& all my problems (it's so stupid, they're not even problems!)

by MovePastTheFeeling

Summary

Max returns to Arcadia Bay after five years spent in Seattle, having kept in contact with her best friend Chloe Price. With her and Rachel Amber by her side, along with some new friends, Max will navigate the prestigious hallways of Blackwell Academy and deal with photography contests, cliques, club life, and relationship drama.

What's the worst that could happen?

(This is an AU fic set in a much nicer world in which Mr. Jefferson isn't a thing, Rachel Amber never disappeared, and Max actually kept in touch with Chloe. William is still dead, though - sorry.)

Notes

So, I have this entire story planned out, and I feel a bit apprehensive about releasing any of this before I'm completely done with the whole thing, but I want to see how much interest is out there/if you guys even want to read this at all lol

This is sort of my way of dealing with the pitch-black, bleak darkness that rears its head in the actual game and write a lighter, slice-of-life story that deals with similar themes (growing up, loss of innocence, etc.) in somewhat kinder ways. There will be some drama, but I plan
for everything to be fairly lighthearted

I really hope you guys like this! I've had so much fun getting in the heads of the wonderful characters Dontnod has created and crafting a new story with them.
Max surveys the classroom.

Their award-winning photographer/teacher isn't here yet, so the room is abuzz with energy. Golden sunlight streams in through the tall windows, the students awash in the last warmth of September.

Max has been attending Blackwell Academy for two weeks now and has been back in Arcadia Bay for three, and she still can't believe it. Every day here has been like a surreal dream come to life, especially after spending five years away in Seattle. Sure, she would get fragments of life here through her correspondences with her best friend/life partner Chloe, but hearing about a place isn't the same as truly being in a place.

Chloe, of course, manages to be late to everything. Jerk. So, Max, sitting by herself in the back of the classroom, contents herself with people-watching.

Victoria, Courtney, and Taylor are all sitting at the same table, all radiating negative energy. Max doesn't understand how they can all be so beautiful, popular, and well-liked, yet hold so much disdain for the world around them. Max doesn't exactly subscribe to the Mean Girls theory of social cliques, but with Victoria and Co. it's pretty hard to dispute.

Kate and Dana are sitting at the table to Max's right, chatting away about something. Max still thinks they're something of an odd couple, but they struck up a friendship almost immediately and have remained close ever since. Of course, Max doesn't know how anyone could dislike Kate Marsh – she was really the first friend she made at Blackwell (not counting Rachel and Chloe, of course, who she knew beforehand anyway).

Rachel Amber, Chloe's other BFF, is sitting next to her Vortex Club compatriot Hayden. Max happens to catch Rachel's gaze, who winks lasciviously in return. Ah, Rachel. Never change.

No wonder everyone loves her so much.

Spread out through the various remaining tables are people that Max knows, but not as well as she'd like (for the most part). There's Alyssa, her nose buried in a book. Daniel, sketching away at something. Stella is scrolling intensely through her phone.

Max checks the clock. Class is about to begin.

Max sighs. It's no surprise when Chloe slides into the classroom just before their teacher enters, a devilish grin on her face.

"That still counts as being on time!" Chloe says.

Their teacher rolls her eyes fondly.

"I'll let you get away with it this time, Chloe," their teacher, Hanna Burch, says.

Chloe slides into the chair next to Max, giving her a playful smirk as she does. Max rolls her eyes good-naturedly.
"Alright, class, focus in, focus in," Ms. Burch says.

Max cracks a grin at that. As if anyone has a hard time focusing- she's pretty sure that everyone in the class is nursing at least a small crush on Ms. Burch. Or, in Victoria’s case, a huge, obvious crush played out all across her face and general body language. It makes Max want to laugh, the way that Victoria laser-focuses in on the teacher and leans forward in an almost predatory manner.

Not that I should judge. Ms. Burch is awesome, and I wouldn’t exactly turn her down if she ever asked. Wait – that’s weird to think about.

“Today, class, is a very special day,” Ms. Burch says. “And not because it’ll be the first time that Courtney stops texting as I’m speaking.”

Courtney yelps, her face turning bright red. She guiltily slides her phone into her purse.

“No, fellow artists, today is the day I announce the beginning of the annual photography contest!” Ms. Burch says.

Murmurs immediately bubble up around the room.

“You may have heard rumors about this,” Ms. Burch says. “The contest is simple – you enter a photograph, and I, along with a panel of my fellow professional photographers, will select a winner. The winning photograph will be the one that best exemplifies the theme, and this year’s theme is ‘empathy.’”

The conversations around the classroom increase in volume, and Ms. Burch silences them all with a gesture.

“You may interpret this theme in any way you like,” Ms. Burch. “You can be as lofty or as straightforward as you so desire. There are no wrong answers, save for not submitting a photograph at all. I hope to see entries for all of you.”

Max sinks in her seat. She loves photography with all her heart, but the idea of sharing her work with others still terrifies her, no matter how many times Chloe gushes over her work. Putting her work out there makes it feel so real, so concrete. And then for her photograph to be judged on top of that? Horrifying.

Chloe jabs her elbow into Max’s ribs.

“Stop freaking out, nerd,” Chloe murmurs, always the mind-reader. “You’re going to win if you enter, easy money.”

Max shrugs non-committedly. She wishes that she could have as much courage as Chloe does on her behalf.

“And, to dangle the carrot in front of you all, the winning photograph will be displayed in the Zeitgeist Gallery in San Francisco,” Ms. Burch says. “And, the winner will get to travel with me to go see it.”

The classroom erupts into conversation at that. Ms. Burch manages to get the noise to a reasonable level after a few moments.

“If you have any further questions, please see me after class,” Ms. Burch says. “Now, let’s discuss the reading. Who here can name the first commercially successful photographic process?”
Max begins to zone out as Victoria answers the question, saying something about Daguerreotypes or whatever. Her mind is already completely preoccupied with the contest – what is she going to do? Who – or what – is going to be her subject? Does she even want to enter this thing at all?

Max, Chloe, and Kate decide to lounge outside after class, their free periods just happening to align. It’s a beautiful day, the last vestiges of summer still clinging to the air. Max and Kate rest their backs against one of the old oak trees that dot the grassy quad; Kate giggles as Chloe decides to use her lap as a pillow.

Speaking of odd couples, Max isn’t sure how Kate and Chloe are friends really at all. Kate is prim and proper to a fault, while Chloe is self-described crust-punk and general rabble-rouser. At first, Max thought Chloe was playing nice just for her sake, but the two seem to really like one another. Whatever it is, Max certainly isn’t complaining – having more than one friend at once is still a bit of a novel concept for her.

“Do you know what you’re going to do for the contest, Max?” Kate asks.

Max shrugs weakly and stares up at the clouds.

“Not really,” Max says. “I don’t even think I’m going to enter.”

Kate’s eyes widen.

“Max, you have to enter!” Kate says. “Your photography is wonderful, you need to share it with the world.”

Chloe scoffs.

“Hell yeah, she does,” Chloe says. “Wait, sorry, language. But I’ve been telling her that forever.”

“I don’t know if I like you two ganging up on me,” Max says.

“Hey, if you’re not going to listen to me, maybe you’ll listen to actual saint Kate Marsh here,” Chloe says. “Your photography is amazing, dude, share it and you’ll see.”

“I guess,” Max sighs. “I don’t know.”

“You can’t let all of these opportunities pass you by, Maximillian,” Chloe says.

Max shrugs non-committedly and stares out across the quad.

“Are you two planning on entering?” Max asks.

Chloe just laughs.

“No way,” Chloe says. “Photography is more of your scene, brah.”

“What?” Max exclaims. “You’re lecturing me about how I have to share my shit with the world and you’re not even going to enter? You hypocrite.”

“Get off my case, sister,” Chloe says. “I’m not much of a ‘photographer.’ I don’t really ‘make art’ or ‘get creative.’”

Chloe settles into Kate’s lap, staring up at the gently swaying branches above.
“Why are you even in the class?” Max asks.

Chloe looks at Max like she’s an idiot.

“Uh, because Ms. Burch is hella hot,” Chloe says. “And I wanted to hang out with you.”

“Aww, so sweet and yet so creepy,” Max says.

“That’s how I like to live my life,” Chloe says.

Max fondly punches Chloe’s shoulder. The group is silent for a beat.

“…I’m going to enter, Max” Kate says.

“Thanks, Kate,” Max says.

That night, Max finds herself lying on her bed and staring up at the darkened ceiling, watching the way the tree just outside her window creates strange patterns against the moonlight.

The novelty of having her own room completely unconnected from her parents (besides, y’know, their monetary contributions) is still not lost on her. Having the room to herself does feel a bit lonely, but Max kinds of likes the solitude, the quiet power of having a space all to her own.

Max can’t sleep. She feels like all of her neurons are firing at once.

*Or is that a seizure? Maybe not a good way to think of having an overactive imagination.*

She just can’t stop thinking about the contest. It weighs heavily on her, and she knows that she’s assigning additional value to it that doesn’t actually exist, but even then, its importance isn’t lost on her. The ability to simply put your work out there and self-promote is just one huge difference between a capital-P “Photographer” and some hobbyist who is just out there snapping pictures with an old instant camera. Max may not like it, but she knows it’s a part of the whole professional game.

And she’s only in high school. How is she even going to get into a good art school, let alone go on to become a reasonably successful photographer, if she won’t share her art with anyone not named Chloe, Rachel, or Kate?

She knows she’s being ridiculous, but it’s easy for her anxiety to spike under the cover of darkness.

Plus, just being back in Arcadia Bay continues to be overwhelming. She’s settled in just fine, with Chloe having helped with the transition, but the five years she spent away in Seattle still weight heavily on her. Coming back has felt like she’s been trying to slip into an old memory and hoping that no one notices.

Max sighs, and gets up to turn her stereo on. She puts the volume on its lowest setting and lets the calm, quiet acoustic guitars carry her to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

No Mr. Jefferson at all because fuck that guy. Could you guys figure out the super duper clever way I came up with the name for the new photography teacher? (/s)
I think I'm going to update this every Sunday, but I'll release a two/three chapters this weekend just to see what kind of response I get.

I'd really like to get feedback for this! This is the first long-form story that I'm letting other people see, so I really have no idea what I'm doing. I really, genuinely treasure any comments (even if they're as simple as "love this!" or "hate this!"), so don't be afraid to just blow my inbox up!
“Bruh, school is a spook,” Chloe says, catching up to Max as she walks through the quad.

Max slows down her pace and falls into step with her best friend.

“Got that quiz grade back, huh?” Max asks.

“Yup. I don’t know why teachers just spring those on ya girl,” Chloe grumbles.

“They’re totally out to get you,” Max says sardonically. “Testing the ability to retain knowledge just for maximum Chloe pain.”

Chloe rolls her eyes – Max thinks that Chloe’s the only person who can get away with doing that and not look totally annoying.

“Yeah, obviously. This school has always been out to get me,” Chloe says. “But hey, I like my grades like I like my tits.”

“Oh no,” Max groans, knowing exactly where this is going.

“Straight Cs, baby!” Chloe says. “Ugh, my step-fart is going to kill me.”

“Hey, that’s the nicest mean nickname you’ve given him in a while!” Max says.


“Not at all,” Max says, shoving Chloe right back. “Hey, if he gives you shit, call me, alright?”

“You know it,” Chloe says. “Ugh, I’m hella jealous that you’re living in the dorms while I have to go back home every day like some pissant little high schooler.”

“You are a pissant little high schooler,” Max says.

“Rude!” Chloe says. “I like to think of myself as a distinguished, puissant scholar.”


Chloe scoffs and playfully pushes Max’s shoulder.

“Some best friend you are,” Chloe says. “Can I chill with you before I peace out? I’m going to avoid my problems like a real adult.”

“Yeah, totally,” Max says. “You’re a good distraction from my homework.”

“Damn, that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said about me,” Chloe says.

Max wishes she could get back to her dorm room without running into at least three separate instances of high school drama – she’s managed to warn Alyssa about a poorly-thrown football hurling towards her head, deftly side-stepped another attempt from Warren at asking her out, and walked past Taylor and Courtney arguing (which isn’t drama that directly affects her, but it’s still too much exposure to that pair than she really needs in a day).
As always, the actual return to her room is a huge relief. Max exhales as she passes through that liminal space that is her doorway and, just like that, she’s transported to her hideaway, her sanctuary (one, though, that she’s more than happy to share with Chloe).

Chloe eagerly sprawls out on the bed once they get to the dorm room. Max just shakes her head fondly and sits down at her desk, intending to actually get some work done. That math homework won’t do itself, which Max still considers an absolute failure of science and technology.

She’s successful for about fifteen minutes, before Chloe begins launching wadded-up pieces of paper at her head.

After much whining and begging from Chloe, they end up watching cartoons on the tiny screen of Max’s laptop for so long that they can both feel themselves slowly dissociate from reality.

“Adventure Time is the greatest piece of art ever created,” Chloe says in awe.

“I think you might actually be Marceline,” Max says.

“Oh, fuck yeah!” Chloe says. “Man, I wish I was a shapeshifting vampire/demon. That’d be so rad. I’d be the ultimate badass…”

Max’s phone suddenly buzzes, and it sends both girls jumping out of their skin. Max’s laptop nearly clatters to the floor, and Chloe just barely manages to save it.

“Nice one, ‘ultimate badass,’” Max says, checking her phone.

“Whatever, that phone came out of nowhere,” Chloe says.

"Oh, shoot," Max says as she looks at the calendar on her phone. "I totally forgot I have a tea date with Kate, like, right now."

"Good lord, you two are adorable," Chloe says. “Pun intended. Probably.”

"Sorry, I’m going to have to ditch you,” Max says as she roots around her desk for her wallet.

“Still finding ways to leave, even after those five years we spent apart?” Chloe asks, hand to her chest in mock offense. “How could you?”

Max rolls her eyes.

“You’re going to milk that forever, aren’t you?” Max asks.

“Oh, hells yes,” Chloe says. But it's cool. I'll just go hunt down Rachel and force her to hang out with me."

"Consensual!" Max says, grinning. "I'll see you later."

Max runs out of her room. Her phone buzzes again, helpfully notifying her that she's already five minutes late. Thankfully, the tea place is just down the block and across the street, so if she runs the rest of the way she won't be excessively late.

Max bursts into the tea shop about ten minutes later, red-faced and out of breath. She sees Kate sitting at their usual spot, with two cups of tea set out on the table in front of her. Max makes her way over to her.

"Sorry, I ordered your favorite for you," Kate says, pushing the mug towards her.
"Oh man, I should be apologizing to you," Max says. "I'm super late."

Kate smiles serenely at her.

"Don't worry about it," Kate says. "Tea will always be here."

Max chuckles.

"And that's a great comfort to us all," Max says. "Anyway, how're you doing, Kate?"

Kate taps her fingers against the side of her mug, looking concerned.

"I feel like Victoria has been extra nasty lately," Kate says. "I'm worried about her."

"Wait, you're worried about her?" Max asks. "Has she been messing with you?"

Kate shrugs.

"Nothing I can't handle," Kate says. "I wouldn't have started my abstinence campaign or a Bible study club if I couldn't handle people making fun of my religion."

"Alright, if you say so," Max says. "You know I'm always here if it ever gets too much, right?"

"I know, Max," Kate says. "You're very sweet. But I'm serious when I say I'm worried about Victoria. I hardly know anything about her. When people lash out like she does it usually suggests they're being hurt elsewhere in life."

"Yeah, that could be," Max says. "Or maybe she's just mean and nasty because she's, y'know, mean and nasty."

Kate cracks a grin at that.

"Yeah, it could be that, too," Kate says. "It's just – I don't know. I feel like there's more than meets the eye with Victoria."

"That very well could be," Max says. "But I don't think either of us will ever get past her thorny exterior to find out."

"You're probably right," Kate says. "I know you probably don't care."

"I know I should," Max says. "But it's really hard. Victoria is consistently such a jerk."

"And that's why I worry," Kate says, before getting lost in her own thoughts for a moment.

"Anyway, have you been reading the Bradbury book I gave you?"

"Yes!" Max says. "Alright, I have nothing but praise..."

Her conversation with Kate delves into much lighter topics from there on out, their slowly decreasing amounts of tea the only clue to the passing of time. The café they're in is almost unfairly comfortable, between the cozy, mismatched furniture, the Christmas lights that are strung up from the ceiling, and the leafy, potted plants that dot every available surface.

It's like another sanctuary that's opened up its doors for her. Max could stay here forever, but...

"Wow, it's late," Kate says, happening to glance down at her phone.
"Oh yeah, it is," Max says. "We should probably get out of here. I have so much homework to do."

"I know, I'm in the same boat," Kate says.

"School," Max groans dramatically, throwing her head back in mock despair.

Kate giggles.

"Let’s walk back to campus," Kate says. “The lighting is great at this time of day. Maybe you’ll get some good shots?"

“Yeah, good call, Kate,” Max says. “I really dig your artistic eye.”

“Kind of a gimme,” Kate says. “Everyone likes the golden hour.”

“Still, I like to hear your thoughts,” Max says. “I’ll gladly take advice from anyone who draws as well as you do.”

Kate smiles, her elegant features lit up by the golden sunlight. A faint pink dusts her cheeks as she slips her hand into Max’s. Max has never really been one for platonic handholding before, mostly because she didn’t even know it was a thing (rather than a Thing that signified that you were dating). With Kate, she can’t even remember how it started, she just knows that it’s nice and somehow appropriate for their tea dates.

“You compliment me too easily,” Kate says, giving Max’s hand a squeeze.

“Just easily enough, I think,” Max says.

Kate just shakes her head and tries not to let her blush take over her entire face (it kind of does, after a while).

Max does take a couple of pictures on the way back to campus, the lighting absolutely perfect. Arcadia Bay might be some weird, old fishing town, but it can be beautiful in the right light and at the right angle. Max wants to capture all of those angles.

Once they’re almost back to the dorms, Max whips her camera around with one hand and takes a picture of Kate before she can react. Kate yelps and tries to hide her face, though it’s too late by that point. Max just laughs.

“Max!” Kate exclaims. “Sneak attack! How could you?”

“Don’t worry, it’s a good shot,” Max says.

“You’re not going to post that anywhere, are you?” Kate asks.

Max shakes her head.

“No way, if you don’t want me to," Max says. “I could give it to you, if you want. Ooh, maybe this could be the contest photo!”

Kate laughs and shakes her head.

“That would be a little self-serving,” Kate says. “I appreciate it, though.”

Max grins cheekily and rubs the back of her neck.
“What’re friends for, right?” Max asks.

They make their way back to their floor of the dorm building. Both of them linger out in the hallway, not wanting to bring their tea date to a close and thus be forced to face the real world of homework and due dates.

And then, Victoria’s door bursts open and she pushes her way past Max and Kate.


Max sighs, feeling like she’s deflating.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” Kate says. “I’ll see you later, Max.”

“I know. Thanks a lot, Victoria,” Max says. “See you, Kate. Come drop by my room if you want to distract me from homework!”

Kate chuckles.

“Just get your work done, you,” Kate says, trying to sound stern.

“Yes, ma’am,” Max giggles.

Max is utterly unsurprised that her phone begins ringing around eight at night. It’s Chloe, no doubt itching to vent her ear off because of whatever her step-father said or did. To be fair, while Max isn’t exactly the biggest fan of David Madsen either, it’s clear that Chloe delights in antagonizing the man. Their relationship is really a two-way street of derision.

“Hey, Chloe,” Max says. “David on your case again?”

“Ugh, he’s such a fucking penis,” Chloe says. (Max cringes at the choice of language). “He’s on my ass about applying myself and working hard in school, while I know for a fact that he did crap in high school. The only reason he managed to get into college was because he hitched his shit-wagon to the ROTC and the military and signed his miserable life away.”

“I hear you, girl,” Max says.

“And, like, whatever, maybe I could be doing a bit better,” Chloe says. “But grades are fake and illusory, and schools are these weird oppression machines that teach us to be good, obedient factory workers and assign these dumb letters to narrow expressions of our intelligence. It’s fucking bullshit, yo.”

Max is always thrown by how quickly Chloe can oscillate between irrational rants about her step-father to weirdly cogent critiques of society. It’s a rare skill.

“Definitely,” Max says a bit off-handedly. “Hey, I don’t want to make it sound like I’m siding with David, but maybe you could apply yourself a bit more? School is fascist or whatever, but it might be good just to play the game, excel, and then flip them all off in the rearview.”

“Yeah, that’s what Rachel is always telling me,” Chloe says. “That’s why she’s a 4.0 student, apparently.”

“It’s like a delayed fighting-the-man thing,” Max says. “Put your head down now so you can rise up later.”
“I don’t want to put my fucking head down at all,” Chloe says, before sighing. “But you’re probably right. I don’t know. I just find it hard to give a shit after…”

“Your dad,” Max says quietly. “I know.”

“Yeah, it fucking sucks, still,” Chloe says. “Shit, I don’t want to get all Midwest emo on you or anything. Just sucks, is all.”

“Have you visited him lately?” Max asks.

“Nah,” Chloe says.

There’s a long pause, the only sound the faint fuzz and crackle of the phone line.

“I should, though,” Chloe says. “I should. Could you come with me? Graveyards creep me the fuck out.”


“You’re a good friend,” Chloe says. “Ugh, I didn’t want to get all emotional. This is your fault.”

Max can’t help but laugh.

“I’ll gladly take the blame,” Max says. “I’ll talk to you later, alright?”

“Yeah, peace,” Chloe says. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Max sets her phone down and leans back in her chair. Maybe it’s not really her place, even as a friend, but Max worries about Chloe a lot. Chloe has been through more than most at this age, more than any daughter to a loving father should, but she still seems so stuck. Max sighs. How do you break someone out of a five-year slump?

Max decides that she needs some fresh air more than she needs to finish her homework, and there’s just enough time before curfew for a nice walk around campus. She grabs her warmest jacket – a surprisingly nice leather one that Rachel got her from one of those boutique thrift shops downtown – and throws it on before heading out.

On her way to the stairs, though, she hears the faint sound of sobbing coming from Dana’s room. Tonight’s the night for emotional expression, apparently. Against her better judgment, Max’s nosey nature ultimately wins out and she gently presses her ear to the door.

Dana is definitely crying and Max has no idea why. It breaks her heart to hear, since Dana has been nothing but friendly and sweet to Max since the very first day she moved into the dorms. Max taps her fingers against her jeans, thinking. She absolutely can’t stand to hear Dana so distraught, but also doesn’t want to just knock on her door and barge into her room.

An idea strikes Max, and she practically sprints out of the dorms and down to the convenience store at the corner. She’s young, and she still feels the romantic thrill about being able to strike out into the inky blackness of night all on her own, far from the watchful gaze of her parents, and curfew be damned. It’s a beautiful night, and the clear moon glows. Max almost regrets not bringing her camera, but she has more pressing matters.

Max quickly make sit down to the convenience store. It’s one of those stores attached to a gas station that seem to pop up on every street corner, with aggressive fluorescent lighting and low prices for all. Max can feel the bored yet judgmental gaze of the cashier fall upon her as soon as she bursts into the
store.

The Blackwell curfew looms, and so Max practically flings a carton of ice cream, an assortment of chocolates, a box of tissues, and some girly magazines that Dana loves in spite of herself into a basket.

The cashier raises an eyebrow when he sees the items she’s collected, but otherwise doesn’t say anything. Max doesn’t mind – there’s no way he gets paid enough to make small-talk with the customers on top of everything else. Max just smiles politely and pays everything with her debit card.

Max sprints back to the dorm building, her paper bag of goodies bouncing in her arms. She almost makes it back unseen. Almost.

“Curfew, young lady!” David’s voice comes booming over the quad.

“Feminine products!” Max shouts back, holding up her shopping bag without breaking stride.

