapping a limp hand about it.

"It's about finding love in a time of war," Robin says, pointing at the VHS tape sitting innocuously on the coffee table. "They're both living unfulfilling lives alone when their friendship saves them."

They fall in love. It's beautiful."

Billy considers the cover, suddenly is very interested in giving it a try.

Steve covers his eyes. "But it's French."

"And it's French!"

-

Steve says he'll give Robin a ride back because her mom dropped her off earlier before work. He's in the bathroom when Robin corners Billy on his way for a smoke.

She's leaning against the wall casually, just looking at him. He refuses to squirm.

"Yes?"

Robin glances up the stairs, then looks back at him. "Don't break his heart again, okay?"

Billy's fingers twitch. He sticks his hand in a pocket.

He wants to lie. It's the first instinct he has, to evade, to avoid, to cover up the dirty little lie. But it's Robin, who likes other women, who knows he likes other men. Who told Steve liking both was an option.

"How can you tell?"

"Billy." She steps up to him and flicks the lapel of his shirt. "You're wearing Steve's most hideous pink polo, and it's inside out."

He went outside like this.

He can only laugh at himself.

Steve appears at the top of the stairs, keys dangling from a finger. "Ready to go?"

Robin sends him a salute as he descends, then aims it in Billy's direction before she heads out the door. "Don't be a stranger," she tells him and maybe she even means it.

When it's just the two of them and Robin is outside, Steve steals a quick kiss.

"See you soon."

Heat crawls across his face. Was this how Wheeler felt when Steve kissed her, all easy and suave, handsome as sin? Looking at Billy like he's the only other person in the world?

Billy moves back in to steal another, adding a bite for good measure.

Steve levels him a dark look full of want and only manages to drag himself away when Robin starts calling his name.

-

Billy's laying back on the couch with the stereo on when Steve gets back.

Steve comes into the living room and flops down on top of Billy, deflating in a mess of sighs and too much hairspray. Billy wraps his arms around his waist, feeling content probably more than he

ever has.

The phone rings.

“Oh my god,” Steve groans, burrowing further down into Billy.

“You’re a popular guy, Harrington.”

He lifts his head, blowing up at his fringe. “What if we just stay like this forever?”

“I wouldn’t mind that.”

Steve’s lazy smile meets his, and Billy’s more than happy to stay like this forever if that’s what Steve wants too. It’s still hard to believe the night before wasn’t a dream.

That he gets to have this.

The answering machine clicks on and it’s Max’s small voice shaking, saying, “Billy? Billy, are you there?”

They jump apart. Steve’s the first up and across the room. He picks up the phone and holds it between them when Billy reaches the kitchen.

“Hey, Max, he’s here. We both are.”

“Max, what did he do?”

“He just called. He—*Billy*, he said he’s gonna throw your stuff out.”

The buzz is back, flaring brighter, bigger, more dangerous than it has in months.

“When?”

“Today. H-he’s at work. Mom’s running errands—”

Neil pissed at home with Max alone? With Max’s temper?

“I’m coming over.”

“We both are,” Steve adds, voice hard. “Want me to ask Ms. Byers or Ms. Henderson to pick you up so you don’t have to be there?”

“No, he won’t like that,” she says. Her voice cracks. “It’s not fair. He doesn’t get to pretend you don’t exist.”

Billy wants to punch a hole through the wall. Steve grips the phone tighter, pulling it back to speak directly into the receiver.

“We’ll be there in five, okay? Just sit tight, everything will be fine.”

He hangs up and Billy immediately starts for the stairs. He has his duffel and book bag. The rest he can just carry in his arms. Steve’s hot on his heels.

“You’re not coming, Steve.”

“Like hell I’m not. Your dad doesn’t get to do this—”

Billy turns around on the stairs, aims a glare down and finds one aimed back at him. He can handle this anger. They're both pissed at the same person right now.

"He comes home and sees you, it'll be a lot worse than some thrown out clothes."

Steve just shakes his head. "I don't care. I can handle him."

Can you, Billy thinks, feeling raw and dug from the inside out. He can't picture Steve in the same room as his father. Not after what he'd said the last time he was in a room with Neil.

Billy heads down the hall and grabs what he needs. He sees the journal he hasn't written in in weeks on his nightstand. Guilt eats him, dark and unruly along with the anger.

Maybe he's not better.

Maybe he needs to call Dr. Toll again.

Not now, he thinks. Not now.

Max needs him.

"You promised." Steve stops him with a hand on his elbow. "You promised me I could do this for you."

"You've done enough."

It comes out sour, bent wrong.

"He doesn't get to keep fucking with your life." Steve jostles him. "There's nothing he can do to hurt me besides hurt you. Or Max and her mom. Okay? So don't tell me I'm not going with you."

Billy curls and uncurls his fists. "Hurting you hurts me."

Steve lets him pull away, the shame of the admission curdling under the weight of everything else imploding within him.

He hears grunting and sees Steve shaking pillows out of their cases. He balls them up and tucks them under an arm.

"I can always call Hopper." Steve rolls his eyes when Billy sends him a furious look. Works better than words ever could.

He just turns for the hall and Billy hears more pillows being shucked.

It takes him until they're both in the foyer, two sets of keys in hand, for Billy to spit out, "Fine. But no fucking cops."

-

Max is in the front yard when they pull up, Billy screeching to a stop before the mailbox with the BMW right behind him.

It's a little after two on a Saturday, and extra shifts tend to run short.

"We have an hour or less," Billy calls back to Steve.

“I don’t know if he’ll show up early–”

Billy breezes past her into the house, ignoring the chill that crawls up his spine. The living room is unchanged, save for a few lingering bottles of beer sat beside Neil’s chair.

“Hey Max, my car’s unlocked. Why don’t you go sit inside while we get this done?”

“I’m not going anywhere!”

“Max...”

Billy can’t focus on Steve and his fruitless attempts at trying to convince his little sister to do what she doesn’t want to do. He’s been trying for years, and he’s only ever gained as much ground as the goddamn western front.

He’s in the bowels of the house now. He strides right into his old room and goes still.

It’s exactly as he left it the day he and Max rushed to grab the essentials. The things he couldn’t replace.

It’s not like he has a lot of things he needs here anymore, or even wants. But still, it’s *his* stuff. His dad doesn’t get to break things and toss them out like he did to his mom’s things.

He steps back, remembering the one thing he does want, but bumps into someone’s chest. He flinches badly, until it’s Steve saying something low and soft behind him.

“Just me,” he’s saying. “It’s just me.”

Billy nods, swallowing past a dry throat. “C-can you. Can you grab clothes and blankets? My music? I have to find something.”

“Sure. And Max is sitting in my car.” Steve clasps his shoulder as he passes into the mess of his room. Neil didn’t clean up after Billy rifled through it, and he likely didn’t allow Susan or Max to do it either.

The room is dusty. The air stale with the window shut.

It’s a fucking monument and Billy can’t be here anymore.

He backs out and goes to his father’s room.

He knows where it is, just not precisely. The photo album from Neil’s first marriage is hidden and Billy needs to dig it out. Wants the pictures of his mom he hasn’t been allowed to look at in years.

The room is dark and claustrophobic. It smells like his dad’s aftershave, a scent that makes the hair on his arms stand on end. He breathes through his mouth and starts looking.

The closet is mostly Neil’s clothes. Susan’s are all pushed to one side, her flowery patterns and pastels making way for slacks and dress shirts.

Neil’s favorite belt is hung on its own hanger and Billy’s skin crawls.

He touches the buckle, barely feeling the metal of it. The design is heavy-handed, the leather thick and well worn.

He feels sick.

He doesn't find it in the closet. He doesn't find it with Susan's collection of books on her walnut shelf by the window. He doesn't find it in either nightstand.

Could Neil have tossed it?

He drops to his knees and bends over, scanning under the bed. An old stack of frames and Susan's laundry ladder paint dark shapes but there's nothing he needs.

"Fuck." He sits back up, on his calves. "Fuck."

He punches the floor twice and forces himself up. He'll check the garage.

He sees Steve stuffing pillow cases full as he walks by, and when their eyes meet, Steve just nods. A lifeline.

Billy breathes.

He doesn't bother with the light when he reaches the garage. With both Neil and Susan out, there's no need for it. It's dark, but with enough light slipping through the double-wide doors to see what he came to do.

The steel shelves are still stacked with boxes Neil never bothered to unpack. They're taped up from multiple moves, their tops wonky like maybe Neil sometimes went through them. Maybe it's out here.

Billy grabs box after box, not wasting time replacing them when he's done.

It's the second to last box he grabs when his hand grasps a familiar brown leather binding. His heart flips, then sinks.

Outside, a door slams.

He snatches the album and runs back inside. He finds Steve frozen in the hall, lumpy pillow cases hanging heavy in both hands.

Billy's been stupid.

He can't move. Can't think. Steve is standing in the middle of Billy's living room, five pillow cases between two hands, full of the inane things that Billy's spent his life amassing, and Neil is going to come in and see him and fucking kill him.

He's stuttering, doesn't even realize he's doing it until Steve is across the room and in front of him, shushing him quietly.

"It'll be fine. Take these around the back and I'll handle your dad."

Billy shakes his head.

He can hear Neil walking up the steps.

They have seconds.

Steve says his name, just once. Billy takes the pillow cases and doesn't argue, doesn't think, when Steve turns him and pushes him a little towards the backyard.

He hears the door open when he steps outside, slips a little on the slick grass under his boots. He

hurries.

Out front, Maxine is standing in the middle of the street, caught on her way to the house.

Her eyes are huge, panic hunching her shoulders.

“He’s here.”

“Get back in that fucking car, Maxine,” he says, his voice shaking.

Thankfully, she does.

He drops his shit in the Camaro, sees Steve’s already dumped the others in the BMW.