That shuts David up real quick.

Max gets back to her room in record time and scribbles a quick note for Dana on the nicest piece of stationary that she can find. It reads:

Dana! You are the best and sweetest person around. I don’t know what’s bringing you down, but I know you’ll kick ass and overcome! We all love you.

Max knows that it’s cheesy, but she hopes it’ll help Dana feel better. And if the note doesn’t help, the various sweets and whatnot probably will. Max sneaks over to Dana’s room, deposits the bag of goodies and the note right in front of her door, and knocks. Before Dana can even react, Max sprints away and around the corner, hidden from Dana’s view.

Max can hear Dana’s door open, as well as the rustle of the bag as she picks it up. It’s not until she hears Dana’s door close again that she starts heading back to her room – and nearly runs straight into Victoria.

“Hey, Max,” Victoria says, her voice anything but friendly. “Creeping on Dana, were you? You know, there are easier ways to get pictures for the contest than through a peephole, right?”

Max sighs and pinches bridge of her nose in frustration. Kate was right – Victoria does seem nastier than ever, but unlike Kate, Max just can’t seem to empathize.

“C’mon, Victoria…” Max says.

“Just giving a little friendly advice,” Victoria says in just the right way that suggests she’s never given friendly advice ever.

“Okay, fine,” Max says. “I’m just going back to my room.”

“What else is new?” Victoria asks. “What do you have in there that’s so fascinating? Old Wes Anderson movies and pictures of Edith Piaf?”

Victoria delivers that with so much venom, yet Max isn’t entirely sure if she’s being insulted or not. Doesn’t everyone like Wes Anderson and Edith Piaf?

“Good night, Victoria,” Max says, with what she hopes is a sense of finality.
She pushes past Victoria and swiftly escapes back into the warm cocoon that is her room. Hopefully, Dana is enjoying her care package, the thought of which is enough to push Victoria’s general unpleasantness from her mind.

The next day, as Max is walking across the quad with Chloe, Dana comes up to her and wordlessly gives her a hug. Max, though a bit surprised, squeezes Dana tightly in return.

“Thanks, Max,” Dana says.

“Of course,” Max says. “But how’d you know?”

“Sometimes a girl just knows,” Dana says as she pulls back from the hug. “Also, you left your receipt in the bag and it had your name on it.”

“Oh,” Max says, blushing. “That was supposed to be a little more anonymous.”

Dana laughs.

“It’s cool,” Dana says. “Honestly, I can’t imagine anyone else doing that for me and writing a note like that.”

“Really?” Max asks. “Not even, like, Juliet?”

Dana squeezes Max’s shoulder.

“Just accept the compliment, Max,” Dana says, a grin on her face.

“Right, sorry,” Max says bashfully. “I hope you feel better.”

“Honestly, I do already,” Dana says. “I won’t let one rough night keep me down. I’ll see you around, Max.”

Dana waves as she walks off. Max and Chloe just stand there in the quad, silently, for a moment.

“Ain’t you a goddamn saint, Maximus,” Chloe says once Dana is out of earshot. “I’m sure that’ll pay off in some unforeseen way in the future.”
“Oh my god, you wouldn’t even believe it,” Dana says as she idly toys with Max’s floofy hair. “And that wasn’t even the craziest Vortex Club party I’ve ever been to.”

“Three people left with concussions and that wasn’t the craziest party?” Max asks.

“It was kind of their fault,” Juliet says. “They should’ve decided which way was forwards and which way was backwards on the slip ‘n slide.”

Max makes a face at that.

“Still,” Max says.

The three girls are hanging out in Max’s room – Max and Dana on the bed, and Juliet sprawled out on the couch. Juliet’s leather jacket is draped around Max’s shoulders after she’d complained about being cold, the chill of these early October evenings catching her off guard.

“This is gonna sound dumb, but what’s up with the Vortex Club?” Max asks. “Why is it so, I don’t know, crazy?”

“Whoa, Max, we’re both Vortex Club members,” Dana says, feigning offense.

“Sorry, I forgot,” Max says sardonically. “You two seem so normal, but lurking beneath the surface…”

“You bitch,” Dana says fondly, gently shoving Max’s shoulder.

“The Vortex Club is sort of overrated, though,” Juliet says.

“Overrated, huh?” Dana butts in. “I think everyone’s favorite hipster over here is rubbing off on you.”

“Serious, though, they used to be the counter-culture club,” Juliet says. “Now look at them.”

“Are you cereal?” Max asks. “Now they’re just straight-up bourgeois.”

“I know, right? So lame,” Juliet says.

“Hold up, Watson, why are you even in the club if you don’t like them?” Max asks.

Juliet just shrugs.

“Better than not being Vortex,” Juliet says, shrugging. “Their parties are still pretty cool, too. And it’s not like the other extracurriculars are very interesting.”

“Kate’s bible study group is cool!” Max says.

Juliet and Dana just turn to look at her like she’s crazy. Max starts to feel indignant on Kate’s behalf – there’s nothing wrong with loving Jesus! Not that Max is Christian, or anything, she’s just very supportive of Kate.

“I mean, the bible has some pretty awesome stories,” Max says. “Did you know Jesus whipped a bunch of merchants so that they’d leave a temple?”
There’s a beat of silence that lasts a bit longer than Max is comfortable with.

“Whatever you say, Maximus,” Dana says, laughing.

“Well, I think it’s cool,” Max says, pouting.

“Ugh, stop being so adorable,” Juliet says, playfully flicking Max’s bottom lip.

Max sputters and pushes Juliet’s fingers away.

“Hey, you should come to a Vortex Club party and see the insanity for yourself,” Dana says. “I love Kate too, but I promise it’s crazier than a bible study group.”

“Oh my god, I want to see Max throw down so bad,” Juliet says. “They have their big Oktoberfest celebration at the beginning of October. We could get you in.”

“Doesn’t the real Oktoberfest start in September?” Max asks.

“Yeah, but when has the Vortex Club ever cared about facts?” Juliet asks.

Max just laughs.

“Fair, fair,” Max says.

“But you should totally come, Max,” Dana says. “You spend too much time in your room. You can be my date.”

Max’s heart skips a beat just at hearing the word “date,” though it’s pretty clearly said in jest. It’s still not fair – Max is so gay and Dana is so pretty. Juliet, though, scoffs and flops onto the bed next to Max.

“No way, you should be my date,” Juliet says. “I already gave you my jacket. That was a total girlfriend move.”

Max giggles, unsure of what to do with all this positive attention. (Besides blush, but Max does that pretty automatically in the presence of pretty girls). If there is a power above, Max is thanking them with all she’s got.

“Okay, I’ll go,” Max says. “And you can both be my dates.”

Juliet and Dana high-five. Max realizes her gaydar must be totally shot, because she can’t tell if they’re just very affectionate or actually gay.

“What are you going to wear?” Dana asks.

“No dress,” Max says as she flips through the clothes in her closet.

“Are you sure?” Dana asks. “You’d look so cute in a dress. Maybe a little floral number? Nothing too much, modest hem line and everything, but…”

“NO DRESS,” Max says.

In the end, Dana acquiesces, and Max ends up going to the Oktoberfest party in a borrowed denim button-up shirt and pants (thank god for pants). The party is being held out on the football field,
under the stars, which Max begrudgingly admits is a pretty cool venue. Max almost wishes it wasn’t such a nice night – after a long, drawn-out discussion with Dana, she ended up begrudgingly leaving her camera in her room. Now? She definitely wishes she had it to capture the swaying trees in the pale moonlight. Oh well – her phone’s camera will have to suffice.

Speaking of picture-worthy moments, Juliet and Dana weren’t entirely kidding about the whole “date” idea, and the three of them end up walking into the venue arm-in-arm. A few Vortex jocks hoot and holler as they see the trio, who pointedly ignore all of them. Max wants to have a good time with her girls, no boys allowed.

The party is already in full swing by the time they get there, and they have to avoid the flailing limbs of dancing partygoers as they make their way to the “punch” table (which is for sure all alcohol). Naturally, the Vortex Club has hired a semi-famous DJ to spice the joint up, and he has some kind of generic trap-rap pumping through some very expensive speakers.

Max inspects the drink selection, which seems to be beer, beer, more beer, and jungle juice. Yuck. Max pulls a face. She gets that underage drinking is cool and rebellious, but alcohol still just grosses her out. That, combined with the blaring music and Vortex club members grinding and flailing near each other, make this whole event slightly overwhelming. Maybe coming to this party was a mistake.

“Gee, Max, how come your mom lets you have two girlfriends?”

Or, maybe not.

Max turns around to see Chloe standing there, her arms folded across her chest and a playful grin on her face. Rachel is by her side, looking flawless as usual.

“I’m really gay,” Max says.

Chloe just laughs and puts her arm around Max’s shoulders as they all exchange greetings. Everyone knows who Rachel is, of course, and they know Chloe by association.

“Hell yeah, my dude,” Chloe says. “I’m glad you finally came out to one of these shindigs. Maybe you’ll help make them suck less.”

“No promises,” Max says. “Why are you even here?”

“Uh, I’m down to clown with underage drinking,” Chloe says. “Plus, Rachel dragged me here. I’m her plus-one.”

“Yeah, thanks for being my arm-candy,” Rachel says, winking at Chloe.

“Sure, I’m the arm candy in this situation,” Chloe says. “Right.”

“I mean, you are wearing your nice leather jacket,” Max says.

“It’s nice, right?” Chloe asks. “This is the one without any scorch marks on it.”

Chloe makes a big show of inspecting her jacket, as if she’s making sure it really doesn’t have any holes or burns in it.

“So classy,” Max says.

As they mingle, Juliet comes over and runs her finger along the lapel of Chloe’s jacket. Juliet herself is wearing her trusty leather jacket on top of her red and white polka-dot dress, looking like a very
fashionable 1950s barhop.

“This is a nice jacket,” Juliet says. “Where’d you get it?”

“Well, my dear Juliet, that’s a long story that starts with stealing and ends with me running away from a furious shop owner,” Chloe says. “Wait – that was the whole story.”

Juliet laughs and bumps shoulders with Chloe. Max smiles, thinking that coming out was the right choice. Everyone seems to be having so much fun!

And then, of course, Victoria bursts onto the scene with Taylor and Courtney in tow.

“Ugh, are you freaks going to monopolize the drinks table for the whole night?” Victoria asks, pushing her way past Chloe and Juliet to grab a red solo cup that’s definitely not filled with beer.

“C’mon, Victoria, we’re all cool,” Juliet says.

“Whatever,” Victoria says. “What are you supposed to be? Minnie Mouse’s rebellious teen years? Is that what Zachary’s into?”

Max can see Juliet’s clench her fist and tighten her jaw. Victoria’s ability to drag down the mood is unparalleled – it’s like a really crummy superpower.

"And Max! I'm stunned to see you out of your room," Victoria says. "I thought you'd be too busy getting off to Bright Eyes and old lomography shots."

Max sighs and looks upwards, her eyes pleading – someone, please, just strike me down.

“Victoria!” Rachel says, gliding over and putting her hand on Victoria’s shoulder. “So good to see you. I love your outfit. It looks so expensive.”

“Obviously,” Victoria says, shrugging Rachel’s hand off her shoulder. “What are you doing hanging out with these people? I don’t think you can get tax write-offs for these charity cases.”

“They’re all my friends,” Rachel says. “You know, you should think about being a little more charitable yourself. You wouldn’t want people to find out about your little late night photography escapades with our new professor, do you?”

Victoria entire face seems to turn red, and Max begins to wonder if steam is going to start shooting out of her ears, like a cartoon. Her mouth, in a very fish-like way, opens and closes as she searches for something to say.

“Let’s get out of here,” Victoria says. “I don’t need this shit.”

Victoria turns on her heel and storms away with Courtney and Taylor in her wake. Everyone is silent for a moment.

“What a fucking loser,” Chloe says.

Everyone laughs at that, though it’s still a bit hesitant.

“What’s her deal?” Max asks. “Seriously?”

“I have no idea,” Rachel says. “We used to be friends.”

“Yeah, she was always a bitch,” Chloe says. “But like, in a cool way. Like, she was a bitch,
y’know? She got shit done and took no shit from anyone. Now she’s just a bitch.”

Max really hates that she understands all of that. Chloe’s expletive-laden rants always make too much sense for their own good.

“It’s like a flip got switched this year,” Dana says.

“She and Nathan are really making the Vortex Club nasty,” Juliet says.

“Truth,” Rachel says sagely. “Nathan was always super intense, but she actually used to hold him back. Now they’re both just completely insane.”

Max shifts from foot to foot. It feels like transferred to Blackwell just as a bunch of drama is ramping up. Max is decidedly drama-averse. She can’t even watch TV shows if there’s too much conflict.

“Wait, what do you know about Victoria and our new photography professor?” Juliet asks.

“Always a slut for gossip, huh?” Rachel asks with a smirk. “I have to keep that one stashed in my back pocket.”

“Does she seriously have a thing for Ms. Burch?” Max asks. “I mean, I love her, but still.”

Chloe slings her arm around Max’s shoulders once again.

“Max, you sly gay youth, I know what you’re getting at,” Chloe asks. “You’re asking yourself – is Victoria a gay too? Is that dyke-y, short hair evidence or is she just ‘fashion forward?’ Is your gaydar functioning properly or has it totally gone haywire since every woman these days looks a little queer? Well, I can let you in on a very poorly-kept secret – Victoria is super gay.”

“Well, she’s bi,” Rachel says. “Word to our bi sisters.”

Dana and Juliet both nod sagely at that.

“Yes, totally,” Chloe says. “No erasure intended, homies.”

“You know, Kate mentioned the other day that Victoria has been acting meaner lately,” Max says. “She thought that something might have happened to her. That would explain a lot.”

Everyone nods thoughtfully, except for Chloe.

“Guys, what the fuck are we doing?” Chloe asks. “I’m not here to psycho-analyze the psychotic bitch matriarch of the Vortex Club. We need to get our drink on and turn this mess into a full-on mosh pit.”

Chloe shadow-boxes with the night air.

“Let’s try not to punch too many people, Chloe,” Max says, gently places her hands on Chloe’s fists.

“No…,” Chloe says. "promises. C’mon, nerds, let’s go.”

Everyone cheers and begins raiding the totally innocuous drinks table (seriously, how does security turn such a blind eye to Vortex Club parties? Max saw David bust a student for walking on freshly-mown grass).

Max, though, is still preoccupied with their confrontation with Victoria. Victoria is a star student, a great photographer (which Max will begrudgingly admit), and one of the faces of the most premier
club on campus. So why does she have to be such a jerk? Why does she have to rub her social status in everyone’s faces?

Those thoughts swirl around in the back of her mind, even as she gets dragged out to dance by Chloe and co.

Dana and Juliet seem to delight in shoving cups of beer into Max’s face, though, and she reluctantly drinks them until she’s buzzed enough to not be reluctant anymore. Any further thoughts of Victoria quickly dissipate. Plus, the more alcohol she has, the more she realizes that dancing is fun, and she might be kind of good at it. Or it just feels empowering to dance near the presence of people who are actually good at that sort of thing, like Rachel, or Dana, or Juliet, or Chloe (damn, are all of her friends good dancers? Life is hard).

As the night goes on, Max finds herself losing herself in the music and dancing without thinking too deeply about what she looks like (thought she can tell she’s definitely buzzed, not even the dulling effect of the alcohol can completely dampen her constant self-judgement).

At one point, the DJ starts playing some Kendrick Lamar, and Max can definitely jam to that. She catches Chloe’s eye, who grins and works her way over to her, her hips grooving the entire time.

Max finds it entirely sexy (but, in like a completely objective way, because Max would never genuinely be enchanted by the sway of her best friend’s hips. Right).

“I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel Tower, so I can fuck the world for seventy-two hours!” Chloe screams along with the song.

And the magic is gone. Max giggles, because Chloe attempting to rap is always primo comedy.

“Damn, I got bitches – wifey, girlfriend, and mistress,” Chloe says, putting her arms around Max and Rachel and pulling them in close.

Juliet, who’s dancing by them, throws her head back and laughs, her dirty blonde hair reflecting the pulsing, multi-colored lights set up around the dance floor. Max marvels in it all and lets her fears of the drama at Blackwell fizzle and fade. She loves that she actually seems to have friends, loves that her friends are mostly beautiful, tough, and kind women, and loves that she’s back together with Chloe.

Seattle was nice, but it wasn’t anything like this. Max is almost ready to admit that she might like parties, but she’d like them a lot more if they were divorced from the Vortex Club entirely. (Seattle, truly, can suck it).

Still, with her friends by her side, Max is ready and willing to dance the night away, since that’s apparently something she does now.

Chloe and Max stumble back to the dorm, arm in arm, their laughter brightening up the cool October evening and their faces bright and red from drinking and dancing. Max thanks the spirits (that no doubt infest this place) that there’s no curfew on the weekends, though they still left the party early.

“Dude, I can’t believe you actually punched that guy,” Max says.

“Homie was in my thrash radius,” Chloe says. “It was his fault, really.”

“I think that was one of our team’s linebackers,” Max says. “I hope he’s okay.”

“Since when do you give a fuck about sports?” Chloe asks.
Max giggles.

“I like American Football,” Max says.


They reach the front steps of the dorm building and head inside. Max is unwilling to admit it, but it takes a lot of effort just to get up the stairs thanks to her alcohol-dulled sense of coordination. Chloe mostly drags her up, both to be helpful and to just be able to feel Max against her.

The door to Max’s dorm room acts as the final obstacle between her and total comfort forever. Max drops her keys at least three times before she manages to open the stupid door.

“Oh my god, you suck at life,” Chloe says once Max finally manages to get the door open.

“Well life is…sucks,” Max says.

Chloe stops in her tracks.

“What?” Chloe asks.

“I don’t know,” Max says. “That didn’t even make sense in my head.”

Chloe shrugs and flops down on the couch, all loose limbs and good vibes. Max thinks she looks very liquid, like the way cats get when they’re lounging.

“You are *hella* drunk, dude, and I’m loving it,” Chloe says, jabbing her finger at Max.

Max exhales audibly and slumps down on her bed. The lights are still off in her room, and they will remain so, the moonlight filtering in through her open window all she needs.

“I don’t think I’m going to be loving it tomorrow,” Max says, rubbing her head.

“It’s all good,” Chloe says. “Just slam some water right now and you’ll be fine.”

“Ooh, good call,” Max says.

Max looks around for a bottle of water, the only one in sight being the one she keeps on the windowsill for Lisa.

“Sorry, girl,” Max says, petting Lisa’s bouncy crown of leaves. “I’ll replace it tomorrow, I promise.”

“You seriously talk to your plant,” Chloe says. “You’re such a nerd.”

Max flips her off as she chugs the bottle of water. Chloe just laughs.

“Nice. I’m a good influence on you,” Chloe says.

Max exhales sharply as she finishes off the bottle and wipes her lips clean.

“Wow, already much better,” Max says. “Hey, do you want to crash here?”

“Seriously?” Chloe asks. “I was just about to fuck off and everything.”

“No, you definitely should,” Max says. “Keep me company. Also, I don’t like the way you drive when you’re sober, so drunk driving is absolutely off the menu.”
“Good call, Maximus Prime. So responsible, even when you’re drunk,” Chloe says, hopping up next to Max on the bed. “Dude, this is going to be sick. We’re kicking it old-school sleepover style.”

Max grins in the darkness. There’s something so deeply intimate about a small room doused in moonlight.

“Make yourself at home for sure,” Max says. “Mi casa…is your…whatever.”

“Wow, multiculturalism fail,” Chloe says. “So not progressive of you.”

“Uncool,” Max says. “I know you failed Spanish in middle school, too.”

Chloe scoffs.

“I failed all of my classes,” Chloe says, like she’s trying to brag.

“Yeah, I know,” Max says. “Anyway, you can just chill out here. I’m going to shower. I feel like butt.”

“A cute butt, though!” Chloe says as Max gathers her things for the shower.

Once they’re both freshly showered (though Chloe only did so at Max’s insistence), they flop down onto the narrow, Blackwell-issued bed. It so easily reminds Max of all the sleepovers they had when they were younger, when Chloe would always insist that they share her bed. There was always something so magical about those sleepovers, the feeling that they had their own little bubble protected from the world around them by the night sky and the quilted cover of Chloe’s bed.

Chloe has changed a lot over the years – she’s a little wilder, a little angrier, and a little sadder – but deep down, she’s still the same. Everything changes, but not ever by very much.

Even sharing a bed feels different, but the same. It’s cramped and it’s hard to avoid the way their limbs seem to insist on tangling up together, but Max wouldn’t change a thing.

"Hey," Chloe says in the dark. "Have I told you how stoked I am that you're back?"

Max smiles brightly at that.

"Maybe a couple of times," Max says.

"Well, I'll say it again," Chloe says. "I'm so, so, so fucking happy you're back. Shit got weird when you were gone."

There’s the Chloe she knows so well. Rough around the edges, but she feels everything so, so deeply.

"Well, life is...weird," Max says. "It's good to be back, too. I really missed you."

Though she can't see it, Max knows that Chloe is smirking at her.

"You nerd," Chloe says. "We were on Skype every weekend."

"Not the same," Max says. “And don’t try to act all tough.”

The moonlight glints off Chloe’s eyes just enough that Max can tell that they’re being rolled.
“Whatever. But I agree,” Chloe says. “Not the same. I honestly never thought this day would come.”

Chloe’s still trying to keep her tone light, but Max can tell that this means a lot to her. Max can always tell.

“Chloe, c’mon,” Max says. “You really thought we’d be separated forever?”

Chloe sighs and turns away from Max. She traces out meaningless patterns on the wall in front of her.

“I don’t know,” Chloe says. “I kind of freaked after you left. You were – and are – my best friend, so not having you around was a huge shock to my system.”

It’s nothing they haven’t hashed out before in numerous conversations during those five years apart, but Max is always more than willing to go over it again and again. Chloe is her best friend, and she always will be, no matter what happens.

“Well, I’m back now,” Max says. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good,” Chloe says.

“I mean, I’ll have to leave for college,” Max says, unable to avoid ribbing Chloe just a little bit. “And, y’know, what if I get a good photography gig in, like, Europe after that? I couldn’t pass an offer like that up.”

Chloe laughs and punches Max’s shoulder. (Which actually really hurts – Chloe is definitely low-key jacked).

“Fuck off, dude,” Chloe says. “I’m going to follow you wherever you go for college as long as it’s away from Arcadia Bay. I’m going to be co-dependent as hell!”

“Maybe not a good goal?” Max says, giggling. “Also, you might need better grades for that.”

Max means it as a joke, but Chloe groans all the same.

“Don’t remind me,” Chloe says. “My step-fungus is always on me about my grades.”

Max knows she has to tread lightly now.

“I mean, it couldn’t hurt, right?” Max asks. “I’m serious. I’d love if we could go to the same college, and it’d be so much easier if we both do well and set our sights high.”

“Oh my god, you’re so much better at guilting me into trying hard than my parents,” Chloe says, resting her forehead in the crook between Max’s neck and her shoulder. “I mean that in a good way. I think.”

“C’mon, it shouldn’t be that hard, right? You were always the star student between the two of us. I’m pretty sure you got straight As from first grade to, like, the start of middle school,” Max says.

“Alright, alright, I get it,” Chloe says, tickling Max’s midsection. “I’ll try hard and apply myself and blah blah blah.”

Max laughs and tries to push Chloe’s hands away.

“Hah, it worked!” Max says. “This was all a ruse to get you to be a good student!”
Chloe gasps dramatically.

“She-demon! Devil!” Chloe says. “Begone!”

Chloe doubles down her attack and Max actually think she might pass out from laughing so hard, until someone out in the hall yells at them to shut up. (It’s probably Victoria).

They pause for a moment, before giggling madly beneath their breaths.

“It’s good to be back,” Max says. “Cap’n.”

“Wait, I thought you were the captain,” Chloe says. “Well, fuck it. Co-captains.”

“Co-captains,” Max repeats with a grin.
Max wakes up the next day to a chirping alarm and a mouthful of blue hair. She sputters and coughs, waking up her bedmate in the process of trying to clean out her mouth. As she starts to stand, her headache (courtesy of her hangover) hits her like a sledgehammer. She fumbles with her alarm clock, the temptation to just throw it across the room and let it smash on the far wall overwhelming. She ends up hitting nearly every button and switch on the thing in an effort to turn it off.

“Oh my god,” Max says, rubbing her forehead.

Light is streaming in through her partially opened blinds. It feels like the sun is personally stabbing her in the eyeballs.

“The sun is the worst thing that has ever happened,” Max grumbles.

“Aww, is somebody hungover?” Chloe asks, propping her head up with one hand as she lounges in the bed.

Max groans and rubs her eyes with the heels of her hands.

“Why are you yelling at me?” Max asks.

“I literally can’t make my voice quieter without whispering,” Chloe says. “It’s bad, huh?”

“It’s bad,” Max says. “I feel like I’m listening to early Swans records.”

“Wow, super, super bad,” Chloe says. “Go shower and detox. I’ll grab some Gatorade. And don’t drink any coffee this morning! That stuff is definitely not a hangover cure. People are fucking stupid.”


“Don’t say shit like that, it’s weird,” Max says as she gathers her things for the shower.

“Don’t talk to your mother like that!” Chloe says as Max leaves the room.

Max returns from a near half-hour long shower to a surprisingly well-made bed, three bottles of Gatorade, and a legit hand-written note from Chloe.
Sorry Maximus!

Joyce insisted that I come home so that I could be lectured about partying too hard or whatever. I tried to stall as long as I could, but the mom-guilt is too powerful. So, sorry for ditching.

If you so desire to hang out with me later, I'll be at American Rust, throwing rocks at passing squirrels.

Attached is a picture of Chloe flipping off the viewer. Classy.

Max is both tickled that Chloe went through the trouble of writing a note rather than just texting her and concerned about what her friend gets up to in her free time. Still, if her hangover ever subsides, she’s willing and eager to make her way out to her friend’s sanctuary of choice.

Chugging the first bottle of Gatorade seems to help, but the first few sips of the second want to make her vomit, so she stops. Her tongue is already stained neon blue from the stunningly unnatural ingredients that make up the drink, which is a good a sign as any that she might want to stop. (Her tongue will match Chloe’s hair now! That’s a weird thought).

Max is interrupted from her productive session of resting her head against her desk and groaning by the sound of gentle knocks at her door. A sense of annoyance quickly builds up inside of her at the mere prospect of someone she doesn’t like interrupting her morning of recovery, until she remembers that the people on her floor she doesn’t like are really confined to just Victoria and her lackeys. So, she pushes herself up and answers the soft but persistent knocking.

Who else could it be but Kate Marsh standing in her doorway, holding a steaming to-go cup of tea and a to-go box of food.

“Kate,” Max greets, her voice coming out much more gravelly than she had expected. “What brings you here?”

“I heard through the grapevine that you’ve been having a rough morning,” Kate says. “So I grabbed an extra plate of food and some tea as I was eating breakfast this morning.”

“Oh wowsers, you did not have to do this for me,” Max says graciously, though she’s beginning to salivate at the mere scent of the food, without even seeing what it is.

“I kind of did,” Kate says. “I don’t want one of my friends to be hungover, miserable, and hungry all in one morning. Here.”

Kate holds the to-go box and the cup of tea out to Max, who takes them both.

“You are a literal angel,” Max says. “I think you’re going to be sainted for this.”

“Borderline sacrilegious, but I’ll take it,” Kate says with a pleasant smile. “I get the sense that you don’t drink much?”

Max shakes her head.

“Not at all,” Max says. “Chloe is a bad influence on me, I think, and a master at the art of peer pressure.”

“Chloe’s an interesting character,” Kate says with a gentle laugh. “I always like seeing the two of you together. It…makes sense, I think.”
“Yeah, I love her,” Max says.

There’s a beat of silence between the two of them. Kate shifts from foot-to-foot.

“What do you want to come in?” Max asks.

Kate shakes her head.

“I appreciate the offer, but I think you might need the peace and quiet more,” Kate says. “I’ll see you later, though!”

Chloe is her best friend forever and ever, but right now, Kate is giving her a serious run for her money.

“Thanks again so much for this, Kate,” Max says. “I’ll definitely see you later.”

Max returns to her hideaway, setting the food and tea down on her desk. She flips open the top of the Styrofoam to-go box and is greeted by a pile of greasy eggs, biscuits, and a truly disgusting stack of bacon. She checks the box again to see where it’s from – The Seabird Restaurant, which Max is pretty sure is under the ownership of Alyssa’s parents and is, likely, the second best eatery in all of Arcadia Bay.

Max scarfs everything down like she’s just rediscovered the concept of food itself while watching soothing videos of cute baby animals on her laptop. With the bright, hopeful morning sunlight filtering in through the blinds, it’s beginning to feel like a pretty good Saturday.

Once Max’s headache is reasonably under control, she looks up bus routes that’ll put her reasonably close to American Rust and scrounges together bus fare from the quarters that seem to just perpetually exist between her couch cushions and underneath her bed. With her trusty hoodie on, she makes her way down to the bus stop and is quickly whisked off to her destination.

As she walks to the junkyard, she can hear the sound of voices softly rising above the usual waves of forest noises. Thinking that Rachel has decided to hang out, Max is surprised to see Chloe sitting next to Kate on the top of the abandoned school bus that serves as something of a centerpiece for American Rust.

“Kate?” Max greets in surprise. “Has Chloe convinced you to become a delinquent?”

Kate giggles and waves happily at Max. In truth, Max is more surprised that Chloe has decided to open up this private space to Kate. Sure, Chloe almost immediately adopted a strong and almost protective stance with Kate, but American Rust is practically a sacred space.

“Hey, Maximo,” Chloe greets. “Did you like Kate acting as surrogate me this morning?”

Max gasps.

“You mean Kate didn’t bring me food out of the goodness of her own heart?” Max asks.

Kate looks genuinely cross as she turns towards Chloe.

“That was my idea!” Kate says. “You just told me that Max wasn’t doing so great this morning.”

“Well, I guess I can share the credit,” Chloe shrugs. “Like, twenty-five percent.”

Max loves watching the two of them bicker. It’s like they’re siblings. She begins to climb up the
rickety, perilous towers of junk that make up something of a pathway to the top of the bus. The higher she gets, the slower she goes, biting her lip as she focuses on her feet.

Max mistimes her last step, and just before she can feel gravity pull her down to the earth, Chloe’s hand shoots out and wraps around her forearm, pulling her to safety. Kate stands bolt upright as this all happens, her hands clutched to her chest in fear for her friend.

“Good save,” Max says a bit breathlessly. “Thanks, Chloe.”

“Anytime,” Chloe says. “I know you’re clumsy, so I’m always on the ready when I’m around you.”

Max purses her lips.

“Gee, thanks, Chloe,” Max says.

Max takes a seat on the roof of the bus, letting her feet dangle over the edge. She bounces her heels against the bus’s windows.

“Oh, I have more Gatorade for you,” Chloe says, fishing through her backpack and producing two neon-colored bottles.

“Wowsers, thanks again,” Max says, accepting them both. “Why’d you buy so many bottles?”

“I just kept kicking the vending machine until a bunch fell out,” Chloe says.

Kate giggles.

“I like your motive, but your methods leave something to be desired,” Kate comments.

“Whatever, Kate,” Chloe says. “Don’t act like you’re my ethical superior just because you have a consistent and distinct moral framework to draw from.”

Kate furrows her brow.

“Wait…” Kate says.

“…Right,” Kate says.

Chloe just grins at Kate as Max cracks open the bottle of sports drink and quickly downs a few gulps.

*Take that, hangover headache.*

“So, what’ve you guys been up to?” Max asks.

“Well, I wanted to break every piece of glass I could find around here with this cool pipe I found,” Chloe says. “But Kate just had to go and veto that. So we’ve been talking about life, instead.”

“You’ve been talking about life?” Max asks. “Kate – what did you do to Chloe?”

“Nothing!” Kate says, sounding genuinely distressed. “We just…started to talk.”

Chloe slings her arm around Kate’s shoulder.

“Little Kate here wanted to learn about the women-loving-women experience,” Chloe says.
Max’s eyes grow wide as Kate tries to curl up into a ball.

“That’s not what we were talking about,” Kate says.

“I mean, sure, I may have editorialized a bit there,” Chloe says. “But that’s basically what it was.”

“Okay, seriously, what’s going on?” Max asks.

“I was only asking about the, y’know, LGBT community on campus, since a lot of girls in the dorms seem to be…that,” Kate says.

“Yeah, they totally thought that one through. Putting a bunch of hormonal, queer girls together. Great plan, administration,” Chloe says. “Is anyone in that dorm straight?”

“Courtney is,” Max says. “And Taylor, I’m pretty sure. Stella and Brooke are, and…”

Chloe huffs and shoves Max.

“Okay, fine, whatever,” Chloe says. “But you get what I’m saying. “There’s an over-representation compared to mainstream society. And it’s great! Yet another reason I wish I could live in the dorms.”

“That would not end well,” Max says. “It’s hard enough watching you flirt with everyone before and after class.”

“And during,” Chloe says lightly, though there’s an expression on her face that Max can’t quite place.

“How’d this come up in the first place?” Max asks.

“Well,” Kate says, her fingers curling about the hem of her skirt. “My church is quite…confident in its teachings about homosexual relationships, and in its encouragement of abstinence before marriage. But living in the dorms has made me reconsider certain aspects of my faith.”

“Reconsider how?” Max asks.

Kate looks up at the sky. It’s a beautiful day, with voluminous, white clouds drifting lazily across the blue sky.

“I’ve found it difficult to reconcile those teachings with the reality of knowing and being friends with so many people of that…orientation,” Kate says. “Especially being friends with Dana, who’s so open about who she is.”

The way that Kate’s face lights up just from her saying Dana’s name isn’t lost on Max and Chloe. Max gives Chloe a look, and Chloe just gives her a vague shrug in response.

“Question,” Chloe says. “Do you think Dana is totally into me? Sometimes I just get that feeling.”

Apropos of basically nothing.

Max suppresses the urge to roll her eyes. Chloe has the subtlety of, well, someone who dresses like a wannabe punk rocker with blue hair. Still, though, Kate slumps ever so slightly and she seems preoccupied with picking at the peeling paint of the bus.

“I don’t think so,” Kate says, far too knowing even for her. “Sorry, Chloe.”

Chloe sighs theatrically.
“Well, a girl can dream,” Chloe says.

Kate squirms where she’s sitting, and Max suddenly doesn’t want to pursue this un-subtle subtle line of questioning any longer.

“Well, there’s also…” Kate begins to say, before being struck with some sort of realization and clamping her mouth shut. “No, I shouldn’t say anything about that.”

“So, do you guys want to pose for pictures?” Max asks.

“Super flimsy attempt to change the subject, Max,” Chloe says flatly. “C’mon, Kate, you gotta dish. Mama needs her fix.”

Max groans.

“You’re worse than Juliet,” Max says.

“No, Max, it’s alright,” Kate says. “I trust you guys, and I’ve been wanting to get advice about this for a while now.”

“And seriously, we won’t gossip. No way,” Chloe says. “I know how that goes.”

Kate takes a deep breath as Max and Chloe scoot in a little closer.

“Dana’s thinking about asking Juliet out, and it’s freaking her out,” Kate says. “She has been for a while now.”

Max and Chloe stare at Kate for a long while, before looking at each other, and then back to Kate.

“What,” Chloe says, drawing out the vowel.

“And seriously, we won’t gossip. No way,” Chloe says. “I know how that goes.”

Kate takes a deep breath as Max and Chloe scoot in a little closer.

“Dana’s thinking about asking Juliet out, and it’s freaking her out,” Kate says. “She has been for a while now.”

Max hums thoughtfully and stares out across American Rust. Unsurprisingly, Blackwell is a twisted web of interpersonal drama. There’s no escaping the simple fact that Blackwell is, in fact, a high school.

“I don’t know what to tell her,” Kate says. “I mean, of course I mentioned that confessing her feelings would make sense, but that’s still terrifying for her. She’s worried about ruining her friendship with Juliet by doing this. She thinks that no matter what happens, she’ll completely change the nature of their relationship if she confesses.”
Max can’t help but glance over at Chloe. For Max, this all strikes very close to home, though she hardly even wants to admit it to herself.

“Yeah, but no matter what happens it’ll be worth it in the end,” Chloe says. “You just have to take these crazy-ass chances, no matter how awful the outcome might be.”

“And even if things don’t work out, if they’re friendship is as strong as it seems they’ll be fine,” Max says. “It might get strange for a while, but I think they can work it out.”

“That’s what I tried to tell Dana,” Kate says. “She’s so sweet and caring that I really believe she could make it work. Juliet, though…”

Kate purses her lips, unwilling to say anything overtly negative about her friend.

“She can definitely be a bit bull-headed,” Max says. “It makes her a good reporter, but she has a tendency to overreact.”

“Exactly what Dana is worried about,” Kate says. “I’m not sure what more advice I can give her. It’s not as if I’m experienced in that way.”

Chloe shrugs and starts to light up a cigarette.

“She needs to woman up and just talk to Juliet, because if not…” Chloe’s about to light up her cigarette as she’s talking but Kate flicks it out of her lips before she can react. “Hey!”

“They’re bad for you!” Kate says.

Max chuckles. Kate can definitely be tough when she wants to be.

“I hate that I like you so much,” Chloe grumbles, shoving her box of cheap cigarettes back into her jacket pocket. “But anyway, Max and I can help wing-woman this situation. It’ll be better than seeing Dana bulldoze her way through a cavalcade of dude-bros again.”

“Does that happen a lot?” Max asks.

“Oh boy, did it,” Chloe says. “That’s what literally all the gossip was about last year. It was fucking unbearable. You two are lucky you weren’t at Blackwell yet.”

“There’s so much drama at this school,” Max says.

“No shit,” Chloe says. “That’s what happens when people like Victoria and Nathan are top dogs. They get off on that stuff.”

Chloe stands up suddenly and stares off into the distance.

“Alright, I’m bored with talking about people and their emotional problems,” Chloe says. “Let’s go break stuff.”

Chloe leaps off of the bus and looks back up at Kate and Max, a challenging glint in her eyes.

“We better indulge her,” Max sighs. “If we don’t let her work off her destructive urges, she’ll just take it all out on her step-dad once she gets home.”

“She said she wanted to throw rocks at squirrels earlier,” Kate says. “I have my concerns.”

Max grins.
“She’s just joking about that,” Kate says. “C’mon, don’t you want to let your inner punk out?”

“I have no inner punk,” Kate says, her eyes wide. “I’m Kate all the way down.”

“That’s why everyone likes you so much,” Max says with a smile.

“Hey, c’mon, nerds!” Chloe shouts. “I want to throw old beer bottles at other objects!”

Max and Kate both carefully climb down the bus, mostly to stop Chloe from indulging in her most destructive instincts.

Chapter End Notes

...and as always, I love feedback more than Chloe loves the word "hella." So, how much do I love feedback? HELLA
"I hate English class lectures," Chloe says, pushing her way out of the classroom with Max in tow. "They're just like Mogwai records. Long and ultimately unsatisfying."

"Hey, I like Mogwai," Max says.

Chloe rolls her eyes.

"Of course you do," Chloe says. "Whoa, douche roadblock, 12 o'clock."

Nathan Prescott, self-appointed king of Blackwell, is blocking off the hallway with a handful of his lackeys. They're all wearing Vortex Club t-shirts, like they're in the world's worst boy band.

"Excuse me," Chloe says loudly as she tries to push past all of them.

"Slow down there, punk," Nathan says, holding her back (though clearly struggling to do so). "You two need to pay your tithes to the Vortex Club."

"Uh, we're not a part of your shitty circle-jerk of a club," Chloe says. "We don't owe you shit."

"You don't get to make that call," Nathan says.

"I kind of do," Chloe says. "So why don't you go run backwards naked through a field of dicks?"

The whole hallway seems to fall silent at that. Someone audibly "ooohs" in the background, like this is the start of a rap battle or something.

"We can't just let non-Vortex members run around like they don't give a shit," Nathan says. "Think of this as our new fundraising venture."

"I'm hella poor, dude," Chloe says. "Your reverse Robin Hood scheme is some major dumbass BS. Your gross family is already super rich, why don't you just go beg for more money from daddy?"

Max shrinks back. Nathan looks like he's about ready to blow.

"I don't need them," Nathan says darkly. "It's the principal of the matter. Why don't you empty your pockets, show us how poor you are?"

"Oh, you want me to empty my pockets? Okay," Chloe says. "Let me see..."

Chloe shoves both hands into the pockets of her jeans. She roots around like she's really looking for the money she doesn't have, before pulling out both middle fingers and flipping Nathan off. Max can't help but chuckle at that, though she quickly stifles it. Nathan notices, though.

"What's so funny, Caulfield?" Nathan growls. "Think I didn't notice you, huh? I know you think you're too cool for the Vortex Club. Well that's too fucking bad, you still have to pay your dues."
Nathan shoves Max, who stumbles backwards a few steps. Chloe's face immediately hardens.

"Leave her alone," Chloe says.

"Yeah?" Nathan asks. "What are you going to do about it, dyke?"

Chloe's fist clenches and Max know she's about to do something that they're all going to regret.

"What is going on here?" David's voice booms down the hallway.

Chloe and Nathan just stand there, staring daggers at one another. Nobody makes a sound or even moves.

Eventually, Max clears her throat.

"Nathan is extorting money for the Vortex Club from non-members," Max says. "Chloe didn't agree with that."

"Snitch," Nathan mutters beneath her breath.

David turns his gaze to Max, who tries not to shrink too much in front of him.

"That's a serious accusation, Max," David says, before turning his gaze to Nathan. "But also, a serious offense, if true."

"She's lying," Nathan says.

"Weak," Chloe says.

"Bitch," Nathan says beneath his breath.

"Hey, stop!" David says, holding his hand up. "Max, Nathan – since you both have spotless school records, I'll let you go with just a warning today. But, one more disturbance in the hallways, and you're going straight to the principals' office. Understood?"

Everyone nods except for Chloe, who mockingly salutes David.

"Good," David says. "Now get to class, everyone."

The crowd slowly disperses. Chloe stares Nathan down defiantly until he too leaves, his Vortex Club underlings forming a cloud of douchebaggery around him.

"I fucking hate Nathan," Chloe says.

"Me too," Max says.

Max and Chloe walk to their usual hangout/study spot in the quad in relative silence, their interaction with Nathan weighing heavily on their minds. Max is so absorbed in her own thoughts that she nearly runs right into Juliet.

"Whoa, Mad Max," Juliet says, grabbing Max's shoulders to steady her. "You're in total zombie mode. What's up?"

"Sup, Julio," Chloe says (Max really wonders what steps must occur in Chloe's head to come up with the nicknames that she does). "We ran into Nathan Pres-cunt in the hallway."
Max can’t help but flinch at Chloe’s casual use of such colorful language. She knows that she’s a square, but Chloe could really take it easy with her word choice. Juliet doesn’t seem to mind, though.

“Gross,” Juliet says. “Have you guys disinfected? Washed your hands and burned your clothes?”

Chloe laughs.

“Not yet,” Chloe says. “High on my list of priorities, though.”

“Hey, Juliet,” Max says. “Do you know what Nathan’s deal is? Why he’s always so…”

“Completely fucking insane?” Chloe chimes in.

“Yeah, something like that,” Max says.

Juliet looks around, as if the Vortex Club has eyes and ears everywhere (which, Max supposes, they kind of do).

“Actually, come with me to my room,” Juliet says. “I have some high purity, Breaking Bad-level gossip to drop on you girls.”

“Yeah, hit us up,” Chloe says. “You’re the dealer, girl.”

Max loves that all of her friends seem to be completely insane (save for Kate), and that they all own it. She’s glad that she didn’t let her first impressions of Juliet stop her from befriending her.

They had back to the dorms and crash in Juliet’s room. Max doesn’t spend a whole lot of time hanging out here, so she still finds it impressive how Juliet’s dedication to her role as a reporter for the Blackwell Totem is so clear through the décor of the room. Scribbled-in, top-bound spiral notebooks are arranged in neat stacks on her dresser, front pages of the Totem dating back to the early 1900s are arranged artfully on the wall by her bed, and she has what looks like an entire conspiracy board above her desk, comprised of various notes, pictures, and clippings from the main Arcadia Bay newspaper.

“Good lord, Juliet,” Chloe says, gently running a finger along the pieces of string connecting the items on her board. “What the fuck are you working on?”

“That’s a secret,” Juliet says with a grin.

“Ugh, you tease,” Chloe says.

“So, what’s the deal with Nathan?” Max asks.

“Right, Nathan,” Juliet says. “I’ve just so happened to have overheard some conversations he’s had with Victoria, and…”

“Just so happened,” Chloe echoes. “Right, totally.”

Juliet rolls her eyes.

“Whatever, I hear things, alright? Just call it my reporter’s instinct,” Juliet says. “Anyway, I’ve heard that Nathan’s dad is totally on his case to get into a good college. Like a serious, top-tier college.”

“Daddy wants his heir to the throne,” Chloe says.

“Yeah, exactly,” Juliet says. “The pressure is totally getting to him. He’s cracking.”
“Really juicy gossip, Jules,” Chloe says. “But was this worth going to your room for?”

“That’s not it,” Juliet says. “Get this – Nathan’s also going off his meds. Completely cold turkey.”

“No kidding?” Chloe asks.

“Wait, Nathan takes meds?” Max asks. “What for?”

“Oh, you sweet, innocent little fawn,” Chloe says, throwing her arm around Max’s shoulders. “It’s basically the worst kept secret of the Prescott family.”

“And honestly, I don’t know why he works so hard to keep it under wraps,” Juliet says.


“Unless you’re Nathan Prescott, apparently,” Juliet says. “So, he’s in this crazy pressure cooker, and he’s taking it out on everyone else.”

“What else is new?” Chloe scoffs.

Max squirms a bit. Talking about this sort of stuff – people taking their medication or not, family drama – seems even more toxic than the usual topics that come up with gossip. Still, though, she holds her tongue.

“So yeah, that’s the dish,” Juliet says.

“Tasty, girl,” Chloe says, wandering back over to the conspiracy board. “Seriously, though, what are you working on here?”

“Still a secret,” Juliet says. “I don’t blab about everything.”

“Apparently not,” Chloe says. “Seems like a lot of work.”

“Yeah, but I’m cool with that,” Juliet says. “Between Zach being just a typical boy and Dana acting weird, I’ll have plenty of time for this.”

As Juliet gestures weakly at the board, Chloe and Max exchange a look.

Does Juliet know about what Dana’s going through already?

“Is everything alright, Juliet?” Max asks.

Juliet casually waves her question off.

“It’ll all work itself out,” Juliet says. “I’m sure.”

Max shoots another look Chloe’s way, who just shrugs.

“That’s cool,” Chloe says. “People suck, anyway. You want to hang out? I’m one-hundred percent unwilling to do homework.”

Juliet cracks at that.

“Sure thing,” Juliet says. “I’m starving, you want to check out that new smoothie place down at the boardwalk?”

Chloe sighs and throws an arm around Juliet’s shoulders.
“Ah, skinny girls,” Chloe says. “Always want smoothies when they’re hungry.”

“Fuck off, you’re a twig compared to me,” Juliet says.

Chloe ponders that for a moment.