His heart swells. He doesn’t deserve this. Doesn’t deserve Steve after all he’s done.

He runs back to the house, where the front door hangs open, the screen flapping.

Inside, Neil’s got Steve against the wall.

Steve’s nose is bleeding.

Everything goes away. His anger. His fear.

Billy slams into his dad and sends them both smashing into the floor.

Steve’s saying his name. There are hands grabbing at him.

All he can see is Neil underneath him. His lips are moving. His fists are landing. His legs are kicking. His eyes hate.

Red hair gets in his eyes, obscures the man beneath him. He’s distracted for one second. Only one.

He’s thrown off. Sees stars after his head meets the wall. Steve is in front of him now, getting between Neil and—and Max, who’s got her arm trapped in Neil’s fist. Whose got her fingers wrapped around the hilt of the knife he’d given her. Neil throws her down, the knife goes flying somewhere behind them. Her head snaps back and she goes still for a beat, groaning. Time ceases. Everything, everyone stops.

She moves, head lolling to the side. Sounds out of it when she says, eyes landing on him, “Billy, he’s here.”

Steve starts in on Neil.

Billy doesn’t remember much after that.

-

He comes back to reality as he’s pacing, heart racing out of his chest, police cruisers parked on the curb.

Max is in one of those space blankets, sitting on the ledge of an ambulance. An EMT picks over her and she glowers at the fussing.

Steve is talking to some cop and he’s loud, and he’s pissed.

Hopper is saying, “Come back to me, kid. You hear the question or no?”

“He threw her down. She got knocked out.”

“Billy—”

“Where is he?”

“He’s in custody. Right now I need you to answer my questions.”

“I know the fucking drill.”

He doesn’t see Neil anywhere, not on the lawn, not in the back of the cruisers.

Did they already take him away? Has he really been that out of it?

“He was in pretty bad shape,” Hopper continues. “How’d he end up like that?”

“All me,” Billy says easily. He honestly doesn’t remember if he went in on Neil after Steve had.

“Huh.” Hopper writes a note and closes his notepad. “Go see your sister. She’s worried about you.”

Billy just walks away. The EMT is checking her back when he reaches her.

“I already said I’m *fine*,” she’s whining. “Billy, tell him.”

The EMT prods at her sides and all the way up to her neck. She flinches away when he gets behind the side of her head that hit the floor first.

He draws back, no nonsense as he says to Billy, “No major injuries I can find, but I still feel better having her fully looked over at Hawkins General.”

“No!”

Billy holds up a finger to her. “Has anyone called Susan?”

“...No.”

“Take her,” he tells the EMT, and ignores Max’s shouting to head back in the house.

The phone rings twice before a woman answers, relaying a greeting he doesn’t fully hear.

“I need to talk to Susan Hargrove. It’s an emergency.”

“Regarding?”

He bites his tongue to keep from screaming at her. “It’s about her daughter, Maxine.”

-

He’s parked behind Steve, watching him ferry in pillow case after pillow case.

His hands tighten over the wheel when Steve finishes, heads to him. He’s right to look wary. Billy’s balloon is about to pop.

Steve wordlessly opens the backseat and carries those pillow cases in too.

The photo album sits like a brick in the passenger seat. When Steve is gone again, Billy glances its

way. He reaches for it and flips it open in his lap.

He'd half suspected Neil to scribble some bullshit insults inside, sharpie over his mom's face. Rob Billy of ever being able to see her again, since she made it so clear he wasn't welcome anymore.

But it's untouched. The album had sat forgotten and buried with a bunch of other things Neil had written off as unimportant. He doesn't even know if there are others. He just remembers when he was very little how excited he was when she let him pick out a sticker to put on the front. He'd chosen a sunflower.

His mom didn't hate Hawkins, but she missed California more, hated his father even more so. He remembers them fighting before he could really walk. How could she have lasted so long only to abandon him in the end?

The last words she'd spoken to him ring in his ears.

Had she seen Neil in him even as a child? That potential to hate so badly and burn everything he touched?

Billy startles when his door opens. Bites his tongue when he sees it's just Steve.

He's got Max's knife folded and in his hand. He must have grabbed it before the cops came.

Steve Harrington, making sure the Hargrove-Mayfield bullshit didn't get them into worse trouble.

Billy takes it, a strange sense of urgency settling over him.

"Can't believe she had the balls to pull it on him," he mutters, running a thumb over it before tossing it in the glove.

"Kid's got a mean streak. Wonder where she could have possibly gotten that." Steve crouches, nosing into his business as per usual. His big eyes drag over the pictures, their plastic yellowed and crinkled firm in spots. "She's really beautiful."

"Yeah."

"Looks like you."

Billy nods, trying not to notice the miserable underscore to every memory. Their filthy kitchen. The backyard Steve played with him in, before Neil could dedicate the next door neighbor boy to memory. Before he called Billy certain things that still stick in his throat when he thinks about Steve wanting him.

He worries it'll never go away.