“…Yeah, but still,” Chloe says. “You’re driving.”

“Gladly,” Juliet says. “I don’t trust that hunk of junk at all.”

Chloe gasps theatrically.

“How dare you!” Chloe says.

Max laughs.

Following their smoothie escapades (Max actually found them pretty tasty, and she’s pretty sure that Chloe liked them too despite her constant shit-talking), which extended into an entire shopping trip, Juliet drops the two of them off at Chloe’s house. It’s a Wednesday night, which Joyce has adamantly deemed as “extended family dinner night,” which really just means that Max eats with them, too.

“I like Juliet,” Max says, as Juliet’s Mini Cooper drives off into the distance.

“Me too,” Chloe says. “I’m down with anyone who can rock a leather jacket like she can.”

Max laughs and bumps shoulders with Chloe.

“You’re so easy,” Max says.

“Proudly!” Chloe says. “Now let’s go eat dinner and try to be civil with step-despot.”

“Are you just talking to yourself?” Max asks.

Chloe thinks on that for a moment.

“Yeah, for the most part,” Chloe says. “C’mon, let’s go.”
Chapter Summary

Max has dinner with Chloe's mom and step-dad, and Max and Chloe have a late-night heart-to-heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chloe steps into her house and literally kicks off her boots the moment she’s inside, one of them arcing up and nearly hitting the ceiling. Max still finds it so strange to be back in Chloe’s house, the same one that she spent so many hours in as a kid. It’s physically the same, but its emotional layout has completely changed, the energy that William brought now conspicuously gone.

“Loving parentals, I’m home,” Chloe calls out.

“Jesus, Chloe, we heard the door open,” David says gruffly from the living room, as Chloe mimes him for all she’s worth.

“Good, you got here just in time to help me with dinner,” Joyce says. “Is Max there with you?”

“I’m here, Joyce,” Max calls out.

“Good,” Joyce says. “You can supervise Chloe. Why don’t you two work on the salad while I finish up the main dish?”

“Sure thing!” Max says.

Chloe silently groans and throws her head back in despair, but Max drags her along regardless. Despite Chloe’s performative angst, Max has always enjoyed cooking with Joyce – mostly because she’s a fantastic chef, and Max gets a kind of contact high from that. It’s almost enough to convince Max that she can really cook, too. (She can’t – the most complex meal she’s ever made on her own starts with ramen and ends with noodles).

“What ingredients do we have today, mother?” Chloe asks.

“Enough for a Greek salad,” Joyce says. “I love that new farmer’s market they hold on the boardwalk; their prices are so cheap!”

“Ugh, you’re such a mom,” Chloe says. “But yeah, let’s do it. I’ll do the fun stuff, and Max can, like, wash the veggies and whatever.”

Max folds her arms across her chest.

“You just want to claim sole knife-wielding responsibilities,” Max says.

“Yeah, duh,” Chloe says. “Now get to washing. I’m ready to chop!”

“Fine, but I’m only doing this because I love you so much,” Max says.
“Obviously,” Chloe says.

Max shakes her head fondly and grabs all of the necessary ingredients from the fridge.

“Oh, wow, these look great,” Chloe says, immediately all over produce. “These cherry tomatoes look bomb. And those Kalamata olives? Oh man, kill me now.”

Max laughs. Though Chloe would be loath to admit it, she’s as much into cooking as her mom is. Max is jealous of the way that Chloe seems to have absorbed Joyce’s culinary abilities through osmosis, while the same thing has not at all occurred with Max and her dad.

“Prepare your knifing area, Chloe,” Max says, bumping hips with her. “I’m the sole produce washer, remember?”

“Ugh, throwing my own words back at me. Traitor,” Chloe says. “Fine, just don’t bruise anything.”

“You’re bruising my ego,” Max says. “You really think I can’t wash vegetables?”

“I’ve seen you try to cook,” Chloe says. “Frankly, you being in a kitchen frightens me.”

“You with a knife frightens me,” Max says. “Remember that time in middle school when you cut that poor girl’s hand with a butter knife?”

Chloe busts out laughing, and Max can’t help but join in as well.

“Girls!” Joyce cuts through. “Less quipping, more cooking. Let’s go.”

Chloe lets out an exasperated sigh, which Max laughs at as well.

Joyce is awesome.

After all of that, there’s only one slightly terrifying incident in which Chloe almost throws up a cucumber to cut it in mid-air. The food comes together with practiced ease and soon they’re all sitting around the dinner table, a steaming plate of lamb kebobs and Max and Chloe’s salad set out for them to eat.

“Wowsers, this all looks so good,” Max says.

“Definitely,” Chloe says. “I’m sensing a theme here. Did Hestia visit you during the night?”

“Thank you, Max,” Joyce says. “I’ve been wanting to branch out my cooking for a while now. It’s so easy for me to prepare all of the Southern dishes I learned how to make back when I was a young woman.”

“Well, it looks great, Joyce,” David says.

To Max, David is a constant conundrum. As a security guard, he’s completely intolerable. To Chloe, he oscillates between indifference and utter assholery. To Joyce, he’s somehow both gruff and caring all at once. He’s a sea of contradictions that Max doesn’t exactly want to navigate.

“So, Chloe, how is school going?” David asks.

Max sighs. Really? Do we need to fight right away?

“Fine,” Chloe says.
“Just fine?” David asks. “You’re not getting into any trouble, are you?”

“You would know, wouldn’t you?” Chloe asks. “You’re the one obsessed with surveilling our campus.”

Max wonders if David is aware that Chloe literally punched one of the school’s star athletes in the face while drinking on campus. Hopefully not.

“I’m trying to keep people safe,” David says.

“You’re trying to convince yourself that you’re keeping people safe,” Chloe says.

“I’m not having this argument with you again,” David says. “It’s clear you don’t have respect for me or for what I do.”

Max sinks down in her chair, the food in front of her forgotten.

“Can’t we just have a nice evening?” Joyce snaps. “Especially with Max here.”

The room falls completely silent as all eyes are suddenly on Max. She hates the attention.

“Sorry, Joyce,” David says gruffly, before beginning to serve himself some food.

“Yeah, sorry, Max,” Chloe says pointedly. “I guess we won’t be starring in your contest photo, huh?”

“Oh, there’s going to be a photography contest?” Joyce asks. “Are you going to enter, Max?”

Max shrugs, feeling like saying “no” outright would be like letting Joyce down. And Max would rather do almost anything besides letting Joyce down.

“I’m thinking about it,” Max says. “I don’t know. I hate reducing an artform like photography down to a competition.”

“Unfortunately, that’s what life boils down to, a lot of the time,” Joyce says. “You should enter, dear. You have a rare talent.”

Max just nods, almost believing it.

“Thanks, Joyce,” Max says.

“Hopefully Max will listen to one of us,” Chloe says. “Literally everyone is telling you you’re going to kill it!”

Joyce sighs, a sort of fond exasperation.

“If you believed in yourself half as much as you do Max, I wouldn’t have to worry about your grades anymore,” Joyce says.

“I believe in myself plenty,” Chloe says. “Max just doesn’t have the same intrepidity that I do, so I’ll do the heavy lifting for the both of us.”

David looks as if he’s going to make a comment about that, but refrains at the last moment. Max is overwhelmingly thankful for that.

The dinner goes relatively smoothly from that point on, the sniping between Chloe and David limited
to somewhat more trivial matters. Max is able to enjoy Joyce’s cooking somewhat in peace, which is actually pretty good for this household. Max definitely loves the Prices, but there’s no avoiding the simple truth that this house holds a lot of powerful, negative energy these days.

After Max and Chloe finish up with the dishes, they head upstairs to Chloe’s room to escape the uncomfortable aura that always seems to surround David. Chloe sighs loudly as she faceplants on her bed. Max just laughs.

“You doing alright there, Chloe?” Max asks.

“Peachy keen,” Chloe says. “I want to get out of this house so bad.”

Chloe turns over and laces her fingers behind the back of her head.

“That’d kill Joyce,” Max says, lying down beside Chloe.

“Well, I don’t know what she expects,” Chloe says. “I’m getting out of here no matter what, whether it be for college or trade school or just to get my Kerouac/Springsteen on and drive clear across the country.”

“Don’t you like Arcadia Bay at all?” Max asks.

“Well, sure,” Chloe says. “You’re here now, which is a major bonus. Rachel’s here. But this place is so steeped in memories. I can’t go a block without being reminded of some formative experience from my goddamn youth.”

“I’m not sure how much moving away really helps,” Max says. “I found myself missing the weirdest things those five years I was in Seattle.”


Max nods thoughtfully. Really, it’s likely she’ll make good and bad memories no matter where she goes, but that’s not exactly what Chloe wants to hear right now.

“Where would you want to go?” Max asks.

“Anywhere,” Chloe says, gesturing dramatically in front of her. “Anywhere but this dead fishing town.”

“It’s not so bad,” Max says.

“You have the advantage of being nostalgic about this place,” Chloe says. “I actually had to live here.”

Max just nods as the both of them fall silent.


Max sits upright.

“Los Angeles? Are you cereal?” Max asks. “Of all places?”

Chloe shrugs.

“I don’t know, I hear it’s pretty cool these days,” Chloe says. “Lots of youth culture.”
“Lots of young, rich people who can afford, like kombucha drinks and personal trainers,” Max says.

“Hey, I might make it big,” Chloe says, sounding mock-offended. “Either I finally start that punk band, turn into the next Sleater-Kinney, and eventually leverage my connections to start a beloved cult comedy show, or Rachel makes it big as a model and she ends up as my sugar momma.”

Max laughs.

“Right, that’ll totally work,” Max says.


“I’m just saying, you could set your sights a little higher than Los Angeles,” Max says.

“I mean, that’s not the only place I’m interested in,” Chloe says. “San Francisco would be cool. Or maybe Seattle. Portland. New York. Philadelphia has a cool music scene these days.”

“All so expensive,” Max says.

“Fine, little miss practical,” Chloe says. “The point is I’m getting out of here the moment I graduate. You know there are people who live out of their vans and just drive from town to town? Maybe that’s what I’ll do. I’ll be a fucking van dweller.”

“That sounds kind of cool,” Max says. “Would there by room for me in that van?”

Chloe laughs and rolls over to pull Max into a tight hug. There’s a brief moment that Chloe just looks at Max, and for once Max can’t read her expression.

“Obviously,” Chloe says. “You and Rachel both. We’ll be the Charlie’s Angels of van dwellers.”

Max giggles and just lets herself be held. A future without Chloe isn’t one she’d really want to ever envision.

“Hey, c’mon,” Chloe says.

Chloe grabs Max’s hand and pulls her safely onto the roof.

“Thanks,” Max says.

They sit there in silence for a moment, enjoying the still, Arcadia Bay night. The town is so nondescript that it could be plopped down in any forlorn corner of the country and still make sense, yet Max recognizes every building along its skyline. A cool breeze rolls in from the shoreline, ruffling Max’s hair as it goes.

Chloe grabs a cigarette from the breast pocket of her flannel shirt and lights it up, the thin lines of smoke curling into the night sky. Max turns to look at her, her face dimly lit by the burning tip of her cigarette.

“Why are you so reluctant about this damn contest?” Chloe asks.

Max sighs and stares up at the clear moon hanging over the bay.

“Then it all becomes real,” Max says. “Then I have to contend with awful shit like – do I really want to be a photographer? Is that how I want to make my living? Is that what I want to do for the rest of my life?”
Chloe laughs humorlessly.

“That’s a lot riding on a little contest,” Chloe says.

“But it’s not little,” Max says. “This is a huge way for me to get my name out there, especially since I have jack shit in the way of a portfolio. I could be a part of a real art installment. That would be amazing, especially since art schools expect you to have so much prepared already.”

Max buries her head in her knees. Chloe takes a long drag from her cigarette before lying back against the shingles.

“Okay, I understand,” Chloe says. “This is important to you. But it’s not the end of the world. Yeah, colleges want you to be put-together and whatever, but you’re still so young. Fuck, we’re both still young. Plan for the future and everything, but we don’t need to be so stressed out about it.”

Chloe takes a deep breath.

“Enter the contest because you want to take a truly great photo, not because you think it’ll get you brownie points for some jerk-off college admissions officer somewhere,” Chloe says. “Fuck ‘em. Like I always tell you – you have talent, Max, real talent. They’ll come to you.”

“I don’t know,” Max says.

“No, fuck that,” Chloe says, suddenly bolting upright. “You do know. You know exactly what you want to do, you’re just too chickenshit to say it.”

“Why do you care so much?” Max asks.

“Because I’m your best friend!” Chloe says. “I want you to go out into the world and kick its ass, not just be some sad-sack loser like I am.”

“You’re not a loser,” Max says.

“ Whatever, you get what I’m saying,” Chloe says. “Deep down, you already know what to do. You just have to go out and actually do it.”

Max exhales audibly. No matter how much she wants to ignore it, this feels like a moment. She can envision herself five years in the future, looking back at this very moment and wondering why she didn’t make a different choice.

“Fine,” Max says.

“Fine?” Chloe asks.

“Fine,” Max says. “I’m going to enter the contest.”

“No ifs, ands, or buts?” Chloe asks.

Max shakes her head.

“No ifs, ands, or buts,” Max says back to her.

Chloe smiles brightly at her and loosely punches her shoulder.

“Good,” Chloe says. “Life is too short to waste on not doing cool shit.”
And so ends the first "arc," so to speak.

Also, as always, feedback sustains my lifeforce! Commenta, kudos, anything!
“You know the sacred rules of puff, puff, pass, I hope?” Chloe asks.

“I get the general idea,” Max says. “Spreading the wealth around, right?”

“You got it, Karl Max,” Chloe says.

“Terrible pun,” Max says, laughing.

Chloe just flips her off.

“Let’s get it going, guys!” Rachel says. “I so want to see Max high.”

“I’m hella excited, sister,” Chloe says.

Chloe lights up her joint and takes a couple of deep drags, the smoke floating lazily up to the ceiling, before passing it to Rachel. Max watches her toke up with a bit of apprehension. She’s been around the two girls when they’ve been high plenty of times, but this is her first time joining the fray. It shouldn’t freak her out so much, given she’s had plenty to drink at the parties she’s been invited to, and alcohol is technically more damaging than weed, but weed has such a stigma around it and it lingers for so long in your system and the smell…

“You, Max Attack, stop spiraling and take a hit,” Chloe says.

(Chloe’s sixth sense is basically just being able to tell when Max is freaking out).

“Uh, right,” Max says. “No time like the present, huh?”

Max takes the joint and puts it to her lips. She takes a long drag, the tip glowing bright orange. The smoke fills her lungs and she tries her hardest not to cough, not wanting to look too lame in front of her two, admittedly very cool friends.

Max flops backwards on Chloe’s bed and waits for it to hit her.

(It hits her).

“We should listen to some music,” Max says.

“Oh my god, if you suggest some neo-psychedelic, freak-folk bullshit I’m going to defenestrate your hipster ass,” Chloe says.

Max giggles. Chloe gets verbose when she’s high.

“Good idea!” Max says, jumping up and heading over to the stereo system. “Let’s put on some Animal Collective.”

“Defenestrate!” Chloe repeats.

Max flees from Chloe’s joking attempts to kick her (presumably out the window). As Max plugs her phone into the stereo, Chloe’s foot makes contact with her butt.
“Hey!” Max exclaims.

“She serves you right,” Chloe says. “At least you’re playing early Animal Collective.”

Max sticks her tongue out at Chloe.

“Why don’t we ever listen to anything cool, like Sleater-Kinney?” Chloe asks. “Or Wild Flag? Or clips from Portlandia of Carrie Brownstein saying anything at all?”

“You really love Carrie Brownstein, huh?” Max asks.

“Honestly, she owns my entire ass,” Chloe says.

“So basically, rich-boy Nathan is trying to stick people up for money. It’s insane,” Chloe says as she finishes recapping the entire debacle with Nathan in the hallway.

“The whole Vortex Club is wack though,” Rachel says as she takes another long drag.

“How come everyone in the Vortex Club hates the Vortex Club?” Max asks. “Juliet thinks it sucks too. And I don’t think Dana even goes to half of the parties.”

“Dana’s a weirdo,” Chloe says. “The Vortex Club doesn’t do shit besides their parties.”

“I don’t know about those two, but I see it as a necessary evil. I can’t conquer Blackwell if I don’t have my tendrils in the most popular, elite club,” Rachel says. “That’s why I’m in it.”

“Don’t talk about fucking tendrils,” Chloe says. “You make yourself sound like some eldritch horror.”

“Am I not, Chloe?” Rachel asks sweetly.

“Weirdo,” Chloe says.

“Burnout,” Rachel fires back.

“Princess.”

“Nerd.”

That starts a shoving match between the two, which ends with Rachel on top of Chloe, pinning her hands to the bed on either side of her.

“Shesh, you two are so gay,” Max says.

“Aww, Maxie, you can join the cuddle pile,” Chloe says.

Chloe grabs Max and pulls her close as Rachel giggles. Rachel collapses onto the two of them, her head resting on Max’s shoulders. Max feigns being offended at first, but she can’t help but dissolve into giggling herself.

“We should start our own club,” Max says off-handedly.

Rachel bolts straight upright, staring down at Max like she just discovered a cure for hangovers.

“We totally should,” Rachel says.
“What?” Max asks. “I wasn’t being serious.”

“I am,” Rachel says. “That hoity-fucking-toity, rich kids club thing that Vortex Club has going on is so last century. We need an actually cool social club for real.”

Chloe grins, something of a spark shining in her eyes.

“Oh man, that’d be dope,” Chloe says. “Once we’re the big club on campus, we can rub it in Vortex’s faces!”

Max can always tell when Chloe and Rachel are about to get stuck in a feedback loop of excitement and hype. She doesn’t want to burst their bubble, but sometimes that bubble really needs to be burst.

“Wait,” Max says. “And I’m not saying I’m supporting this idea…”

“Your idea,” Rachel adds in.

“Fine, my idea,” Max says. “I’m just trying to say that the rich kids are what make the Vortex Club so popular – they have the money to throw insane parties. We have, what, twenty dollars for weed and pizza between the three of us?”

“Oh fuck,” Chloe says.

Rachel and Max turn to look at her, concerned.

“We should hella order some pizza,” Chloe says. “Keep talking about the club, because that shit’s straight fire. I’ll be right back.”

Chloe races downstairs, looking for coupon clippings for pizza. Max can practically see a cloud of weed smoke following her around.

Rachel grabs Max’s hands and looks very seriously into her eyes. It strikes her right then, like – this is why everyone is so into her. Rachel could tell her practically anything and Max is sure she’d agree with it.

“We should seriously start a club,” Rachel says. “I think it’s such a good idea.”

“I mean, I think it’d be cool too,” Max says. “But what’s our angle? Why would people join us instead of Vortex? They have such a stranglehold on this entire school.”

“We could be the cool, inclusive club,” Rachel says. “Good vibes and, like, being chill with all different types of people is what’s cool right now, not being snobby, rich weirdos. We’ll be the proles to the bourgeois of the Vortex Club.”

“Would we still throw parties and everything?” Max asks.

“Well yeah!” Rachel says. “But we’d also have low-key get-togethers. Something that people like you and Kate could jam to. Like, tea and acoustic guitars and that whole scene.”

“We still have no money, though,” Max says.

“Money is fake!” Rachel says. “Chloe and I know how to have a good time with no money. Just steal a keg from the frat boys the next town over and thrash in the junkyard.”

Max pulls a face at that.
“Well, we can work on it,” Max says. “Maybe we can throw some fundraisers?”

“Ugh, you’re such a square,” Rachel says. “That’s why I love you so much!”

Rachel starts pinching Max’s cheeks. Max squirms and tries her hardest to get away, giggling all the while. This is, of course, exactly when Chloe decides to return to the bedroom.

“Okay, the pizza’s going to be here in twenty,” Chloe says. “What the fuck are you two doing?”

Rachel and Max just look at each other, before falling over laughing.

(The pizza comes in the next half-hour, and it’s delicious).
Hello friends - because I'm going on vacation for the next few days or so, I won't be able to make my usual Sunday posting time. So, y'all are getting a chapter early! Woo! Looks like AmberPriceField's plans for a new club are really taking off.

ALSO, I want to use this space to shout-out the other Life is Strange fic I'm releasing: I Will Bury You In Time. Unlike this fic, it's a angstier, darker look at a post-sacrifice-Chloe Max and her struggles to move on (as if it would really be so simple). It would mean a lot to me if you guys check that story out as well?

Is it ridiculous and irresponsible of me to be posting and updating two LiS fics at once? Probably! Hopefully I'll be able to keep up! (Jk, both stories are totally planned out. I'll be fine!)

When Max wakes up the next morning, she expects the whole “starting a club” thing to have been completely forgotten. But as she checks her phone, she sees that she has a few texts from Rachel.

Rachel (7:36 AM): COOL KIDS CLUB PLANNING MEETING 9 AM TODAY @ TWO WHALES

Rachel (7:37 AM): IF YOU DON’T SHOW UP I HATE U 4EVER

RACHEL (7:49 AM): jk i luv u max but i will cut a bitch!

Max groans and rubs the sleep from her eyes. At least she doesn’t have class until this afternoon.

Max gathers her things for the shower and reluctantly leaves the warm cocoon that is her dorm room. She hears a door open behind her as she’s on her way to the showers, and before she knows it, Victoria has bumped her from behind. Max stumbles, her towel and bottles of body wash and shampoo scattering across the floor.

“Whoops! Didn’t see you there,” Victoria says. “Must be that waifish frame of yours.”

“C’mon, really, Victoria?” Max asks.

“I thought being on the floor is cool now,” Victoria says.

Max just shakes her head and begins picking up her things.

“I hear not showering is pretty throwback, too,” Victoria says. “You want to be vintage cool, right?”

Victoria finally disappears into the shower room and Max lets out the breath she didn’t even know she’d been holding. Okay. That solidifies a lot of things in Max’s mind.

Max shows up, freshly showered, at the Two Whales diner just before nine. Rachel and Chloe are
nowhere to be found, of course, so Max reserves their usual booth.

“Well hey there, Max,” Joyce greets. “Are the three musketeers meeting here today?”

“You know it,” Max says with a smile.

“Oh, it’s so good having you back in Arcadia Bay,” Joyce says. “I love seeing you back with Chloe. I love Rachel too, don’t get me wrong, but she’s always been a bit of a wild child.

Just then there's a flash of blue hair behind Joyce - right on cue.

“Who’s a wild child?” Chloe asks, butting into the conversation with Rachel in tow.

“I bet it’s Max,” Rachel says. “She’s a bad influence on us, Joyce.”

Joyce just tuts and shakes her head. Chloe gives her a big, shit-eating grin as she and Rachel slide into the booth opposite from Max.

“You two are late,” Max says, trying to sound stern even as her smile suggests otherwise.

“Couldn’t be helped,” Chloe says. “Time is a spook anyway.”

“Chloe, you weren’t even on time for your own birth,” Joyce says.

Rachel and Max both burst out laughing as Chloe looks utterly offended. She sputters, unable to think of a comeback, and sits back huffily with her arms folded across her chest.

“Well, looks like the gang’s all together,” Joyce says, moving on. “What’ll you girls be having?”

The three of them place their orders. Max tries not to gag at Chloe’s order, which involves the biggest stack of pancakes Joyce is willing to give her, a plateful of eggs, and fistfuls of bacon and sausage.

“You’re disgusting,” Max says.

“You mean disgustingly endearing?” Chloe asks.

Max opens her mouth to answer, and Chloe clamps a hand over her mouth.

“No, don’t answer that. It’s a rhetorical question,” Chloe says. “I don’t know if my ego can take the hit.”

“Your ego is bulletproof,” Max says.