He turns another page. Neil, no moustache. Neil, eyes pale and brow low, beer in hand. His mother, her smiles growing smaller and smaller until her cheeks are just shadows, her eyes downcast. Midway through they're rarely pictured looking at one another, Billy always in the middle.

"You know...the first time I saw you, I thought you were so cool. I wanted to be your best friend."

The smile breaks before he can stop it. Steve flips another page.

"I thought you were a freak," Billy laughs.

“What, why?”

“You were too pushy, too friendly. And you had this huge fucking mouth,” Billy tells him, covering Steve’s hand with his own. “You still do.”

When he looks up, Steve’s wagging his eyebrows. Billy squeezes his hand. Lets him go.

“I...I need to take a drive. Shit was.” He can’t think of anything worthwhile to say. “I’m sorry.”

Steve’s unscathed, save for a few busted blood vessels. He’ll probably bruise but his nose didn’t break when Neil went in on him.

“It’s your dad’s fault. He’s a real piece of work.”

“He is.”

“Max is gonna be alright, Billy.”

“I fucked up. I can’t stay.”

“You didn’t. It wasn’t your fault,” Steve insists. “But no, I get it. Get some air, take as long as you need. I’ll make something for dinner. Pasta sound good? Then we can go check in on Max.”

Billy’s hand shakes beneath the photo album.

“No, Steve.” He’s going to pop. Erupt until all that’s left is Steve at his feet, burnt to a crisp. “I can’t stay.”

Steve squints his eyes. “What do you mean? I said you can stay as long as you need—”

“In Hawkins.”

Finally, it lands. Steve’s hand goes from the album to the wheel. “Billy—”

“He’ll get out. He always does. He’ll sweet talk the pigs and then he’ll be *out* and he’ll come for you. I can promise you if he doesn’t already know who you are, he’s working on finding out. You’re in the goddamn phone book like everybody else, Harrington.”

His soft brown eyes turn hard, steely. Billy switches his gaze to the wheel. He takes Steve’s hand and pries it off.

“He hurt Max because I was too selfish to just let my shit go. He knows your face now. He’ll fucking—he’ll hurt you, again, because of me, and I—” God, why does his voice have to break *now*? “If I stick around and he finds us together—”

“Stop. Billy, stop it.”

He’s hitting the steering wheel. He can’t stop. Steve reaches for him, tries to do something, anything maybe, to get him to let go. But Billy blinks and he’s here, he blinks and he’s gone, and he blinks and he’s doing something he doesn’t even remember starting.

His throat hurts. He’s—he’s screaming. Roaring.

It cuts off all at once and Steve is just holding him.

He can’t.

He shoves Steve off him, but it's weak. He slides through Steve's arms like mud, sticking in his seeking fingers, his clasping palms, his shocked face. He's blasting Steve apart, into a million pieces, because he has to.

He jerks the keys. The Camaro rumbles to life.

"It's not forever. This isn't—it's *not* goodbye. Once I'm eighteen he can't hurt me anymore. He won't be able to hurt you."

"But I—" Steve's holding the door open, placing himself between Billy and his freedom. "You don't get to make that decision for me."

"I do. I do, because I love you," Billy says, the words easing out of him like sharing the crisp end of a cigarette. "I do, because I promised you I'd never miss another birthday and I plan on keeping that promise. It's not goodbye, but I have to go. I have to go to keep everyone safe."

He doesn't look at Steve to see if he understand that Billy *means* those three words. He doesn't look when he places a hand on Steve's chest and shoves him out, away. He doesn't look at Steve as he shuts the door in his face. He doesn't look when Steve is shouting, "It doesn't work like that! If we don't stand up to him, he'll never stop!"

He doesn't look when he backs out into the street, when Steve follows him out, when he starts slapping at the hood like an idiot who wants to get run over.

"Don't do this!"

He doesn't look in his rearview when Steve is shouting his name.

He doesn't look until he stops driving, far enough away Steve won't be able to find him right away. Far enough away he'll be able to make a plan.

He pushes himself into sour air and realizes two things.

He's been sobbing since he opened the album.

When he'd shoved Steve away, the album had slipped out onto the driveway.

He beats his fists bloody on gravel and dirt.

-

The Camaro disappears down the street, shrinking until it's a blue smear turning the corner and out of his life.

Steve doesn't think he's ever been so goddamn angry at Billy Hargrove in his life.

Pushing down every nasty thing he wants to shout down the street, he instead bends and grabs Billy's family photo album before booking it inside.

He won't let Billy disappear again.

-

“Steve?” He sounds surprised and Steve can’t blame him. “Did you mean to call my house?”

Steve stares at the floor, free hand buried in his hair. He pulls, releases, pulls again.

Billy loves him. Billy left him.

“Yeah. Yeah, I did mean to call you, Jonathan. I need to ask you something that’ll probably make you want to punch me again.”

“...Okay.”

He barrels on, because there’s no other option. This is his grand plan, his one scheme.

There’s plenty of families in Hawkins. Plenty his parents know, and all of them prime sources of gossip for the boredom of Loch Nora’s residents. Most are about his rich neighbors, people his dad works with sometimes, but some are about the poorer families. The kids from those families.

Growing up, Steve’s dad talked a lot about Lonnie Byers.

“It’s about your mom.”

There’s a sigh. A muffled muttering from the other end, like maybe he’s not alone. Maybe his mom was home. It’s late afternoon on a Saturday, and he knows Jonathan’s mom works at Melvald’s.

God, it would be so much easier if it was her.

Maybe it’s Nancy there, listening in.

“It’s about your dad,” he adds, holding his breath.

“Oh.” More muttering. “Hold on, Will’s drawing in the living room. Give me a minute.”

He waits, every second feeling like an hour as he listens to Jonathan shuffle his little brother around. It’s good too, this isn’t a conversation Steve would want any of the kids to get a hold of. It was just...too much.

Billy loves him. He loves him. He loves him.

Jonathan comes back and Steve regrips the phone. “I’m here.”

“How did your mom get him to leave?”

There’s a beat of silence, then, “What?”

“I know this is like, a hard thing to talk about. I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t need to know.”

“Steve,” Jonathan says his name in such a way it settles his anxious hair pulling. “What do you need?”

“Billy got into it with his dad and Max was there. She got hurt. She’s in the hospital, and she’s fine! She just got knocked out for a second, but—I mean. You know I can’t fight for shit. He almost broke my nose—”

“You got into it with her stepdad?”

“–Billy’s trying to skip town because he thinks Neil is going to come after me or something. But I know it’s not going to stop.”

“No, it doesn’t.” There’s a pause. “Mom divorced Lonnie. It was ugly. Is Hargrove a drunk?”

“I–I don’t know. He was drunk the other day–”

“Is he a big guy? My dad’s pretty slim, like me. When I fought back he mostly left us alone.”

Steve remembers the weight behind Neil’s fists and feels his face ache. Everything still tastes a little coppery.

“He’s short but he’s not little.”

“Huh.”

“Should I fight him again? Try and kick his ass?”

Jonathan huffs at that. “Don’t do that.”

“I can’t just let him go after Max or her mom or Billy again, if he even comes *back* –”

“Have you called Hopper?”

“Billy made me promise no cops.”

“Have you considered not listening to Billy?”

“The last time I called Hopper, he got shipped out to California. I–I can’t do that again, man.” Something tiny and broken cracks through, seeping into his voice. “I can’t go through that again.”

“You’re not going to lose him, Steve.”

Like he lost Nancy. He wonders if Jonathan’s thinking it. If he pities him.

But Jonathan has never mocked anyone in his life, not that Steve’s seen. He’s serious and steadfast, a little fucking weird. He’s sincere and rectifies his mistakes. Like the pictures. Made it less like a kick to the throat for Steve to suck it up and apologize after the fight.

They’re not friends. Nancy is with Jonathan. But Steve is with Billy now. And she–maybe she told him there was some truth to the rumor they all heard Tommy spreading.

But Nancy said it was okay. She’s okay with...that. With him.

He should talk to her soon. After everything else.

So maybe Jonathan knows. Maybe he doesn’t.

None of that matters.

“I can’t lose him again, Jon.”

“You know, the way I see it, there’s no harm in getting Hopper involved. Hopper always hated Lonnie, and he wasn’t shy about it. And you’ve seen him around my mom.”

It was the sophomore dance. They were supposed to be chaperoning, but instead had just talked to each other all night.

“He said no—”

“You’re afraid he’ll get sent away again, but he’s already done that to himself. Hop won’t involve the rest of the department.”

That takes Steve a little aback. “How do you know that?”

“I know it like I know he won’t just let Neil go. Let me call my mom.”

-

Steve is talking too much. He knows that, he does. But he needs Hopper to know. To understand every angle, to know how much Billy means to him without giving the whole thing away.

They met in the parking lot outside Benny’s Diner. Hopper arrived in his truck, still in uniform even though, according to him, he was supposed to be home an hour earlier. Joyce drove down from Melvald’s, Jonathan from his house, and Steve from his.

Hopper just sits on the lip of his truck bed and listens, moustache twitching every now and again like he wants so badly to cut in. But then Joyce will throw him a look from beside Jonathan, with his eerie stare, and then he’ll sigh and settle once more back on Steve and his rambling.

It’s already getting dark, the sky hazy with pastel purple. Steve doesn’t know how far Billy’s already gotten.

Billy loves him.

Steve gasps a breath, throat clenching between rushed words, when Hopper finally jumps in. He hushes the group when Joyce starts in to let Steve finish, everyone talking over each other.

“We’re doing this my way!” he says, raising his voice into more of a command than a shout. “Joyce, you drive through town, check every street, every business, bar, and hotel. Jonathan, you take the rest stops, the trailer park, the schools. Steve, you—”

“What’s the point of that? He’s not sticking around in Hawkins. He made it clear he’s skipping town, that he doesn’t want to be found.”