Max and Rachel just look at each other before laughing uproariously. Chloe feigns looking hurt before joining in as well.

Joyce stops by a moment later with three steaming-hot cups of coffee. Max grabs hers with glee and takes a loud slurp of the sludgy liquid. The Two Whales Diner coffee is so strong that Max is sure it must break some kind of health regulation, but she doesn’t care. She needs that kick in the ass in the morning.

“Addict,” Rachel says as Max happily gulps down her coffee. “And you judge me and Chloe for our love of the green.”

“Yeah, because now you’re a pothead!” Chloe says, her voice loud enough that Joyce shouts something in response. “Like us. You’ve been ganja-fied.”

“Jeeze, shut up, Chloe,” Max says, well aware that there’s a police officer sitting no more than ten feet away from them.

“Aw, you love me,” Chloe says.

Max ducks her head and stares down at her coffee.

“Whatever,” Max says.

“Gay,” Rachel says.

Chloe smacks her shoulder and Max throws a packet of sugar at her.

It doesn’t take long for their order to come out, and the table falls silent as they tear into their food. Everything is absolutely delicious, of course, and Max is convinced that breakfast food is the absolute best type of food.

“Okay, let’s talk club,” Rachel says as their assault on their food slows down.

“I’m so in,” Max says. “I’m one-hundo percent down.”

“I like the energy, Mad Max,” Rachel says. “What changed from yesterday?”

“No reason,” Max shrugs. “Victoria may have solidified her status as opposite-of-Beyoncé this morning. Queen B-I-T-C-H, y’know? I’m not exactly opposed to taking the Vortex Club down a notch.

“Revenge!” Chloe says. “That’s one of my top three reasons to start a club.”

“What are the other two?” Max asks.


“AKA the ‘Chloe Special,’” Rachel says sardonically.

“Hell yeah,” Chloe says. “Really, those are my top three reasons to do anything in life.”

Max just looks at her, concerned.

“That’s, uh, how do I put this,” Max says. “Super unhealthy?”

Chloe just grins and leans back in her booth, resting her head against her hands.

“That’s what I’m about, son!” Chloe says.

“Okay, but seriously, the club,” Max says. “I really like the idea of it being, like, a social thing, but for the weirdos.”

“Exactly,” Rachel says. “We celebrate weirdness, not try to be a bunch of Stepford sister-wives to
“Nathan and Victoria.”

“We can thrash and throw down,” Max says. “And also do more relaxed stuff, too, like drink tea and listen to music and whatever.”

“Really what we need is a dope space where everyone can come together,” Chloe says. “Somewhere we can all escape, like the junkyard. Except not the junkyard, because that’s our spot forever.”

Everyone leans back, immediately falling deep in thought. Max takes another long sip of her coffee. Suddenly, Rachel snaps her fingers and leans forward over the table, her long hair nearly falling into the remains of her breakfast.

“What about that old music building the school has been trying to shut down?” Rachel asks. “We could ask around and see if we could use that.”

“That’d be awesome,” Max says. “It’d already have great acoustics for when we want to jam or whatever.”

“Plus, that whole building is sound-proofed,” Chloe says. “Great place to hook up, b-t-dubs. But, also good if we want to throw parties without being noise-polluting dillweeds like Vortex.”

“Gross, Chloe,” Max says.

“Hey, sex is natural and beautiful, Maxi Pad,” Chloe says.

Max rolls her eyes good-naturedly.

“Anyway, let’s see if we can take over that building,” Rachel says. “Final piece of business – we need to come up with a good club name.”

“Yeah, as much as it pains me to say, Vortex is actually a pretty cool name. If it weren’t associated with a bunch of smug rich kids,” Max says. “We need something catchy like that.”

Chloe’s entire face lights up and she slams both palms on the tabletop.

“How about the ‘Bad Bitches Club?’” Chloe suggests immediately. “Or the ‘Cunts Club?’ Maybe, like the ‘Vuvalini Club?’”

“Okay, first: no to all of those,” Rachel says, and Chloe sinks down further into her seat. “And two: this is not going to be a girl’s only club, as cool as that might be. We want to be all-inclusive.”

“Whatsoever,” Chloe says. “The boys at Blackwell should be thrilled to be called cunts.”

“Could you stop saying that word?” Max asks.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Chloe pouts. “I’m starting my own club, then – the Rage Against the Maxine Club.”

Max laughs, and Chloe stops pouting and cracks a grin.

“Okay, that was pretty good,” Max says.

“But seriously, guys,” Rachel says. “We need a cool name.”

Everyone leans back, deep in thought. Chloe, though, amuses herself by pouring salt onto her plate in various patterns. Joyce is definitely going to kill them.
“Hey, we should call it the Tobanga Club,” Max says. “Just like the actual totem pole, we’re a little weird, a little mysterious, and a little cool.”

Chloe and Rachel share a look at that.

“Huh, I kind of like that,” Rachel says.

“I mean, it’s not a reference to vaginas, but I can dig it,” Chloe says. “It’s relevant to the school, too. That’s pretty dope.”

“Awesome,” Max says. “Tobanga Club it is.”

“Now we just have to get ourselves out there,” Rachel says.

“Posters! We need hella posters,” Chloe says.

“I can ask Kate,” Max says. “Maybe Dana, too, she has so much school spirit.”

“Chloe and I can secure the music room,” Rachel says. “This is coming together!”

“Yeah, Blackwell better watch out for us!” Max says.

Chapter End Notes

Feedback. Pls?
After class that day, Max texts Kate and Dana to meet her in her dorm room for some poster-making. Max is positively buzzing with excitement as she waits for them to show up. Given all the time that she spends reading the bulletin boards, it only seems fair that she now contributes to them, especially for something as cool as the Tobanga Club.

There’s a knock at her door, and Max flings it open to see Kate and Dana standing there, both looking mostly confused.

“Hey, guys,” Max greets. “Come on in.”

“Is everything alright, Max?” Kate asks. “Your text was a little frantic.”

“Yeah, everything cool in your little hipster heart?” Dana asks.

Max peeks down the hallway before closing the door.

“Sorry about that,” Max says. “I wanted to really make sure you guys came over. I have big news.”

“Oh my god, you finally hooked up with Chloe?” Dana asks.

Kate squeaks and blushes red. Max tries to ignore the way her heart begins to thump in her chest.

“What? No, focus, this is serious,” Max says. “And Dana, you have to keep this a secret for now. What you hear can’t leave this room.”

“Uh, you do know who I’m friends with, right?” Dana asks. “I tell Juliet everything, and she has a tendency to tell everyone else everything.”

“C’mon, Dana, please?” Max asks. “For me?”

Max tries to make her eyes look as big and on the verge of teary as she can. Dana sighs.

“You and your doe eyes,” Dana says, folding her arms across her chest. “Fine, I won’t tell Juliet.”


The room is silent for a moment. Max swears she can hear actual crickets.

“Guys, you aren’t reacting to this,” Max says.

“No, this is very cool!” Kate says. “Just – what’s this club going to be like?”

“Yeah, what’s the deal?” Dana asks.

“We’re calling it the Tobanga Club,” Max says. “And it’s going to be a total social thing. We want to provide a space where people can hang out and just be themselves, no pressure. We’ll throw parties and quiet get-togethers and everything else in-between, where everybody is invited. And, if I can manage to convince Chloe, we’ll do some community service and everything.”
Kate and Dana share a quick look.

“That sounds really awesome, actually,” Dana says.

“Quiet get-togethers sound nice,” Kate says.

“Plus, it’ll nice to have a club that actually does community service and not just say they will, like Vortex,” Dana says with a quick roll of her eyes.

“Exactly,” Max says. “So, to get this thing off the ground, I’m going to need your help.”

“Anything, Max,” Kate says.

“Seriously, we’re here for you,” Dana says.

“I’m going to need some posters,” Max says. “Maybe some banners, too. Just something to say we’re here and we’re taking over.”

Dana and Kate look at each other for a moment.

“I’m sure we can think of something, between the two of us,” Dana says, putting her arm around Kate’s shoulders.

“Thanks so much you guys, seriously,” Max says. “I owe you both big-time.”

Dana opens her mouth, about to say something, before closing it again and furrowing her brow in thought.

“I’m not, like, betraying the Vortex Club by doing this, right?” Dana asks.

“Honestly, if you don’t want anyone to find out you helped with this, I certainly won’t tell anyone,” Max says. “But also, you can be in more than one club at the same time. I don’t think that counts as betrayal.”

“The Vortex Club is pretty intense about their membership,” Dana says. “But, you’re right. And, honestly, I’d rather help you.”

“Cool. Thank you so much, Dana,” Max says. “Honestly, you don’t even have to join if you don’t want to.”

Dana scoffs.

“If I’m helping make the poster, I want first crack at the drinks table and the dance floor at your parties,” Dana says.

Max laughs.

“That can certainly be arranged,” Max says.

Max finds the process of making the poster pretty fun, like arts and crafts from back in elementary school. Kate brings all of her art supplies to Max’s room and they take up every inch of available space to spread out and work.

It’s nice, too, the way Kate and Dana sprawl out on the floor, shoulder-to-shoulder, as they go over poster designs together. Max can’t help but grin at the not-so-subtle way they always stay in close
physical contact and the excited way they stumble over their words when they land on a design they both like. Max wonders if Kate is genuinely unaware of the way she acts around Dana, because to Max’s untrained eye it seems like there’s a possible interest there beyond mere friendship.

At one point, Dana insists on putting on some music, which makes their design session devolve into an impromptu dance party. Dana’s the only one with any real dancing ability, and she takes Kate’s hands and hoists her up onto Max’s bed, the two of them laughing and simply moving together. Max stealthily grabs her camera and takes a picture of them.

They get back to work after Kate nearly falls off the bed and Max insists that they focus up. After another hour or so of brainstorming and sketching and a veritable mountain of crumpled up drafts, they come up with a final poster that they’re all pretty happy with.

In a departure from Kate’s usual style, a realistic drawing of the Tobanga graces the center of the poster, with the words “JOIN OR DIE” surrounding it. Since they have no actual events planned or even a meeting space lined up, they have Rachel’s phone number at the bottom with no explanation, along with the name of the club itself.

“Maybe a bit too aggressive?” Kate asks.

“It’s catchy, though,” Max says.

“Honestly, people might need the threat to get them away from Vortex,” Dana says.

“I like it,” Max says. “Now we need to abuse that photocopier.”

There’s a strange void of time between the end of classes and before curfew begins in which nobody is actually in the main school building, meaning it’s the perfect time for Max and co. to hang up their posters.

The three girls stroll through the halls when they hear two distinct, female voices drifting out of the art classroom. They all look at one another, all a bit surprised. Usually, nobody would be hanging around the building at this time. They make sure to tread lightly, and the closer they get to the classroom, the more distinct the voices become.

It’s Victoria and Ms. Burch.

Max’s eyes widen. She doesn’t exactly want Victoria to see them sneaking through the building, clutching posters advertising a rival club to Vortex.

“What do we do?” Kate asks.

“C’mon!” Dana says, pulling both Kate and Max around the corner.

They all flatten against the row of lockers as the footsteps grow louder, suggesting that Victoria and Ms. Burch are walking down the hallway. Max finds herself holding her breath.

“…thank you so much for helping me, Hanna,” Victoria says. “I can call you Hanna, right?”

Max nearly gags, and she turns to see Kate looking horrified and Dana stifling giggles.

“Ms. Burch is fine,” she says cheerily, but firmly.

“Of course,” Victoria says, all feigned graciousness. “But, again, thank you so much. You’re, like, the total package. Smart, talented, pretty – we’re like two peas in a pod.”
Ms. Burch just laughs and runs a hand through her bushy, curly hair. She and Victoria pass right by where Max and her friends are hiding. Victoria doesn’t notice any of them, but Ms. Burch does. Max’s throat tightens as she makes eye contact with Ms. Burch, but she just winks at her and keeps on walking.

“I’m flattered, Victoria,” Ms. Burch says. “But let’s not go down this route, alright?”

“I’m not…,” Victoria starts, thrown off her game. “I – I wasn’t suggesting…”

“Of course not, Victoria,” Ms. Burch says. “Look, I’ll see you in class, alright…”

The sound of the front doors of the building opening and closing come as a huge release. Max exhales the breath she’d been holding that entire time. The three friends are silent for a moment, simply looking at one another.

“Did that just happen?” Dana asks.

“I believe so,” Kate says.

“Unfortunately,” Max says.

The three of them are silent for another long moment.

“Let’s hang up the posters,” Max says.

“Yeah, anything to scrub that interaction from my brain,” Dana says.

“Listen all of y’all it’s a sabotage,” Dana hums beneath her breath. “Listen all of y’all it’s a sabotage…”

Max jumps beside Dana.

“I can’t stand it! I know you planned it!” Max half-sings, half-raps. “But I’m gonna set it straight, this Watergate. I…”

“I love you, but please don’t rap, Max,” Dana says, placing her hand on Max’s shoulder. “Like, ever.”

Max hangs her head.

“Yeah, I hear you,” Max says.

Kate giggles.

“I am seriously betraying the Vortex Club right now, no matter what you guys say,” Dana says. “So, we need to be careful.”

“Definitely,” Max says. “We’ll be like ninjas. Like really careful, considerate ninjas.”

“That also means we shouldn’t just put our posters on top of the Vortex Club ones,” Kate admonishes. “Max.”

Max sighs.

“You’re right,” Max says, taking down a poster that she just put up. “I guess these are eye-catching
“I would hope so,” Kate says, in mock offense (she did design the bulk of the poster).

They make their way down the hallways of the main building, making sure to get a poster onto every single bulletin board they can see. Max finds it kind of fun, finally having found a way to subvert the Vortex Club.

Once they’re done, they all stand back, shoulder-to-shoulder, and admire their handiwork.

“Thanks again, you guys,” Max says.

“It was our pleasure,” Kate says with a smile.

Dana shrugs.

“Beats doing homework,” Dana says.

Max goes back around and takes pictures of all of the posters with her phone and sends them to Rachel and Chloe. Almost immediately, she gets back several excited texts. It’s really coming together.

“What was so important that both of you needed to call me?” Max asks. “Neither of you ever use your phones as actual phones.”

Max had just received two very frantic calls from Chloe and Rachel, who both told her to come meet them in the quad.

“We got some hella exciting news, homie,” Chloe says. “I’m finna freak out right now.”

“Yeah, follow us,” Rachel says.

They both take Max’s hands and practically drag her through the quad to the old music building. Max’s eyes widen as she realizes where they’re going. Did the two of them really pull it off?

Chloe pulls a ring of keys from her back pocket with a loud jangle and holds them in front of Max’s face.

“No way,” Max says. “Are those keys to the music building?”

“Hells yeah way, Maximo!” Chloe says.

“How’d you do it?” Max asks.

“So, you know how I’m trying to be like, ugh, cool or whatever with my step-fascist?” Chloe asks.

“Trying real hard, clearly, calling him that,” Max says.

“Whatever, you’re the one who told me to not be such a royal cunt-ess to him,” Chloe says. “But anyway, last weekend I may have helped him work on that car he’s been tinkering with for so long, so I called that favor in. Got a chance to talk with him and good ol’ Big Wells with Rachel.”

“Long story short, they were both secretly thrilled to bring in another club that might rival Vortex,” Rachel says. “I may have emphasized we’d be, like, drinking tea and talking about our feelings with Kate Marsh, which probably helped. But still, they were willing to hand over the reins to us.”
“So, are you saying…?” Max asks.

“We do be saying, Max,” Chloe says. “We are now the proud owners of this shitty old music building.”

“Owners?” Max asks.

“Well, whatever, we can use it unless they catch us doing what we’re actually planning on doing in it,” Chloe says. “Which is smoking weed and getting fucking wasted.”

“Chloe…” Max says.

Chloe holds her hands up defensively.

“Not all the time,” Chloe says. “But we have to get down, too. It’s our civic fucking duty. Now, without further ado…”

Chloe unlocks the double-doors to the music buildings and pushes them open with aplomb. A musty stench wafts out to greet them, and Max coughs, waving her hand in front of her face.

“Jeeze, when was the last music class held here?” Max asks.

“For real, half a decade ago,” Rachel says.

Those five years show, too. The music building is nothing more than a wide-open rehearsal space with a few private practice rooms off to the side. Old, rusted-out music stands and rickety plastic chairs are arranged haphazardly in a half-circle, suggesting an orchestra or something practiced here once upon a time. Dusty curtains hang loosely over the wide, tall windows, and golden sunlight filters through in stripes across the space.

Max reaches into her camera bag and snaps a quick picture with her instant camera. There’s a certain magic to abandoned spaces, even ones as recently abandoned as this place. The whole room still buzzes with the energy of the music played within.

“This place is awesome!” Chloe says, leaping up onto a chair and nearly falling off in one swift motion. “Man, I can see it now. We clear out all these shitty chairs and music stands and put in hella beanbag chairs and other thrifted crap. We can get some hippy blankets and hang them on the walls. There should just be pillows fuckin’ everywhere, and…”

Chloe moves her arms about like she’s conducting an orchestra, and Rachel and Max just stand back and watch her go. Because here’s Chloe “don’t give a shit about anything” Price giving a shit about something.

“You know, this means we have to do one last thing…” Rachel says.

Chapter End Notes

Totally necessary cliffhanger at the end there lol

And, as always, I love feedback! Comments, kudos, anything!
“Shopping montage!” Chloe says, pumping her fist in the air.

“I’m so excited to do a tour of all the thrift shops in town,” Max says.

“Hell yeah,” Chloe says. “I also notice that none of you are complaining about my truck now, huh? That’s what I like to call foresight. Furniture foresight.”

“You foresaw us making a rival club to Vortex and needing furniture to populate our new hangout spot?” Max asks.

“Whatever, my truck is awesome is my point,” Chloe says as she pulls into a parking space. “Alright, here’s our first stop. Let’s get hella bean bags and gross, old rugs and shit.”

“Sanitary!” Max says.

They all exit Chloe’s truck and head into the thrift shop, on the hunt for furniture. Chloe immediately gets sidetracked by a display of old leather jackets, and it takes both Rachel and Max grabbing at her arms to pull her attention away.

“But I only have four leather jackets,” Chloe says. “What kind of fuckin’ punk am I?”

“A frugal one,” Rachel says. “We need to use our money wisely. Max was right – we don’t have deep pockets like the Vortex Club. But we do have something even more important.”

Rachel pauses for dramatic effect.

“Heart?” Max asks.

“Baller attitudes?” Chloe asks.

“No, you weirdo idealists,” Rachel says. “We have desperation – that is to say, we can flirt with the cashiers and try to bring those prices down.”

Max and Chloe both deflate.

“I’ll let you guys handle that,” Max says.

“Nonsense,” Rachel says, sliding her arm around Max’s shoulders. “Just use those big, teary doe eyes of yours.”

“Okay, we won’t pimp out Max just like that,” Chloe says, grabbing Max’s hand and pulling her towards the furniture. “Shit’s wack, sister. Let’s just go find some cool furniture.”

Rachel sighs.

“If you say so,” Rachel says. “I think your talents are going to be left underused, though!”

As they had expected, most of the furniture for sale is either disgusting (as in human discharge stains level of disgusting) or simply broken down. They do manage to find one 60s looking lounge chair
and an old, brightly colored rug with a vaguely psychedelic pattern.

“So, are you going to get the ol’ two-button discount?” Chloe asks.

“What’s a ‘two-button’ discount?” Max asks.

Rachel just grins and undoes the front of her flannel shirt, exposing more of her cleavage. Max can’t help but roll her eyes.

“It hasn’t failed me yet,” Rachel says. “Wish me luck, ladies.”

Rachel goes to have a productive conversation with the cashier as Chloe and Max hang back and watch. Max isn’t sure if she’s impressed or just appalled.

“Does she do this a lot?” Max asks.

“Oh yeah,” Chloe says. “Big time. You should ask her about that time we got our meal at that fancy-ass, bourgeois French restaurant downtown for free.”

“Wait, the place that’s, like, a hundred dollars a plate?” Max asks. “Is Rachel a witch?”

“I don’t think so,” Chloe says. “But she’d be thrilled to hear you call her that.”

“I bet,” Max says.

They both watch as Rachel masterfully flirts with the cashier. It really is both impressive and a little disturbing at once as Rachel pulls out every move in the book - a smile here, a touch to the forearm here, a laugh that’s a bit too enthusiastic there. To Max, it’s so obvious that she’s certain it won’t work, but Rachel flashes them a double thumbs-up as she hands her debit card over to the cashier.

“What the fuck did you do?” Chloe asks. “How cheap was it?”

“Got it down to 50% off,” Rachel says. “Who’s the baddest bitch around?”

“Uh, still me,” Chloe says. “But you’re a close second.”

“Whatever,” Rachel says, rolling her eyes. “Just help me carry everything outside.”

They take their hard-earned goods out to Chloe’s truck and toss them into the back. Chloe, in a rare moment of foresight, brought along ropes to secure everything, and they use their combined yet fading girl scout knowledge to tie knots they’re pretty sure won’t fall apart mid-drive.

“Okay, I’m hype now, guys,” Chloe says. “Let’s tear up the next thrift shop!”

Chloe turns up the car’s stereo, which is playing a mix CD of mostly Sleater-Kinney songs. Everyone cheers as Chloe roars out of the parking lot, her driving wild and herky-jerky.

By the end of the day, their arms are sore from lugging furniture around and Rachel is, incredibly, getting bored of flirting with every cashier she sees. Chloe’s truck is piled high with furniture, however (including the bean bags that Chloe so desperately wanted). And between the aesthetic tastes of all three girls, they’ve managed to come up with an eclectic yet strangely cohesive collection of furniture.

“Yo, Rach, call up our skater boys,” Chloe says. “I’m not carrying all of this shit down to the music
building. I’m only skinny-girl jacked. I can only do so much.”

Rachel laughs and pulls her phone out.

“You got it,” Rachel says, before calling Justin. “Timberlake! Get your friends and meet us in the parking lot. We’re going to exploit you…no, not like that. Just meet us out there, dick. Okay, bye, love you.”

Max as always, is impressed by Rachel’s ability to simply get people to do things, given that it’s a skill that Max herself does not possess in the slightest. And, right on cue, Justin comes walking over to the parking lot with his friends as Chloe pulls into a parking spot.

“Whoa, nice haul, Chloester,” Justin says. “What’s the deal?”

“Sup, my man,” Chloe says. “Well, we gotta move all of this to the music building. You down?”

Justin’s face falls just a bit, but his attitude remains undeterred.

“Beats homework, right? We got it,” Justin says.

“Thank you so much, Justin,” Rachel says. “We owe you one.”

“Hey, we good,” Justin says. “If you let us crash the first Tobanga Club shindig you throw.”

Max groans. Of course Dana spilled the beans.

With the help of Justin and his skater gang, they manage to haul all of their purchases to the old music building. Max is sweating right through her trusty grey sweatshirt and she’s panting hard by the time they get the last beanbag chair in place, but as she steps back and surveys the room, she can really begin to envision their club get-togethers. This could really be something special.

“Wow, this already looks great,” Chloe says, echoing Max’s thoughts succinctly. “It’ll take a bit of rearranging and some of the ol’ Chloe flair, but it’s already coming together.”

“Yeah, super cool,” Rachel says. “I’m so ready for our first party already. I want to start planning it out yesterday!”

“Cool, guys,” Justin says. “So, will I get, like VIP status at this party or something?”

The three girls look amongst themselves for a moment.

“No VIPs, man,” Rachel says.

“You’re still invited, though!” Max adds on.

“Get out of here, Justin,” Chloe says good-naturedly. “And thanks!”

Justin just laughs lazily and waves goodbye before heading out of the music building.

“Alright, ready to turn this baby into a hangout truly worthy of us?” Rachel asks.