Hopper’s moustache splits on a grumble. “You’d be surprised by how many runaways are found just down the street. And that’s what we’re looking for; a runaway, not a body. You say he doesn’t have a job, barely any savings, and nothing of his own to make it too far. He’s still here.”

The pendant weighs on his chest, the chain feeling too heavy.

He can’t do this. He can’t. He can’t, he can’t, he can’t—

“Breathe,” Jonathan’s murmuring, hand on his shoulder. “We’ll find him.”

Hopper watches him have the beginning of a meltdown as Jonathan turns him around, walks him a little bit away. Joyce is saying something but Steve can’t hear through the rush of sound filling his ears.

“This hasn’t happened in—in weeks.”

Steve closes his eyes, imagines Billy kissing him. Remembers with a shiver being pinned to the wall by Neil.

“What about Neil?” he gets out, whirling back around.

Hopper’s already closing up his truck, straightening his belt while he steps away from Joyce. “Don’t worry about him.”

“Is he—you can’t just let him go, right? He *hurt* Max—”

Hopper walks up, effortlessly inserts himself where Jonathan had been, placing a huge, warm arm around Steve’s shoulders. It weighs him down, ties him to the ground beneath his feet.

“Between the two of us, I’ve had about enough of that bastard,” Hopper tells him, easy and uncomplicated. “He’s in holding for a little more than the next thirty-six hours. He’s not going anywhere while we’re finding Billy.”

“But after. What about *after*? Billy swears his dad is gonna come back, come after Max and,” he stops, then forces himself to push on regardless of whatever idea it sends Hopper. “Me.”

Hopper shakes him a little. He feels like an orange being put through a juicer. “Don’t worry about him, Steve.”

“But—”

“Harrington,” Hopper says, and it has Steve looking up at him and shutting his mouth. Something in Hopper’s eyes is deadly. Maybe a touch amused. Hopper’s honestly kind of terrifying. “You don’t need to worry about him. None of you do.”

Steve swallows. Hopper slaps his shoulder a little too hard before he lets Steve go.

“I want you to take the hangout spots, everywhere you teenagers get into trouble. Lover’s Lake, Skull Rock, that *special* bench behind the High School—oh yeah, I know about that. Places like that. Okay?”

“Places like that. Yeah, yeah I can do that.”

Hopper slaps his back once more before rounding back to his truck. “Everybody got the plan?”

They’re going to find him. They have to. Steve hardly believes they’re actually here and ready to help him. Jumping to go above and beyond because, what? Steve is freaking out? He barely knows the Byers family, had only recently patched things over with Jonathan and Nancy. He only really knows Hop through his parents and the few times he’s been pulled over.

But they’re *helping* him.

And Billy, damn him, owes Steve more time.

-

Skull rock is empty, which he suspected would be this time of night. Every time he’s taken a girl here it’s been really late. Late enough a good excuse was that they could spend the night in his car with the back seat down and the hatch open, under the stars with a blanket and a couple of beers.

His gut churns icy as he drives from place to place. More than he’s visited with Billy at some point in his life. Everywhere there are memories. Everywhere, a piece touched by him in some way or

another.

Their most frequent haunts are empty, void of the silhouette he's searching for. If Billy hasn't stopped driving since he left, then he might already be past Illinois, if his goal is to make it California. He could be heading for Michigan or Ohio, even Kentucky.

It's not like he said he was gunning for California. And why would he go back? He'd said there was nothing there for him anymore.

Steve was stupid enough to hope that one day they'd be able to visit California together. Make new memories. Better, happier, perfect memories.

He blinks away the wet gathering on his lashes and keeps driving.

It's late and he's exhausted, overstimulated and strung out from his anxiety wreaking havoc on the could bes and might bes, when he sees a soft golden glow coming from the lip of the quarry.

He pulls into the entry, driving down the easy slope until he sees the Camaro. He slams the brakes. He rubs at his nose and wipes at his eyes.

He's here.

He's fucking here. He didn't leave. He didn't—

Billy loves him, he loves him, he didn't leave him.

Yet.

Steve still has to get this right.

Hopper said to trust him. So that's what he's gonna do.

His hands shake as he steps out into the night. He's stiff from sitting so many hours, neck craned for anyone who looked like Billy or the Camaro.

The Camaro is dark and shut up. He spies inside the driver's seat and finds Billy on his side in the back, jacket serving as a blanket. His knuckles are busted where one hand is flopped over his eyes.

Steve takes a deep breath and raps his knuckles on the window as loud as he can.

Billy stirs, his face peeking behind his hand before he jerks up, eyes wide and mouth open when he sees who's found him. Then Steve sees the surprise fade into something blank and closed off.

Then the anger shows up and Steve smiles because he's *missed* Billy. It's been half a day. Less than. He's pathetic, but he can't help it.

Steve backs up as Billy flies for the door, ends up kicking it open and practically stumbling out. Both of his hands are bloodied, like he got in a fight.

Steve reaches for him, takes a hand in his before Billy snatches it away.

He's breathing hard, his eyes wild as he licks his lips. He bites them, chewing, then shoves hard at Steve's chest with both hands. He windmills to keep from falling down, barely keeping upright.

"I *told* you I was leaving," Billy roars at him. He paces back and forth, eyes hooked on Steve like he's a lion and Steve's the juicy steak. He's just tossed himself into Billy's den.

“Then why haven’t you!”

“You’re so fucking stupid, Steve, you know that? God, you couldn’t just leave me alone.”

Billy laughs once, manically at the sky, before he falls to a crouch and back on his ass. He hugs his knees and buries his face in his elbows and Steve is...lost.

He doesn’t know what this is.

“Jonathan and his mom and Hopper are all out trying to find you.”

Laughter, stretched and wirey, floats up to him.

“Just let me go, Steve.”

Steve crouches, hands hovering because he doesn’t know if Billy will punch him if he’s touched right now. Worse, Billy might book it for his car and drive him over. Or even worse—over the cliff.

“No. You’re stuck with me, remember? I’m not letting you run away.”

Blond hair moves as Billy shakes his head. “Give me a year. Just give me a fucking year. I’ll come back.”

“You told me you love me.”

Billy tightens in on himself, hunching smaller into a shape Steve doesn’t recognize.

“You can’t just skip out on me like that. What’s a girl to think?” Steve says, laughing. It comes out all watery. His heart is hammering. “Let me help you.”

“I don’t need help,” Billy says, finally lifting his head. “I’m supposed to be helping you.”

“Billy, no offense...but I didn’t ask for your help. I thought after—after what we did we’d be together. Or something, you know?”

“Or something.” Billy sneers ugly and mean. “You thought I was gonna be your boyfriend?”

His chest aches. He wants to be home, in bed, Billy warm in his arms while they talk about nothing at all. He doesn’t want to be feet from the edge of death.

But they’ve done this song and dance before, and he’s tired of it. He knows what it looks like know.

“That’s what I was hoping. Yeah.” Steve tips forward to his knees and reaches out, taps quick fingers over Billy’s arm. He’s freezing. “I think I’ve been wanting that for a long time, actually. Just didn’t realize it.”

Billy’s anger cracks, splits right down the middle. He laughs again, and Steve sees the shine of tears leak from his eyes.

“Neil’s definitely gonna kill us.”

He resists the urge to hope, to think what Billy’s saying is that he’ll stay.

“Hopper’s handling him.”

Billy's eyebrows twist up. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't really know, but he sounded like he was gonna take him out back and, you know." He mimes a finger sliding across his throat.

It shocks another wet laugh from Billy. "Christ, he's gonna ship me off again."

"He won't. He did this off the books. It was just me, him, and the Byers. Nobody else knows you're technically missing."

"...Max and Susan?"

"Not yet. I kind of ran straight to Jonathan."

Billy seems less ready to strike and more like he wants to cry, so Steve eases into sitting beside him. He worms a hand between Billy's knee and arm and finds a hand to hold.

And Billy just melts after that. Starts crying in a way Steve's never really seen him do before. Small, raw, so sad.

They sit like that until Billy's shivering. Steve's drawn his arm down into his lap, is sliding Billy's rings around and around.

Steve's looking down at Billy's split knuckles when he murmurs, "I love you too, you know."

It only makes Billy cry harder. His head falls to Steve's shoulder and Steve leans into him. He wishes there was a way to make him hurt less, to take it all away from him. Probably would have saved them both months worth of trouble.

"Please come back. We can handle this. We'll figure it out, make it where he can't do this shit to anyone ever again."

Billy breathes in shaky and deep. His other hand covers Steve's.

"I don't know if I can." His voice is so small, Steve hates it. "He makes me—I feel like I'm a fucking volcano about to blow and level the town. If he comes for you or Max...I don't know what I'll do. I don't. I'll burn everything down."

"You won't."

"You don't know that, Steve."

"You won't."

Steve pulls Billy up with him when he stands, as he leads Billy to the BMW. He needs Billy with him, where he can see him, make sure he won't blink and be gone.

Billy moves slow, lets Steve guide him into the car, lets Steve buckle him in. Kiss his cheek. Nose at his temple. Tell him *I love you, I love you and you're gonna be okay.*

He takes the cigarette Steve holds out, lets Steve light it for him. Obeys when Steve tells him to smoke.

On the way back into town, Billy evens out. When Steve chances a look, Billy's already watching him.

It slots into place then, all the years spent loving Billy as his friend. Loved him so deeply and fully that he couldn't even see it until he was gone. Until he came back all fury and worse. It's not like Nancy, or anyone else he's ever halfway had a crush on. This is everywhere, lighting him up and dragging him down, enveloping him and squeezing until he's a seed needing some dirt and sunshine. Striving on when he's all dried up.

Billy's eyes have long dried, the cigarette is nearly gone. The night is dark and Steve has more friends than he thought. He's wearing a piece of gold around his neck that makes his insides go syrupy when he thinks too hard about the nonchalant way Billy passed it over to him.