“Oh, hell yes,” Chloe says. “C’mon, we’ll start by hanging these tapestries over these windows here…”

About halfway through their decorating session, Chloe jury-rigs a way to hook her phone up to the still-function AV equipment in the room and starts blasting some Le Tigre to really bump the mood
up. The three girls dance and sing as they rearrange furniture and hang up decorations.

“I love you guys!” Chloe shouts over the music.

“Keep it in your pants, girl,” Rachel shouts back.

Max just laughs and smiles at her friends, overjoyed and oh so willing at being swept up in the moment.

“When do we want our first get-together?” Chloe asks.

“This Friday!” Rachel says.

“So soon?” Max asks.

“Totally,” Rachel says. “We gotta blitz this school. All Tobanga Club, all the time.”

“What’re we going to do?” Max asks.

Rachel gasps and stands stock still for a moment.

“Sleepover!” Rachel says.

“A sleepover?” Chloe asks. “What’re we, twelve?”

“Dude, we had one at your house just before the semester started,” Max says.

“…Whatever,” Chloe says.

“I’m so serious, though,” Rachel says. “It’d be a super great way for everyone to bond and we could both party at night and then have a chill morning tea session or something.”

“Not bad,” Chloe says.

“Obviously, it’s my idea,” Rachel says, a grin on her face.

“Are we even allowed to do this?” Max asks. “Does this break curfew?”

Rachel shrugs.

“I have no clue,” Rachel says. “I don’t see why it would, since we’ll be inside the entire time.”

“I guess you have a point,” Max says.

“Naturally,” Rachel says.

“Chloester, could you check with your step-dad about it?” Max asks.

Chloe rolls her eyes dramatically and folds her arms across her chest.

“You want me to speak with my step-douche?” Chloe asks, incensed. “After I already spoke with him earlier this week?”

“I thought that was pretty obvious,” Max says teasingly.

“Do it for the club, Chloe!” Rachel says. “The Tobanga is bigger than our petty squabbles.”
“Okay, is this a club, or a fucking cult?” Chloe asks.

“Yes,” Rachel says, not missing a beat.

Chloe sighs, rolls her eyes, and sits down huffily on the piano bench in one motion. Max laughs – only Chloe could make whining look so graceful.


“Hell yes!” Rachel says. “Oh man, I’m so excited I feel like I’m gonna throw up.”

“That might be because we’ve been hauling furniture around and we haven’t eaten since lunchtime,” Max says.

“Oh shit, it’s late already,” Chloe says, checking her phone for the time. “Two Whales?”

“Two Whales,” Max and Rachel say at once.

On Monday morning, Max wakes up, as always, with a deep unwillingness to go to any of her classes. Thankfully none of them are particularly early, but still. Monday classes feel like a borderline war crime. Max groans out loud as she rolls over and grabs her phone. The group text between her, Rachel, and Chloe has about a million notifications.

Rachel (8:48 AM, Mon): MY PHONE IS BLOWING UP

Rachel (8:48 AM, Mon): EVERYONE has been texting me about the club

Rachel (8:49 AM, Mon): mostly Victoria and Nathan bitching at me, but still

Rachel (8:50 AM, Mon): I’m texting everyone but them and their lackeys about the sleepover on Friday

Rachel texts a cavalcade of fire emojis to follow everything up.

Chloe (9:01 AM, Mon): NO FUCKIN EMOJI

Chloe (9:01 AM, Mon): cool tho

Max laughs and starts writing a response.

Max (9:24 AM, Mon): That’s awesome, Rach! We should get party supplies during the week ^_^

Chloe (9:24 AM, Mon): mAX WHAT DID I JUST SAY?

Max (9:25 AM, Mon): (公开发言)

Max sets her phone aside, grabs her things for the shower, and gets ready for the day.

“Hey, did you get Rachel’s text about the sleepover?” Max asks.

“I didn’t, but I heard about it from Dana,” Kate says.

Max and Kate are walking across the quad, having just finished their shared Western Lit. class. They’re sharing a pair of earbuds that’re hooked up to Max’s phone, an acoustic track coming through tinny and soft.
“Are you thinking of going?” Max asks. “I know you’re really not the party type.”

“I know,” Kate says. “That one Vortex Club party I went to at the very beginning of the year was… a bit much.”

Even Max shudders as she recalls the aftermath of that party. Kate had gone with Dana, and while being a good idea on paper, in reality it meant Kate having to fend off a number of aggressive Vortex dude-bros who wanted to hitch their wagon to the Dana-train. One guy actually pushed Kate into the pool by the end of the night, which was referred to as an “accident.”

Right.

“But Rachel makes this sleepover sound a lot calmer,” Kate says. “I’m not entirely comfortable with underage drinking, but bonding with everyone seems nice. Plus, she promised a tea party in the morning. Do you think she put that in just to get me to come?”

“I definitely wouldn’t put it past her,” Max says. “I don’t want to pressure you or anything, but I’d really like it if you came. I need someone to be a wallflower with me.”

“You’re no wallflower, Max,” Kate says. “I heard about that Vortex Club party you went to with Dana and Juliet as your ‘dates.’ Didn’t someone get punched, too?”

Max laughs.

“Yeah, Chloe did the punching,” Max says. “Of course. But there will be no physical violence of any kind in the Tobanga Club!”

Kate smiles and bumps shoulders with Max.

“Okay, I think you have me convinced,” Kate says. “I’ll come. But I reserve the right to judge people who get embarrassingly wasted.”

“Sounds fair,” Max says.

When they get back to the dorm, Max remembers that she was planning on buying tea for the Tobanga Club sleepover and decides to invite Kate to help her. They both end early tomorrow, so they plan to go out once they’re out of class. With that, they have to say their goodbyes, both of them unfortunately saddled with seemingly endless amounts of homework.

“Max!”

Max actually jumps into the air as she feels two hands descend on her shoulders. She whips around to see Chloe – who else – standing in front of her with an impish grin on her face.

“Wow, Max, you should really be used to that by now,” Chloe says.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be used to you giving me panic attacks,” Max says. “What’s up?”

“Guess who just had a super awkward conversation with her step-dick?” Chloe asks.

“Gee, I have no idea,” Max says.

“Okay, tone down the sass, girl,” Chloe says. “I asked David about the whole sleepover thing, which I really should’ve done before Rachel let everyone know about it. Anyway, it’s technically within the rules, just as long as none of us leave the music building after curfew.”
“No problem with that, right?” Max says. “I’d rather stay inside anyway. Your decorations look so cool, Chloe.”

“Ah, it was nothing,” Chloe says. “But I could stand to hear you stroke my ego even more.”

Max playfully slugs Chloe’s shoulder.

“You dick,” Max says.


“Okay, queen lesbian, whatever you say,” Max says.

Chloe laughs and throws her arm around Max’s shoulders. Max, as always, leans into the contact. Plus, it helps that Chloe is always so warm; she makes good shield against the brisk, Pacific-Northwest-in-the-fall weather.

“And don’t you forget it,” Chloe says. “So, what’re you up to? Off to class?”

“Nope, I’m meeting Kate to go get some tea and an electric kettle for our party,” Max says with a smile.

“…Jesus, you two are too pure for the rest of us,” Chloe says. “Mind if I tag along?”

“Don’t you have class?” Max asks.

“Technically, yes,” Chloe says. “But spiritually, I’m as free as the seabirds wheeling up in the sky.”

Chloe gestures dramatically up at the clear blue sky. Max rolls her eyes.

“Alright, seabird,” Max says. “You should still go to class.”

“But it’s math class,” Chloe says pleadingly. “Calc is hella easy, anyway. I don’t need to listen to some old fogey lecture to understand how to take derivatives and shit. So basic.”

“You should still go to class,” Max repeats.

“No way,” Chloe says. “C’mon, I’m practically begging to hang out with you guys. Have mercy!”

Max sighs.

“Fine,” Max says, fully cognizant that she’s completely incapable of saying no to Chloe. I’m meeting Kate by the fountain.”

“Dope,” Chloe says.

They make their way to the fountain right at the very front of school and take a seat on the concrete lip that surrounds the water feature. The early afternoon light is bright and calming, and Max can feel herself relaxing immediately. Chloe idly runs her fingers through the cool water.

“Max!”

Max looks up to see Kate approaching them, a bright smile on her face. Max waves and stands up.

“Kate!” Max says. “Thanks for agreeing to come with me.”

“Of course,” Kate says. “I’m a big fan of anything tea-related. And hey, Chloe. Shouldn’t you be in
class?”

Chloe is aghast.

“Do you know my schedule?” Chloe asks.

Kate giggles.

“No, I just always assume you’re cutting class,” Kate says.

“Kate, you little – first of all, how could you,” Chloe says. “And second of all, how dare you accuse me of...”

“She’s cutting class,” Max says plainly.

“Yeah, I thought so,” Kate says.

“...Honestly, I want to have a good time with my friends and I’m just being attacked,” Chloe says. “I’m even willing to drive them around, even after enduring this abuse…”

“Okay, drama queen, let’s just go,” Max says, hooking her arm around Chloe’s.

“Thanks for driving, Chloe!” Kate says brightly.

“Ugh, how could I stay mad at that face,” Chloe says. “Okay, into the ol’ tank.”

They all pile into Chloe’s truck, with Kate ending up squished in the middle of the bench-style car seats.

“Since Kate has been forced to sit in the middle, she gets to control the music,” Chloe says.

“I’m good with that,” Max says.

Kate grins and grabs the cassette-player-to-aux-cord converter. She starts playing music off her phone as Chloe drives away, surprisingly loud guitars and passionate vocals blasting out of the speakers.

“Whoa, you listen to mewithoutYou?” Chloe asks. “When did you turn into a little post-hardcore fiend?”

“They’re a Christian band, are they not?” Kate asks with a playful grin on her face.

“I guess, but damn,” Chloe says. “Good taste. I’ve been trying to get Max into louder groups like these guys forever. Good on you, Kate, for totally showing her up.”

“Hey, I like Sleater-Kinney,” Max says. “They’re louder than what I normally listen to.”

“Yeah, but everyone should like Sleater-Kinney,” Chloe says. “They don’t count.”

“When did you become the music czar?” Max asks.

“Since I’m the only one that knows who Glenn Branca is,” Chloe says. “C’mon.”

They end up going to the promenade downtown for the cute, artisanal tea shop that’s there. It’s a bit pricy for Max’s taste, but she and Kate alike are pretty serious about the tea-time aspect of the party, so they’re willing to go all-out.
Max, at her own insistence, ends up carrying all of the tea they picked out, the various tins and boxes cradled precariously in her arms.

“Are you guys really buying all of that?” Chloe asks.

“Yes,” Max and Kate both say at once.

“But it looks expensive, and…” Chloe starts.

“Tea is important, Chloe,” Max says, and marches right towards the cashier.

Chloe just shrugs and follows her.

Once Max has successfully purchased the official Tobanga Club tea, they decide to stroll down the promenade, taking in all of the shops that would kick them out of they realized how much money they don’t have. Chloe and Max lose themselves in a conversation, only being broken out of it when they hear Kate squeak beside them.

“Guess who?” Dana asks, her hands gently placed over Kate’s eyes.

“Wait,” Kate says, grinning.

Kate reaches up and begins gently poking and prodding Dana’s face, who sputters and laughs.

“C’mon, really?” Dana asks.

Max and Chloe both just watch this all unfold. Max, as always, is surprised by how friendly Dana is with Kate. So friendly.

“I know it’s you, Dana,” Kate says finally.

Dana laughs and removes her hands from Kate’s face.

“What’re you doing out here?” Dana asks. “I never took you as a fashionista type, regardless of how good you look in that schoolgirl get-up.”

Kate blushes, a light pink color dusting her cheeks. Max can hardly believe what she’s witnessing. Maybe they both lack a certain self-awareness? Why does Dana seem to delight in flirting with Kate when she apparently wants to get together with Juliet?

“We’re buying tea for the Tobanga Club sleepover,” Kate says.

“Sounds exciting,” Dana says.

“Are you going to be there?” Kate asks.

“Of course, girlfriend!” Dana says. “You better be there, too. I don’t break out my fuzzy pajama shorts in public just for anyone.”

Kate honest-to-God giggles at that, and Max resists the urge to bury her face in her palms. Chloe elbows her ribs and waggles her eyebrows at her.

“I’ll be there,” Kate says. “Max enticed me with tea.”

Max grins and holds up her overflowing shopping bag.
“Perfect,” Dana says. “I’m honestly so excited for this sleepover. I’ve been dying for a club that throws get-togethers that aren’t one-hundred percent insane.”

“I know, me too,” Chloe says, throwing her arm around Dana’s shoulders. “We’re gonna be super wholesome. Though…”

Chloe looks around, as if someone might be listening in on their conversation, for some reason.

“…we will have hella alcohol,” Chloe says, her voice dropping down to a properly conspiratorial tone.

“Okay, good,” Dana says. “I was a little worried about that.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Kate asks, a look of concern on her face.

“Cover your ears, child!” Chloe says.

It almost seems as if Kate’s going to do it, until Max catches her gaze and shakes her head no.

“Don’t worry, Ward, we got the connects,” Chloe says. “Well, Rachel has the connects, and we all take advantage of that. We can’t not have weed and alcohol at a Blackwell party.”

“Yeah, we have standards, right?” Dana asks, laughing.

The foursome begins strolling down the promenade, Chloe’s arm still draped lazily around Dana’s shoulders. Max is always impressed by how easygoing Chloe is around other girls, and not for nothing because Max struggles with that same thing.

“Hey, do you guys know if Juliet is going to be there?” Dana asks suddenly.

The group is silent for a moment. Chloe, Max, and Kate all exchange glances.

“I actually don’t know,” Chloe says. “I’m kind of surprised that you don’t.”

“Yeah, me too,” Dana says, her tone deceptively light and airy. “I guess it’s not a big deal. I’ll see here there if I see her there.”

“Right,” Chloe says.

They fall back into silence.

The four of them, once they’re all done shopping, end up piling into Chloe’s car as she drives them all back to campus. Against Chloe’s very direct demands, Dana ends up claiming the aux cord and plays almost overwhelmingly ebullient dance-pop music.

Kate excuses herself to go back to her room and finish up her homework, leaving Max and Dana standing in the empty hallway. Max shoves her hands into the pockets of her hoodie and debates bringing up the whole Dana/Juliet debacle that she’s now privy to.

Chloe had wanted to somehow lock them in a room together as the end result of some Machiavellian scheming, but, as always, Max thinks that just talking it out is best. Though they haven’t been friends for too long, Max still thinks that she’s pretty close with Dana.

“You cool, Max?” Dana asks. “It seems like something’s on your mind.”
“Yeah,” Max says, still unsure of what she wants to do. “Could we just hang out tonight, just in one of our rooms? I’ve been wanting some solo Dana time lately.”

Max rubs the back of her neck. It’s not exactly true, since she definitely wants to snoop a little bit, but hanging out with Dana is a guaranteed pleasant time. Plus, Max isn’t exactly comfortable with being completely direct about her intentions to pry into Dana’s love life.

Thankfully, Dana just smiles brightly at her.

“Of course,” Dana says. “We can hang out in my room, just let me clean up some of my shit.”

Max laughs.

“I’m sure it’s not nearly as bad as my room,” Max says. “Seriously, it looks like a level of Katamari Damacy in there.”

Dana raises a perfectly-manicured eyebrow at that.

“You’re always throwing reference out that I don’t get,” Dana laughs. “Hey, just give me a sec.”

Dana disappears into her room for a moment. Max only has to wait for a moment before Dana’s door reopens. Even though Max visits her friends’ rooms fairly frequently, there’s still something so intimate about stepping through the threshold. This is Dana’s space, her sanctuary, her space to think the thoughts that only come up when alone.

*Okay, Max, you’re not a poet. Just take it easy.*

Dana is sprawled out on her bed, and Max goes to join her. She practically sinks into the mattress topper, and she gives an idle thought as to why everyone’s bed seems to be more comfortable than her own.

“So, what’s up, Max?” Dana asks. “You want to watch a movie or something? Or just have a little girl time and talk?”

“The latter,” Max says, squirming a bit where she sits.

“Is everything okay?” Dana asks. “You look so serious. I feel like you’re about to tell me that Lisa died or something.”

Max manages to laugh weakly at that. Still, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea – Kate divulged that information in confidence, and here she is blabbing to the source about it. Still, Max is nothing if not inquisitive.

“Oh, I really want to talk to you about something,” Max says. “And please don’t be mad. But I heard – okay, full disclosure – Kate told me about you and Juliet. Or how you want to, y’know, be more with Juliet.”

Dana sighs and flops onto her back, making Max almost immediately regret her decision to ever open her mouth.

“I figured that would get around,” Dana says.

Max opens her mouth to protest.

“Don’t worry, I’m not blaming Kate,” Dana says. “And you aren’t the worst person to know about that, to be honest.”
“Are you into Juliet?” Max asks.

Dana sighs and undoes her ponytail, before flopping backward on her bed, letting her long hair splay around her face.

“I guess so,” Dana says. “I mean, I am. I don’t know.”

“Really?” Max asks. “Kate made it seem like you were pretty set in your feelings.”

“I know,” Dana says. “I told Kate a while ago. You know we both volunteered at the same Meals on Wheels program over the summer, yeah? It can get boring there at times, so we would just talk. Kate still gets all of my gossip first.”

Max smiles fondly at that. She can so easily picture Dana animatedly talking about her latest escapades while Kate eagerly and politely listens.

“I didn’t know that, actually,” Max says. “But it makes sense. Explains why you two are so close.”

Max notices Dana stiffen ever so slightly.

“So close?” Dana asks.

“Yeah, it seems like you two are really close friends,” Max says. “It’s kind of sweet.”


Dana falls silent, and after a moment Max clears her throat and decides to soldier on.

“So, Juliet?” Max asks.

“Juliet,” Dana echoes. “It’s just – I don’t know. It’s weird. I’ve known her since we were both in diapers. But, at the same time, it makes sense, right? That we’d end up together?”

“‘End up together’ implies, like, fate playing a hand in you two getting together,” Max says. “I’m not a huge fan of fate.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Dana says, shifting her position on the bed. “What’s your beef with fate?”

“If things happen for a reason, it’s for reasons we create,” Max says. “I don’t think the universe has a grand plan for us.”

Dana whistles appreciatively.

“Wow, Max, I had no idea you were a philosopher, too,” Dana says.

Max chuckles and waves that comment off.

“No way,” Max says. “I just spend too much time inside my own head.”

“Okay, so no fate,” Dana says. “On the other side of things, I don’t know if I want to risk ruining our friendship by pushing for something more.”

“I’m not sure it quite works like that,” Max says. “Shouldn’t relationships be built on friendships?”

“Fuck, I don’t know,” Dana says, laughing. “I don’t exactly have the greatest track record with relationships.”
Both girls fall silent for a moment.

“How did you do it?” Dana asks.

Max furrows her brow.

“How did I do what?” Max asks.

Dana just looks at her like she’s crazy.

“You and Chloe,” Dana says slowly. “What was confessing your feelings to her like?”

Max’s heart begins to thump in her chest. Though Dana is obviously leaping to pretty bold conclusions, just the idea that other people might think of her and Chloe as a couple has her nerves going into overtime.

Jeeze, what's wrong with me?

“My feelings?” Max asks. “Chloe and I are just friends. Best friends, even. Captain and First Mate.”

Dana begins to smile knowingly.

“But just friends,” Max says.

“Okay, fine, just friends,” Dana says. “Are you ever going to tell her?”

Max wants to shrink into herself, if such a thing were possible. This is definitely not how this was supposed to go – Max wanted to be nosy and Dana has completely flipped the script. Max sighs.

Serves me right, probably.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Max says.

“Alright, fine,” Dana says. “That’s a subject I want to revisit, though. Don’t think you’ve gotten out of this one.”

Max groans and faceplants onto the bed from her seated position. Dana is too good at this.

“Fine, but what about you?” Max asks, her voice muffled by the soft bedspread. “Are you ever going to tell Juliet?”

“I don’t know,” Dana says.

“Why not?” Max asks.

“I just don’t know. Stuff like this – relationship stuff – it’s tough,” Dana says.” But deep down, I’m pretty sure I’m just afraid of fucking up the status quo. Change can be good, but change is terrifying.”

“Change is terrifying,” Max says. “I couldn’t stand living in Seattle, which is maybe the coolest city in the entire US, just because it wasn’t Arcadia Bay. And Arcadia Bay is awful. It’s a tiny, forgotten, dying fishing town that’s basically owned by one rich family.”

“But, you love it,” Dana says.

“I really do,” Max says, turning onto her side.
“Well, we can just pine from a distance, then,” Dana says.

Dana rolls over to face Max.

“I know I should get over myself and tell her and just accept the consequences,” Dana says. “But that freaks the hell out of me. I know exactly what to do and it’s like my body won’t let me do it.”

“Welcome to every day of my life,” Max says.

Dana sighs, before smiling weakly and poking Max’s nose.

“Maybe I should just hook up with you,” Dana says. “And just side-step this entire mess.”

Max still blushes bright red and hides her face in her hands.

“I think that would make everything way more difficult,” Max says. “I mean, not that you aren’t attractive, like, objectively, but…”

Dana laughs and cuts Max off with a wave of her hand.

“Sorry, Max,” Dana laughs. “I’m just kidding.”

“Gah, I know,” Max says. “I can’t deal with people flirting with me.”

“You didn’t have artsy, soft-butch lesbians all over you in Seattle?” Dana asks.

“Are you kidding me?” Max asks. “In five years, I made two friends in Seattle. I spent so much of my time texting Chloe, skyping with Chloe, sending her letters…”

“Oh my god, you sent her letters?” Dana asks. “Like, real, tangible letters? You really do have it bad.”

“Dana,” Max whines.

“Okay, okay, sorry,” Dana says. “I’m just saying.”

Even just talking to Dana like this is making Max reconsider her feelings towards Chloe. At what point does the line between “best friend” and “something more” begin to blur?

But, really, who sends hand-written letters anymore?

“And I’m just saying that I’m incapable of person-ing,” Max says. “It’s really hard.”

“Person-ing is hard,” Dana echoes. “The truth is, Max, I hardly know how I feel.”

“Yeah, join the club,” Max says. “Life is weird.”

“You got that right,” Dana says. “C’mon, I don’t want to talk about our feelings any more. Let’s watch a movie.”

Max laughs.

“Sure thing, Ward,” Max says. “It’s not like I have homework to do or anything.”

“Oh, definitely not,” Dana says. “Who has homework at Blackwell?”

As Dana goes to search through her stack of DVDs for a suitable movie to watch and their
conversation peters off, Max is left with the distinct feeling that Dana isn’t so set on her feelings for Juliet. It makes sense, given the way she acts towards Kate. Max just hopes that Kate doesn’t end up getting burned after all of this drama.

It’s close to midnight by the time the movie finishes up, and Max excuses herself from Dana’s room to head back to her own. Her mind is gauzy from sleep; clearly no homework is getting done tonight.

Max checks her phone, which sat on silent in her pocket while she was hanging out with Dana. There’s one text from Chloe, with an accompanying picture.

Chloe (8:48 PM, Tues): dude check out this pic I found!

It’s an polaroid, almost certainly taken by William and his old instant camera. In it, Chloe is pressing her lips to Max’s cheek; Max is clearly giggling uproariously in return. The picture is dated back to 2007, when the two of them were only twelve years old.

If she stares at the picture hard enough, Max feels like she can almost transport herself back to that very moment. There are so many memories that she has, even more recent ones, that feel so hazy and indistinct. But almost every memory she has of Chloe are razor-sharp.

Even though Max kept in touch, she feels like she missed out on so much time with Chloe. Now, there can be no wasted moments. Especially since it’s their senior year of high school.

Max (11:36 PM, Tues): I wish I could go back to that moment and convince my parents not to move to Seattle

Her phone buzzes so immediately with Chloe’s response that she nearly drops it in surprise.

Chloe (11:36 PM, Tues): please don’t angst over that, seriously, you were still there for me even if you couldn’t be there for me, y’know?

Chloe (11:37 PM, Tues): ugh fuck you for making me all sappy

Chloe (11:37 PM, Tues): let’s be real though I’m still a lil salty that your parents moved, but it’s not like it’s yr fault

Chloe (11:37 PM, Tues): I mean you were a lil string bean twelve year old, what could you do?

Max clutches her phone to her chest. Chloe, despite her rough exterior, has always been so caring.

Max (11:40 PM, Tues): Sorry for the angst. I can’t not think about that

Chloe (11:41 PM, Tues): well u shouldn’t think about anything girl u should be asleep! u have an early class tomorrow

Max (11:42 PM, Tues): Are you trying to be a good influence. I can’t – I don’t – what is happening?

Chloe (11:42 PM, Tues): fuck you, Max. sleep well

Max laughs. That single text has perfectly encapsulated Chloe’s modus operandi.

Max (11:43 PM, Tues): Good night ^_^
Guys, I know that Kate probably wouldn't listen to mewithoutYou. I just really like imagining Kate disappearing into her room, putting on headphones, and listening to them at a completely safe, healthy volume as she thrashes around her room. She only hopes that nobody can hear her dancing and jumping around through the thin, Blackwell walls.

And don't worry, the Dana, Juliet, Kate subplot will be resolved swiftly, easily, and without any hurt feelings
After class, Max, Chloe, and Rachel find themselves lounging out on the quad. They’re surrounded, as they often are, by a loose cloud of Rachel’s close (and not-so-close) acquaintances, who seem to appear around her at all times as if by magic. The cloud rarely actually interacts with Rachel herself, choosing mostly to bask in her presence instead. Max finds it a bit odd, but she’s not well-versed in the world of popular people.

No, Max has more pressing matters on her mind – specifically, the inaugural event of the Tobanga Club. It was fun to imagine starting the club when it was just them hanging out in Chloe’s room and smoking weed, but there first event is in a few days. It’s really happening, and it’s starting to freak her out more and more. Planning to go toe-to-toe with the Vortex Club is no joke.

“Hey, are you guys worried about starting this club?” Max asks, verbalizing her panicky thoughts.

“I don’t experience ‘worry,’” Rachel says as she inspects her fingernails.

Max and Chloe both ignore her.

“I mean, I’ve never heard of anyone starting a club here in direct competition with Vortex,” Max says. “Nathan and Victoria definitely won’t be cool with this.”

“Man, fuck them,” Chloe says. “They can go shove those silver spoons even further up their asses.”

“I’m serious, Chloe,” Max says, sitting up slightly. “We’re going to start some major drama with this.”

“I live for major drama,” Rachel says.

Max sighs and flops back against the grass, her shaggy hair framing her face.

“Am I really the only one worried about this?” Max asks.

“Alright, Max, let me tell you a story,” Rachel says. “About a club that was meant to rival the Vortex
“Club, many years ago.”

“Oh god, this story,” Chloe says.

“So, many years ago, well before any of us came to this school, some rejects from the Vortex Club came together and decided they’d start their own club,” Rachel says. “They were fed up with the social standing that Vortex automatically bestowed upon its members, and they wanted to create an alternative for the people more on the fridges of Blackwell society.”

“Alright, sounds familiar,” Max says. “What happened to them?”

“Well, they started off just fine,” Rachel says. “Their following began to grow as they threw more and more parties. Some Vortex Club members even abandoned ship to go join them.”

Max nods, feeling herself getting pulled in by Rachel’s storytelling prowess.

“They were getting huge,” Rachel says. “So, they decided to throw one, big party on Vortex’s usual turf – the swimming pool.”

Rachel sighs dramatically.

“It would’ve been perfect,” Rachel says. “They were pulling out all the stops. Tons of booze, weed, everything. But then, right as everyone was really getting into the swing of things, campus security busts in, the cops not far behind.”

“Oh no,” Max says.

“Oh yes,” Rachel says with a grin. “Vortex had totally snitched on them. That’s always the last resort, because no one likes a snitch. And nobody does it to Vortex, no matter how much alcohol and weed they have at their parties, because you’ll be destroyed if you ever do.”

“Destroyed?” Max asks. “What could they do?”

“One of their parties got busted while Chloe and I were both freshman,” Rachel says. “It was crazy. Nothing ever goes wrong for Vortex Club like that. Wells usually looks the other way, but it was someone pretty high-up in the club who ratted them out.”

“So, what happened to them?” Max asks.

“They were made into a total social pariah,” Rachel says. “Nobody could talk to them. Nobody even looked at them. There was a rumor they were even denied service at a restaurant because their waiter was a Vortex Club member.”


“It was,” Rachel says. “That’s how you know it was a big deal that Vortex Club decided to snitch on that other club. You’re not supposed to do that. It’s an honor-amongst-thieves sort of thing. You fight amongst yourselves, but you never go to school administration.”

Max can feel herself deflating.

“Rachel, that seriously doesn’t make me feel better,” Max says. “In fact, it makes me feel so much worse.”

“Look, my point is that this isn’t going to be easy. Vortex is going to pull some serious shit in order to get us shut down,” Rachel says. “We have to learn from that other club’s mistakes.”
“I’m not really sure what lessons to take from that,” Max says.

“Well, we can’t go too big too fast,” Rachel says. “We have to take things slow. And we can’t just do the exact same things that the Vortex Club does, which is to throw absurdly lavish parties.”

“And, I can’t believe I have to be the fuckin’ one to say this, but we do have to be careful,” Chloe says. “I joke about getting drunk and fucked up or whatever, but we have to keep everything on the DL for the time being.”

“I guess so,” Max says, not exactly feeling better about everything.

“Max, look at me,” Rachel says, grabbing Max’s face. “We’re three badass queens who won’t be stopped by anyone. Vortex should be worried about us, not the other way around.”

Max manages to smile at that. Rachel is nothing if not supremely self-confident. Of course, Max finds herself wishing that a little bit of that same self-confidence could rub off on her.

“Seriously, guys, don’t worry about it,” Rachel says. “I’m the witch-queen of Blackwell. I’ll make sure everything is fine.”

Max almost believes her.

“If you say so,” Max says.

“Where did you get this?” Max asks.

Rachel winks at her as she continues to wheel the keg of beer into the music building. It’s the day of the party, and the three friends are hard at work at making sure everything is ready to go. Rachel, as promised, has procured the alcohol.

“A girl’s gotta have some secrets,” Rachel says.

Chloe rolls her eyes.

“She stole it from a frat party she snuck into,” Chloe says. “It’s half-full.”

“That raises so many more questions. How do you steal an entire keg of beer? What frat party? How did they not notice?” Max asks, though she’s mostly talking to herself.

“Don’t ruin the mystique of my image, Chloe!” Rachel says, talking over Max. “I’m the mysterious witch-queen who runs this school, nothing more and nothing less. Maybe I plucked this keg out of thin air.”

“Fuck off, ‘mystique’” Chloe says with a grin. “Plus, Max already knows that you wore that ridiculous dental headgear all throughout middle school and looked like a total dork.”

“True, but I’m hot now,” Rachel says. “So, it was all worth it.”

Chloe sighs, exasperated, and flashes Max the traditional back-me-up-best-friend-of-mine look.

“I mean, she is pretty hot,” Max shrugs.

Chloe looks so genuinely betrayed that Max isn’t sure if she wants to laugh or comfort her. Rachel opts to laugh.
“Hell yeah, Max!” Rachel says. “Totally has my back. I love it.”

Rachel blows a kiss to Max.

“Unbelievable,” Chloe says. “If I can’t trust Max, then I can’t trust literally anyone ever.”

Max laughs, but she knows that Chloe totally means it, somewhere deep down.

They keep on setting up the party. Max is almost excited enough that she isn’t totally freaking out, but every now and then she loses herself in her own head and her anxiety spikes. She isn’t even completely sure what she’s so worried about. It’s not like Victoria and Nathan are going to show up out of the blue and shut everything down, since they have their own party to set up tonight.

It’s not quite the extravaganza that a Vortex Club party would be in that there isn’t a semi-famous DJ headlining the event, there aren’t any laser lights or smoke machines, and Nathan definitely isn’t there to hand out expensive party drugs that a high schooler like him shouldn’t be able to afford.

No, they have Max’s laptop plugged into the AV cabinet, a bag of weed that Chloe found beneath her bed, and Rachel’s stolen keg. All of their furniture is thrifted, and the very building they’re in was, not too long ago, marked for demolition. Hell, they even have a couple trays of Joyce’s cooking – Joyce, upon hearing about the party and Chloe’s eager participation in a club, was thrilled to cook for them.

“I can’t believe my mom decided to cater the event,” Chloe says, running her hand over the aluminum-covered trays.

“I think it’s cute,” Max says. “My dad would always make treats for my girl scout troop.”


“I love that we have a team mom,” Rachel says. “Seriously makes us so much better than Vortex.”

“Yeah, so much better than Vortex,” Chloe groans.

It’s over an hour past the official start-time of the party/sleepover and nobody has shown up (except for Kate, who showed up a whole ten minutes early). Even with accounting for people showing up fashionably late, a whole hour with nobody is pushing it.

“You have to have faith, Chloe,” Rachel says, looking completely Zen as she sits, cross-legged, on a bean bag chair. “People are going to show up.”

“I hate this shaman routine that you pull,” Chloe says. “How can you be so sure?”

“I’m not sure,” Rachel says. “But I have faith.”

Max laughs as Rachel takes a long pull of her joint. It didn’t take very long at all for her to break into Chloe’s bag of weed.

“…Well, this is a very relaxing atmosphere for me,” Kate says, a bright grin on her face. “But I get your disappointment.”

“Yeah, having a club that nobody wants to show up for,” Chloe says. “It sucks. How could this even happen?”
“Nobody really shows up for my abstinence club,” Kate says. “And my bible study group isn’t exactly very popular.”

Chloe slumps down even further where she sits, before going over to hug Kate.

“Sorry, Katie,” Chloe says. “Me and my dumb mouth.”

“No, it’s fine!” Kate says, though she eagerly hugs Chloe back. “I know my clubs are pretty niche. You guys are throwing a party, though, I’m sure people will show up.”

“I don’t know,” Chloe says. “I think Vortex is throwing a party tonight, too. How’re we supposed to compete with that?”

Rachel shushes Chloe with her index finger dramatically brought up to her lips.


Chloe groans.


“Sin,” Kate whispers.

Everyone laughs.

It’s two hours past the planned starting time for the party when somebody knocks on the door. Chloe, who had been falling asleep, sits bolt upright, her eyes wide.

“You!” Chloe says.

Max laughs as Chloe actually sprints over to the door and throws it open. She’s greeted by Dana, standing there with a smile on her face, surrounded by a gaggle of fellow cheerleaders. They all have sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows tucked beneath their arms. Max finds it pretty adorable that they’ve totally bought into the sleepover theme of the night. It’s pretty likely that Dana played a big part in that, given how dedicated she is to her own themed parties.

Chloe whoops and draws Dana in for a tight hug.

“Come on in, Ward!” Chloe says. “Let’s liven this party the fuck up!”

“Am I seriously the first one here?” Dana asks. “We were over at the Vortex Club party, but it was super lame.”

Chloe’s face falls.

“You went to their party first?” Chloe asks.

“Just be happy they’re here now,” Max says, putting her hand on Chloe’s shoulder. “Hey, Dana, sorry about Chloe. Come on in.”

“Thanks, Max,” Dana says, giving Max a quick hug and a peck on the cheek before she steps inside. “Wow, this place is great! I don’t think I’ve ever been inside the music building before. Did you guys decorate?”

“That was mostly Chloe’s department,” Max says.
“Hell yeah we decorated,” Chloe says. “I blew my metaphorical load all over this actual room.”

“Gross,” Dana says, laughing. “But it looks great.”

Dana and her friends all spread out as Rachel stands up on her bean bag chair, her arms widespread as a sign of greeting.

“Welcome, friends, to my queendom!” Rachel says. “Please, indulge in the half-full keg of stolen beer and the old Ziploc bag of weed. Also enjoy the food, which Chloe’s mom made for us.”

Dana and her friends all giggle while Chloe blushes bright red and mumbles various curse words beneath her breath.

As Dana goes over to talk to Kate, there’s another knock at the door. Rachel, Chloe, and Max all give each other looks, before Max goes to answer the door.

“Max!” Justin greets in his usual drawl.

Like Dana, Justin is surrounded by folks of his own ilk – the skater bros. Somehow, they smell even more like weed than Rachel and Chloe do, though Max would be concerned more if they didn’t smell like that. Justin attempts to do some sort of elaborate handshake in greeting, which Max immediately fumbles. They end up hugging instead.


As Justin and Dana’s groups intermingle, Rachel goes over to bump shoulders with Chloe.

“See?” Rachel asks. “Just a little faith.”

“Fuck off,” Chloe says, shoving her, though she’s smiling.

Over the next half-hour, more people begin to filter in, most of them clearly coming straight from the Vortex Club party. Max can just imagine the looks on Victoria and Nathan’s faces as they begin to realize they’re losing people to Max and co. After a short while, the music building doesn’t exactly get packed, but there are definitely more people than any of them had expected. Max hopes that they have enough extra sleeping bags for everyone.

“And now, to kick this party off right…” Rachel says, once it seems like everyone who wants to be there actually is.

Rachel jumps up onto the elevated conductor’s platform and clears her throat with aplomb. Everyone turns to look at her.

“Welcome, friends, to the first meeting of the Tobanga Club,” Rachel says.

Scattered cheering and applause ripples through the partygoers, mostly spurred on by Chloe’s boisterous whooping.

“This club is led by us three queens – myself, Chloe, and Max,” Rachel says. “But we’re all kings and queens here. There’s no hierarchy, like within the Vortex Club. We are all equal under the Tobanga.”

Max has to stifle a laughter, because Rachel is really laying on the drama thick. If there’s one thing Rachel is good at, it’s theatricality.

“That means that any of you can come up to any of us with suggestions, complaints, comments,
whatever!” Rachel says. “There are no Nathans or Victorias here. We’re the club of the people!”

There’s more cheering, louder than last time.

“So, with that, I want to officially welcome you all to our sleepover!” Rachel says. “We want this to be like an actual sleepover, like the kinds we used to have as kids. We want to recapture that feeling. So, as the night goes on, we’ll turn down the lights and we’ll share secrets, talk about our crushes, and maybe even play spin the bottle.”

Chloe jumps up next to Rachel, and pulls Max up with her, who tries (and fails) to stay out of the spotlight.

“But first, let’s fuckin’ party!” Chloe shouts. “Drink, smoke, go crazy – but not too crazy, because Kate Marsh is here and she will judge us all for our sins.”

Max slugs Chloe’s shoulder as Kate blushes bright red and hides her face behind her hands. Dana gives her a supportive side-hug, and Kate manages a bright smile and waves at her fellow partygoers.

Everyone turns to look at Max next, the only “leader” of the Tobanga Club who hasn’t said anything.

“Let’s just have fun, guys,” Max says. “And be good to each other.”

Everyone cheers and descends upon the libations and assorted refreshments. Dana and her friends almost immediately clear open a space for dancing as Chloe turns on some pounding, upbeat music.

Even with Kate there, the dancing is decidedly not wholesome, especially with Rachel and Dana leading the charge. It’s all in good fun, though, and Max contents herself with people watching for the time being. Plus, with a half-keg of shitty beer at their disposal, and whatever else people already imbibed at the Vortex Club Party, it doesn’t take long for the more adventurous partygoers to start letting loose. With the bright moonlight filtering in through the tall windows of the building, the whole atmosphere of the party is loose, warm, and laidback.

Max is amazed by how many people have shown up by now. As popular as Rachel is, the Vortex Club is an incredibly entrenched institution at Blackwell.

There are also people who Max doesn’t even know; they’re no doubt Rachel’s friends, given that she seems to know every single teenager in Arcadia Bay. They do make Max just a bit wary, but she’s well aware that she tends to shy away from new people in general. Max is still unwilling to completely go into wallflower mode, though, and eventually she steels her nerves and weaves through the crowd to find Kate, who’s hanging out with Chloe.

“Hey, Kate!” Max greets, reaching out to squeeze Kate’s shoulder. “How’re you doing? Not too intense, right?”

“Not too bad!” Kate says, her voice a bit nervous but excited. “I think I’m enjoying myself more than at the one Vortex Club party I went to.”

“I hope so,” Chloe says. “I heard about that shit. Hopefully you won’t have to fend off thirsty fuckboys who want to get into Dana’s pants.”

“Thirsty…what?” Kate asks, clearly confused.

Max reaches out and squeezes Kate’s hand.
“Don’t worry about it,” Max says. “I can’t understand Chloe half the time anyway.”

Chloe waves her middle finger right in Max’s face.

“Understand this, Caulfield,” Chloe says.

Max just laughs and pushes Chloe’s hand away from her face.

“You’re ridiculous,” Max says.

“Proudly,” Chloe says.

Chloe drapes her arms around Max and Kate’s shoulders. Kate grins brightly and snuggles against Chloe’s side, no doubt enjoying having more friends around for support at this party.

“Jesus fuck you’re so cute,” Chloe says. “Oh, hey, speaking of Dana, what’s going on with her? Any news on the Juliet front?”

Kate’s face grows slightly more serious.

“I don’t really know,” Kate says. “Honestly, I’m not even sure if Juliet is coming tonight. They’ve been acting so weird around each other lately, it’s like they’re not even friends.”

Max takes a deep breath. She usually tries so hard to avoid gossip like this, but she keeps getting sucked into it.

“I actually talked with Dana the other day about Juliet,” Max says. “Just like you said, Kate, she’s freaking out over it. She doesn’t want to mess up their friendship.”

“So stupid,” Chloe says. “Pretty much all good relationships are built on friendships. Obviously.”

Max doesn’t ignore the way her heart speeds up when Chloe says that. Obviously. Obviously, relationships are built upon existing friendships. It’s so obvious. Max wants to explode.

“I’ve heard that same thing,” Kate says. “But I think I get it. You want some familiarity before you start dating someone, right?”

“I definitely think so,” Chloe says. “Why, do you have your eye on someone? Looking to make some moves?”

Kate blushes bright red and buries her face in her hands.

“Chloe, no,” Kate says. “I’m just thinking about Dana.”

“Just thinking about Dana?” Chloe cackles. “Alright, Kate, I get what you’re saying.”

“Chloe,” Kate whines, trying to vanish further into herself.

“Alright, Chloe, give it a rest,” Max says. “We’re trying to help Kate have a good time.”

Chloe just keeps laughing, though.

“A good time?” Chloe asks. “Max, buddy, phrasing.”

“C’mon,” Max groans.

Chloe sighs dramatically.
“Ugh, fine,” Chloe says. “Sorry, Kate. You still doing alright over there?”

“I’m fine, Chloe,” Kate says, giggling softly. “Don’t worry about it.”

And then, seemingly right on cue, Dana Ward appears in front of the three friends, smiling and shining from sweat (dancing is hard work!)

“Hey, guys, how’s it going?” Dana greets. “Mind if I steal Kate away?”

“Absolutely be our guest,” Chloe says.

Kate lifts Chloe’s arm off her shoulder and Dana immediately goes to grab her hand and drags her out to the dance floor.

“…Should we be concerned about this?” Max asks.

“Hmm?” Chloe asks.

“Should we be concerned that Kate has a crush on Dana, even though she’s actively trying to help Dana get with Juliet?” Max asks. “I mean, that sounds like a love triangle to me. Love triangles are awful.”

“Yeah, I have no idea what’s going on between those three anymore,” Chloe says. “I mean, it’s clear that Kate has a crush on Dana. Dana flirts with Kate but wants to get with Juliet. And Juliet seems to have been avoiding Dana lately. Girls are weird, man.”

“We’re both girls,” Max says.

“Yeah, but still,” Chloe says. “What’re we going to do about this?”

“Uh, nothing?” Max says. “I don’t really like to meddle.”

Chloe rolls her eyes.

“Max, you’re like the ultimate meddler,” Chloe says. “You spend basically all your free time the first couple of weeks solving everyone’s emotional problems.”

“Yeah, but that’s different,” Max says.

“Different how?” Chloe asks.

“I don’t know,” Max says. “Just different.”

“Look, Kate, Dana, and Juliet are all our friends,” Chloe says. “Shouldn’t we be helping out our friends?”

“Fine, sure. But how?” Max asks. “Just have them all talk it out?”

Chloe shrugs.

“We could,” Chloe says. “I know you have your Caulfield brand of talk-about-our-fucking-feelings therapy, but I think I have something a bit more exciting in mind.”

“I don’t know if I like the sound of this,” Max says.

If anything, that makes Max even more concerned.
Max finds herself acting far more like a social butterfly than she’s at all used to. Almost immediately after her conversation with Chloe, she gets pulled away by Rachel to dance. Max still feels completely awkward on the dance floor, finding that her limbs don’t follow the commands from her brain with any sort of precision, but Rachel’s energy and enthusiasm is so overwhelming that it almost doesn’t matter. For about a half-second, Max manages to lose herself in the music with her eyes closed and her body doing what it will. It fades quickly, and she’s soon back to her usual, self-conscious self.

After that, Chloe steals her away once again to go join a weed-smoking circle with Justin and his friends. Max doesn’t partake, but simply enjoys the insanity that enfolds. She loses the thread of conversation almost immediately, with Chloe and Justin seemingly engaged in a competition of who can make the most non-sequiturs in a row.

She’s grabbed by Kate and Dana next, both of whom surprise Max by making her join their beer pong team. Kate isn’t drinking and Max has woefully low tolerance, so Dana ends up gulping down the beer whenever they lose a round. They manage to win, but just barely, and Kate helps Dana stumble off to go sit down and wait for some of the alcohol to burn off.

After that, Max contents herself by simply wandering throughout the music room after that and people-watching. She feels abuzz with the joy of having so many good friends (and from the few gulps of beer she’s had). Back in Seattle, she had only made two friends, and she was never even particularly close with them. Here, at Blackwell and back in her old town, it feels like she’s stumbled into friendship after friendship.

In her silent introspection, she accidentally bumps right into someone. Max begins to murmur an apology when she realizes that it’s Juliet she’s ran into.

“Juliet!” Max greets, a bit surprised. “You made it!”

“Of course, Max,” Juliet says. “I wouldn’t want to miss your club’s first event for anything.”

“Thanks, Juliet!” Max says. “That’s so sweet of you.”

The whole debacle of the seeming Dana-Juliet-Kate triangle rises to the front of Max’s mind, and she’s just buzzed enough that she wants to just go for it.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Max asks, to which Juliet nods.

Max clears her throat and tries her hardest not to be completely awkward.

“Have you been avoiding Dana?” Max asks. “Is something going on?”

Juliet sighs and self-consciously fiddles with the zipper of her leather jacket.

“Can we talk about this outside?” Juliet asks. “Things in here are just getting so loud.”

“Yeah, of course,” Max says.
The two friends walk out the back entrance and sit just outside, their backs resting against the brick wall of the building.

“So?” Max asks.

Max hates how nosy she is, but sometimes it just can’t be helped.

“I’ve been trying to give her some space, honestly,” Juliet says. “That girl needs to figure out her feelings.”

That’s exactly what Max thinks.

“So, what do you know about Dana and…” Max says.

Max lets her voice trail off, hoping that Juliet will fill in the blanks with whatever she thinks is going on. Max is unsure of how much Juliet really knows about Dana’s situation.

“Dana and Kate? Or Dana and me?” Juliet asks.

Max’s eyes widen.