He promised never to miss another of Steve's birthdays. And he hid out at the quarry in the same spot he found Steve at a year ago.

So when Billy asks him, "What if you're wrong?" he doesn't need to ask what Billy means.

Steve only tells him, "Then I'll be the first to burn, Billy. Gladly."

-

Max stays in the hospital overnight just to be safe. She's got a headache and a nasty bruise, but she's fine.

Steve sees half the terror drain from Billy when she runs into his arms when they go to pick her up. Susan hugs them both, thanks Steve profusely. Steve tells her what he told Billy and Max and she just hugs him a little tighter.

Days pass. There's a lot of phone calls and drives to and from the station, the Hawkins county courthouse. Billy and Susan get restraining orders.

After a lot of sleepless nights and days spent not so helpfully watching Billy file various legal paperwork, Hopper shows up at the house to inform them that Neil is gone.

That he won't be coming back.

After suffering Billy grilling him for ten minutes over how he managed to do that, Hopper just says, "Let's just say he knows what I have in mind for him if he's stupid enough to show his face in Indiana again."

The state. Not just Hawkins.

Steve knows what's coming when Billy starts sniffing. Ever since he came back, agreed to stick around and see what happens with his dad, the tears come almost instantly over everything and nothing.

Hopper looks immediately uncomfortable at the prospect of Billy crying. "Okay, none of that now. I get it."

Billy just shakes his head, laughs up at Hopper. "You don't know what this means. I can't repay you."

"I still have scars from my old man's belt, so trust me when I say *I do* get it, kid." He waves a hand like it's old history, but it makes Steve hurt for him. For Billy. "Keep out of my hair and that'll be payment enough."

When Billy hugs him, Steve isn't sure who out of the two of them is more uncomfortable.

He's just happy it's over.

-

Billy doesn't have to leave, he can be in Max's life, and finish school with Steve and build something for himself. He suddenly has a future that doesn't look like the dark cloud it's always been.

He's got prospects now. He can get a job and not worry about Neil stealing his savings or demanding rent. He doesn't have to get a job until after high school if he wants. He can do this and that and so many other things that Steve hears all about, all the time, because Billy never stops talking about it.

There's a few weeks left of Summer and things are good. Billy beams like the sun despite the odd summer storm, and the still too-chilly nights to go out and raise too much hell together.

Steve gets to fall into bed with Billy at night and wake up with him snoring, drool pooling on the pillow. He gets to kiss Billy awake and say a hundred different things that make Billy blush like anyone else he's ever dated. But when Billy blushes or shies away or squirms under his words, his mouth, his hands, Steve feels full and hungry all at once. He needs more, all the time, but is happy to wait too. He's never felt so full, the happiness nearly welling over every time Billy says he loves him back because he means it when nobody else has.

They're thrifting for a housewarming gift for Susan, to celebrate the new trailer she bought at Forest Hills. It's their little slice of home, small but cozy, with just enough room for her and Max. And Billy too, because Susan said he had a home with her for the rest of his life if he wanted.

Steve knows it's a sore spot, that his relationship with Susan is fragile. But he's with Billy now, giving his input when Billy holds up something gaudy and ocean-themed as he tries to find something she'll genuinely like.

Billy cares about people so much. Sometimes it floors him.

Billy lifts a brow as Steve just smiles at the little hand-shaped sculpture made of seashells he holds up for Steve's inspection. "It's not that great, Steve."

It's hideous actually, but it isn't what Steve's got in mind to say.

"You in there, or are you trying out for the space cadets?" Billy picks up a broken mermaid themed snow globe and starts shaking it like mad, grinning like a shark when the mermaid's missing arm is unearthed and swims around her head. "Think Susan would dig this?"

"Come to California with me."

Billy stops shaking the snowglobe. He blinks and quirks a smile, like he didn't hear him quite right.

"What?"

"After graduation next year. Let's get out of Hawkins for a while. You can show me where you grew up, the places you loved—"

"I was a kid, Steve."

"You can teach me to surf."

Billy leans an elbow on the shelf, fingers reaching out to briefly touch his chest. He does that sometimes, small touches in public. Like he wants to prove Steve's here with him as much as Steve wants to prove the same. That it's real. That they're not going anywhere.

"You're serious."

"I want to do so many things with you," Steve says, taking the snow globe to place it back on the shelf. He leans into Billy's touch as much as he's able, considering where they are. "I want to be there with you to rewrite the bad into something good."

Billy eyes him, and Steve can tell he's weighing the ask. It's not small by any means. But he can't think of anything else he wants more.

"We'll make new memories," Steve says, "Together."

The fingers on his chest curl, gripping the fabric.

Billy grins.

Steve burns.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter content warning for: difficult conversations, a lot of Billy tears, first time lovemaking, drunk Neil in the background frightening Susan, Neil fights briefly with Billy and Steve and briefly knocks Max out in the process, Billy physically harming himself by punching a lot of flooring.

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