“So, you know about everything?” Max asks.

Juliet cocks a half-grin at that.

“I’m a pretty good reporter,” Juliet says. “I have some connections. And anyone with eyes can see what’s going on between Dana and Kate.”

“I don’t know if Kate knows what’s going on with Dana and Kate,” Max says.

“Yeah, maybe not,” Juliet says. “But I think deep down, some part of her has figured it out. She might be a bit more repressed than some of us are, but the girl’s no idiot.”

“So, what about you and Dana?” Max asks.

Juliet sighs and looks upwards. It’s a beautiful night, the stars just barely pushing through velvety gauze of the darkened Oregon sky. Max turns to look at her, her face barely illuminated by the glow of the party back inside.

“Me and Dana,” Juliet says. “It’s immature of me, I know, I’ve been avoiding Dana because I don’t want to talk to her about this.”

“You’re not into it, huh?” Max asks, crinkling her nose.

“No, I not really,” Juliet says. “I know Dana. Deep down, even through all the boys she’s hooked up with, she’s held onto this idea that we’re meant to end up together. She has like this romanticized idea of the high school sweethearts that get together because they’ve known each other forever.”

Juliet shrugs weakly.

“I don’t know. I just don’t feel that way about her, and it kills me,” Juliet says. “I almost wish that I could.”

“That’s a tough spot to be in,” Max says.

“Tell me about it,” Juliet says.
The pair are silent for a moment, both simply thinking.

“Wait, so if Dana is set on you, why has she been flirting with Kate?” Max asks.

Juliet laughs.

“Well, a few of reasons,” Juliet says. “One is that Dana just likes flirting with people. She’s almost too good at it. It’s kind of scary. The other is that deep down, I think she knows that I won’t return her feelings. Less deep down, she does really like Kate.”

“Kate is a very likeable person,” Max says.

“You know Kate moved into the dorms over the summer, right?” Juliet asks. “For the summer art programs. They got close. It was really nice to see.”

Max just nods, deep in thought.

“Y’know, Dana was flirting with you hardcore the first, like week she knew you, too,” Juliet says, a playful expression on her face.

Max furrows her brow, looking absolutely confused, which just makes Juliet laugh even harder.

“Wait, she was?” Max asks. “Seriously? But she’s so…I don’t know, way out of my league?”

“She was,” Juliet says. “It was pretty obvious. I mean, she asked you as her date to that Vortex Club thing.”

“I thought that was a joke,” Max says. “You asked me, too.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Juliet says, laughing. “Dana hides most of her flirting as a joke. And you’re more of a catch than you think.”

“I don’t know about that,” Max says. “I kind of figured a lot of people became friends with me because I’m so close with Rachel.”

“Max, you have to chill out about Rachel,” Juliet says. “She’s just good at branding. That’s why she’s so popular. The weird, ethereal, punk-witch-queen thing she has makes her really mysterious and cool, for some reason. People like you for you. Or I do, at least.”

Max smiles and reaches over to squeeze Juliet’s hand.

“Thanks, Juliet,” Max says. “That’s really sweet of you to say.”

“It’s true,” Juliet says.

Juliet exhales audibly and stands up.

“Now, how about we get back to the party?” Juliet asks, offering her hand to help Max stand up. “I think I’m over talking about everyone’s feelings for tonight. I need to drink and to dance.”

Max laughs and lets Juliet pull her up.

“Sounds good to me,” Max says.

Juliet throws her arm around Max’s shoulders as they walk back inside.
The party is truly in full swing now. Chloe is pumping some LCD Soundsystem through the music building’s surprisingly impressive speakers, and it feels like the entire room is shaking with energy. The whole room seems to be dancing, from Justin and his skater compatriots to, amazingly, Kate and Dana.

“Ugh, they’re totally into each other. It’s disgusting,” Juliet says, though there’s a big grin on her face. “C’mon, let’s show them how it’s done.”

“I’m not sure I can show people anything like that…” Max says, though Juliet’s already dragging her into the fray.

They’re almost immediately found by Rachel and Chloe – Chloe’s patented “Max-sense” still working just fine, apparently.


Max sputters flabbergasted, and also a bit confused because she isn’t sure of who Chloe’s more jealous of in that hypothetical situation.

“We were just talking, perv,” Juliet says, shoving Chloe’s shoulder.

“Yeah, c’mion, Chloe,” Max says.

Chloe holds her hands up in defeat.

“Alright, alright, if you say so,” Chloe says.

“And Chloe, I don’t think we should go through with your plan…” Max begins, but Chloe immediately cuts her off.

“Max, don’t even worry about it,” Chloe says. “I have it under control.”

“But…”

“Dude, less talking, more dancing,” Chloe says. “C’mon. Dance Yrself Clean!”

Max rolls her eyes, but Chloe grabs her hands and begins flailing them wildly in some weird pastiche of actual dancing. Max just laughs and Chloe’s enthusiasm proves so infectious that Max starts to really get into it. Plus, Max isn’t ignorant to the way that Chloe holds her hands the entire time, or the warm closeness of their bodies.

They get through a few more pounding songs before Rachel makes her way to the front of the room and turns down the music. It’s fairly early as far as parties go, barely past midnight, and everyone groans in discontent. Rachel holds her hands up to silence the crowd, and to Max’s absolute surprised, they actually do.

“Friends, I wasn’t kidding about the sleepover theme,” Rachel says. “Now’s the time to set up sleeping bags, change into your comfy pajamas, and start talking about your feelings and your secret crushes.”

There’s a smattering of laughter throughout the crowd.

“And, if you’re all good, I hear that Max will play some guitar for us to keep the music going,” Rachel says.

Max’s eyes widen and she hopes that if she tries hard enough, she’ll spontaneously combust.
Everyone turns to look at her.

“Even better, Rachel will shut her mouth if you all start getting ready for the sleepover,” Chloe says.

Rachel looks offended for a moment, but she winks at Chloe and waves everyone off.

“Let’s get to it, people!” Rachel says.

Everyone disperses, some clearly uninterested in the sleepover part and leaving to go back to the Vortex Club party, but others heading to the bathrooms or other private corners to change and get ready for the sleepover. Max, Chloe, and Rachel start shifting the furniture about, creating a large space in the middle of the room for everyone to set their sleeping bags down, before going to change themselves.

Everyone starts filtering back in, looking significantly cozier in their pajamas and sleep clothes. Max notices that Dana, true to her word, is wearing her fuzzy pajama shorts out in public. Kate walks back in a few moments later as well, her fluffy hair down (which Max has only seen maybe once before) and in her usual t-shirt and long pajama bottoms.

Once most everyone is back in, Rachel clears her throat and begins to address everyone once again.

“To those of you still here – welcome to the sleepover! We’ve had drinks, indulged in some weed, and danced the night away, and now it’s time to settle down and settle in with each other,” Rachel says. “Remember those sleepovers I’m sure we all had as kids? We want to do exactly that. Now, it is within the Tobanga Club commandments that there’s no pressure to do anything you don’t want to…”

“…Did we come up with commandments?” Max asks, turning to Chloe and keeping her voice low.

“Nope,” Chloe murmurs back.

“…But, I have some suggestions for some fun games we all could play,” Rachel says. “Spin the bottle. Truth or dare. Ten fingers. Two truths and a lie. We want to bond, people! Bonding is good. We want Tobanga Club to be a place you can make real friends, and not just random rich kids you get plastered with every other weekend.”

There are few scattered, murmured conversations amongst the partygoers.

“But if you just want to chill and smoke some more or whatever, feel free,” Rachel says. “I know icebreakers can be kind of weird and awkward, but they can also be really fun if you let them! Alright, let’s do this!”

Everyone begins breaking off into their own separate groups. Max goes to plug her phone into the sound system, wanting to play some relaxed, acoustic music to close out the night, as Chloe goes to gather some people together for an icebreaker. Max watches her with a bit of anxiety, worried that she’ll try to start something she’ll later regret. It doesn’t help that Chloe seems to immediately corral Kate, Dana, and Juliet all together. Max just shakes her head and goes over to hopefully intervene before things get weird.

“Chloe, what are you doing?” Max asks.

“Damn, why are you always so suspicious, Mad Max?” Chloe asks. “I’m following our illustrious leader’s lead and getting some people together for some sleepover games. You in?”

“Sure, mostly because I feel like you won’t let me say no,” Max says with a grin.
“So fuckin’ right you are!” Chloe says, smiling wide. “That’s basically how I got these three involved. C’mon, let’s find a good spot. We’re playing truth or dare.”

Max’s face falls. She figures that there are pretty much zero innocent reasons for wanting to play truth or dare of all games. Kate doesn’t exactly look thrilled either, and Dana and Juliet still seem to be avoiding each other, down to not even making any eye contact. Chloe manages to snag a few more people, all of whom Max only vaguely recognizes, before they all cozy up in a loose circle amongst some pillows and sleeping bags.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Chloe says, clapping her hands. “I’ll go first, obviously, being the clear ringleader.”

Chloe luxuriously drags her gaze across the circle of people gathered in front of her, most of whom seem to shrink back from the attention. Max just shakes her head when Chloe gets to her.

“Hmm, who will I choose?” Chloe asks, clearly enjoying this way too much. “How about…Max. Truth or dare, Maxxinista?”

“Oh my god, you may have found a nickname worse than my actual name,” Max says.

Chloe just gives her a look.

“Alright, sass-master, what-fucking-ever,” Chloe says, grinning. “Truth or dare, Max, don’t make me ask again.”

“Truth,” Max says.

“Of course. Nerd,” Chloe says. “Alright, what’s the most embarrassing thing you’ve ever done?”

Honestly, given Chloe’s history with Max, she could’ve asked a much worse and devastatingly specific question. Max’s face scrunches up as she thinks of a suitable response, before she remembers that her own most embarrassing moment also happens to be one of Chloe’s most embarrassing moments.

“Okay, let me set the stage,” Max says, beginning to smile. “This is back in fourth grade, so you can imagine little baby Max and Chloe.”

Kate smiles and “awws” at that.

“So, we were both convinced we were in love with the same boy,” Max says. “This is before we figured out that…well, y’know. So…”

Max watches as Chloe’s face lights up in recognition before falling completely as she realizes what this story is about.

“Wait, fuck, don’t tell this fucking story,” Chloe says.

“Too late!” Max says. “This is my ‘truth!'”

“You little demon,” Chloe says. “Can I force you into a dare?”

“Nope,” Max says. “I’m telling this story. I’m on a roll now.”


Max laughs.
“Okay, so we both have dumb crushes on this one boy. I don’t even remember his name, honestly,” Max says. “But we keep our crush on him a secret for one another.”

Chloe groans and buries her face in a pillow.

“My idea was really bad,” Max says. “I was planning on taking pictures of all the places we hung out – which was not many, mind you, we hardly spoke to each other. I wanted to put the pictures I took into a scrapbook and give it to him as – I don’t even know – like a symbol of our bond?”

“Wow, you were always artsy and melodramatic, huh?” Juliet asks.

“Pretty much,” Max says. “But before I could give it to him…”

“Ugh, fuck, fine, if you’re going to tell this shit at least let me do it,” Chloe butts in. “Before she could do all this hipster bullshit, I marched right up to this dude, ready to confess my obviously true and undying love for him.”

“Did you?” Kate asks, clutching at the blanket she has draped over her legs.

Chloe laughs and shakes her head.

“No, I panicked,” Chloe says. “Remember, this was back in fourth grade. That was pre-badass Chloe. I freaked out and I just slapped him across the face.”

Max is already dying with laughter, since she knows this story. Everyone else begins cracking up as well.

“You slapped him?” Kate asks, sounding shocked.

“I did,” Chloe says. “We both ran away crying. I had never hit someone like that before. Max had to comfort me for hours after.”

“I think after that, we realized that being best friends with each other was better than chasing after some dumb boy,” Max says.

“Amen to that, sister,” Chloe says.

Chloe holds out her fist, and Max bumps it. Dana and Juliet just both look knowingly at them.

“But also, fuck you for telling that story, Max,” Chloe says. “I didn’t realize you’d be so crafty. Alright, choose your victim.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Max says. “Alright, Kate, truth or dare?”

Kate squeaks and hides the lower half of her face beneath her blanket.

“I don’t know!” Kate says. “Uh, how about a dare?”

Chloe cheers.

“Go Kate!” Chloe says. “Way more of a baller than Max is.”

“Is that a good thing?” Kate asks.

“Just go with it,” Dana says, patting Kate’s knee.
“Okay, Kate, I dare you to…”

Several awkward truths and uncomfortable dares later (Max had no idea that Dana would be *that* flexible), it’s Chloe’s turn to choose once again.

“Okay, Dana,” Chloe says, a big grin on her face. “Truth or dare.”

“Fuck it,” Dana says, shrugging. “Dare.”


The group falls absolutely silent. Max had been having such a good time that she’d forgotten that Chloe was cooking up some sort of plan. Apparently, this is it.

“Juliet, I…” Dana says, fumbling with her words.

Juliet runs a hand through her hair as she stares daggers at Chloe.

“You don’t have to, D,” Juliet says. “It’s cool.”

“Nope, the rules of truth or dare are absolutely sacrosanct,” Chloe says. “You must follow the dare.”

Max can just see the evening falling apart before her very eyes. Kate is clearly trying to avoid everyone’s eye contact, Juliet looks desperate to just move on and avoid this situation entirely, and Dana looks uncharacteristically unsure of what to do.

Dana just stares at Juliet for a long while. Juliet eventually rolls her eyes and moves in a bit closer.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Juliet says.

“Juliet…” Dana says.

Juliet just shakes her head.

“C’mon,” Juliet says.

Juliet leans in and pecks Dana on the lips, before quickly leaning back. Really, it doesn’t even last for half-a-second, but it feels like an eternity to Max. Max loves Chloe, of course, but she sure has a propensity for dumb ideas.

Juliet issues a challenging glare to everyone around her.

“Happy?” Juliet asks. “Good enough for you, Chloe?”

“Definitely,” Chloe says smugly.

Kate clears her throat more loudly than she thinks, and everyone turns to look at her. She shies a bit under all of those eyes, her cheeks blushed faintly pink.


Kate points towards the exit with a jerky movement of her thumb. Max swears the background noise drops away, and all can she hear is the rustle of Kate’s blanket falling against the sheer fabric of her sleeping bag and the sound of her footsteps, padding away.

“Chloe?” Max says, jerking her head towards a quiet corner.
Chloe looks a bit surprised at the angry expression on Max’s face, but follows her over dutifully.

“This was your plan?” Max asks.

“Pretty much,” Chloe says. “You always want to shake things up. That’s like love triangle 101.”

“There’s not even a triangle!” Max says. “Juliet’s rooting for Dana and Kate to get together!”

Chloe’s face falls.

“Oh,” Chloe says.

“So now, all you’ve done is create some unnecessary, awkward situation!” Max says. “Now Kate’s probably never going to explore whatever feelings she may have for Dana, and who knows what Dana is feeling right now!”

“Oh, fuck,” Chloe says, running her hands through her hair. “I always do this, huh? I always manage to fuck things up.”

Max sighs.

“No, Chloe, it’s – I mean, you were trying to help,” Max says. “We just – we just have to figure out where to go from here.”

Chloe groans and slumps her shoulders forward.

“Alright, I guess you’re right,” Chloe says. “Now what?”

“I’m not sure,” Max says. “I’m gonna go talk to Kate. Can you keep Dana and Juliet occupied?”

Chloe salutes.

“You got it, cap’n,” Chloe says.

“Kate?” Max calls out once she’s outside. “Kate, are you out here?”

“Over here,” Kate’s quiet voice cuts through the gauzy silence of the nighttime.

Kate’s sitting a distance away from the music building, her back against the rough bark of an old oak tree. She’s just barely illuminated by the orange, humming glow of a nearby streetlight. Silently, Max goes to sit next to her.

“You alright, Kate?” Max asks.

“I’m fine,” Kate answers so quickly that it’s clear that she didn’t even think about her response. “Just needed some air.”

“Kate…” Max says.

Kate wraps her hands together in her lap.

“I should be happy,” Kate says. “Dana wants to be with Juliet. Kissing helps with that. Or so I hear.”

Max chuckles. In a way, Max finds it sort of relieving that Kate is even more naïve than she is when it comes to relationships. It makes Max feel like her advice might actually be useful.
“It’s just a dare,” Max says. “It didn’t mean anything.”

“I know that, Max,” Kate says. “I’m just – I’m thinking things that I shouldn’t.”

“You can tell me anything,” Max says. “That’s the deal, right? Tea date buddies?”

Max reaches over and slips her hand easily into Kate’s and gives it a comforting squeeze. Kate smiles weakly back at her.

“Of course. Tea date buddies,” Kate says. “I know it was just a dare. But when I saw Juliet kiss Dana, I couldn’t help but think of how I wished things were different.”

Max is almost positive she knows where this is going, but doesn’t want to rush things. She wants Kate to let everything unfold as they will.

“Different how?” Max asks.

“Different like – like – oh, Max, I shouldn’t be saying this,” Kate says.

“Kate, it’s fine,” Max says. “I promise that I’m the least judgmental person ever, especially in this moment. You could say that you had a crush on Victoria and I wouldn’t even bat an eyelash.”

“Oh, well, maybe I’d want you to judge me if that were the case,” Kate says, managing to crack a grin. “But…”

Kate exhales loudly and busies herself by smoothing the fabric of her pajama pants.

“When Juliet kissed Dana, maybe I wished that I was in Juliet’s place,” Kate says softly. “Maybe.”

“Maybe,” Max echoes. “Well, Kate, I may have to break the news to you – you have a crush on Dana.”

“I shouldn’t, though,” Kate says. “I just shouldn’t.”

Max takes a deep breath, knowing that they’re treading into dangerous waters.

“Is it because of your religion?” Max asks tentatively.

Kate shakes her head.

“No, not because of that,” Kate says. “I used to be…less open to gay relationships, because of my religion. But just being friends with you, and Chloe, and Dana, and everyone who’s part of the LGBT community here on campus – it’s really changed the way that I view the world. It’s not that.”

“What is it, then?” Max asks.

“Dana wants to be with Juliet,” Kate says, like it’s fact. “She doesn’t want me.”

“You might be surprised,” Max says. “Look, I can’t pretend to know what Dana feels. What I do know – and you didn’t hear this from me – but Juliet isn’t interested in Dana like that.”

“Does Dana know that?” Kate asks. “And if that were true, what would that make me? A consolation prize?”

“Kate, no way,” Max says. “Sometimes we want things that we can’t have, and what comes after that isn’t lesser in any way.”
“But Dana seems so set on Juliet,” Kate says. “I don’t think she’d just change her mind.”

“Dana’s set on the idea of Juliet,” Max says. “It’s comforting, the thought you’ll end up someone you’ve known your whole life.”

“Like you and Chloe?” Kate asks.

Max resists the urge to groan. How does this always get turned around on her?

“Yeah, sure,” Max says, unwilling to fight Kate on that right now. “Something like that.”

“Oh,” Kate says. “Okay.”

The pair is silent for a moment. Max simply enjoys the warmth of Kate’s hand in hers for a moment, a simple reminder that the other girl is there. That she’s real.

“Look, I’m no expert on relationships,” Max says. “I’ve actually never been in one before. But I like to think that I’m a pretty good people-watcher, and what I can tell you is this: Juliet or not, if you don’t tell Dana how you feel, you’ll regret it.”

“Max, I don’t even know what I feel,” Kate says. “I’m the leader of the abstinence club. I thought I was straight. Now, I’m thinking I might have a crush on one of the most popular girls in the school. This is all so confusing.”

“But still pretty simple, right?” Max says. “Sometimes you have to strip all the trappings of a thing away, and just look at the thing itself. What matters is that gut feeling you have. Not anything else.”

Kate just nods thoughtfully, and stares out at the darkened quad beyond them.

“You give good advice, Max,” Kate says.

“I’ve heard,” Max says. “I’ve also heard that I give advice that I never follow myself.”

“Well, that’s the hardest part, right?” Kate says. “It’s nice to get advice like this, especially from such a good friend. Doing anything about it is what’s difficult.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Max says.

They fall into silence again. The gentle sounds of conversation drift from the music building and mix together with the usual nighttime soundtrack of chirping bugs and the occasional drive-by whoosh of a car.

“Life seems so complicated now,” Kate says. “Everything was so simple when we were kids.”

“I think we’re too young to be looking back at the good old days,” Max says with a smile. “But I get what you’re saying. There’s so much drama here.”

“I feel like you sidestep a lot of the drama,” Kate says. “That’s a good skill to have.”

“Believe me, being friends with Chloe and Rachel means there’s always plenty of drama,” Max says. “And Victoria always loves injecting, y’know, excitement into my life. Excitement that I never, ever want.”

Kate giggles.

“Yeah, I suppose she has a sort of talent at that,” Kate says.
“It’s unbelievable,” Max says.

A burst of laughter erupts from the music building, and both Max and Kate turn in response. Kate just smiles and shakes her head.

“Do you mind if we stay out here a while longer?” Kate asks. “Sorry, I know this is a big moment for your club, and I’m sure you’d rather be…”

“Kate,” Max interrupts. “It’s fine. Seriously. I like quiet moments like these. Honest.”

“Thanks, Max,” Kate says. “You’re really sweet.”

“Oh, I don’t know…” Max says.

“And you’re terrible at accepting compliments,” Kate says with a smile.

Max laughs and nudges her shoulder against Kate’s.

“You got me there,” Max says.

Kate joins in on the laughter, the sound echoing across the quiet, empty campus.

“I like this,” Kate says. “You know, I was really worried about making friends here.”

“I know how you feel,” Max says.

Kate giggles and pokes Max’s side.

“Yeah, but you knew Chloe and Rachel even before you came here,” Kate says. “That’s cheating. They’re, like, the two most popular people here. Or Rachel is, and Chloe is the most notorious.”

“Oh god, never tell her that,” Max says. “It’ll go straight to her head. But yeah, I suppose that’s fair. I had a bit of an advantage.”

“I didn’t know anyone,” Kate says. “My parents signed me up for summer school, probably hoping that I’d make friends before the actual semester started.”

“I always forget that you’ve been here longer than I have,” Max says.

“Honestly, it didn’t really help, at first,” Kate says. “For the first two weeks, I kept to myself. I didn’t really talk in class, and I always went straight back to my dorm room as soon as I could.”

“Sounds like what I would do,” Max says.

Kate smiles and nods thoughtfully.

“It was kind of nice,” Kate says. “It was the first time I had ever been away from home. The freedom I had to do whatever I wanted was pretty amazing, even though I only ever wanted to hang out in my dorm room or wander around town by myself.”

Kate’s smile grows even wider and she clasps her hand in her lap.

“But then, one day, as I was sitting in class, waiting for the teacher to walk in and doodling in my notebook, someone sat down next to me,” Kate says. “I turned and, to my surprise, Dana Ward was sitting right next to me. I didn’t know much about her, but it was pretty obvious that she was popular. Some girls just have that aura about them, you know? I had no idea what she was doing sitting next
to me. I kind of thought I was about to get pranked.”

“Kate, oh no,” Max says.

“But she just started talking to me, like we were old friends,” Kate says. “Dana’s the first friend I made here. Then she walked into the Meals on Wheels I was volunteering at, and that was that. I like to think we’ve been pretty close ever since.”

“You two do seem really close,” Max says. “Just the way you’re so comfortable around each other. That’s a pretty rare thing to find with someone else.”

“I don’t know how I feel about Dana,” Kate says. “I just know that I like being around her.”

“I think she likes being around you, too,” Max says with a smile. “There are much worse places to start a relationship from.”

Kate blushes and stares down at her hands.

“A relationship,” Kate says. “I’m sorry, I still can’t think of myself in those terms.”

“You don’t have to rush anything,” Max says. “Still, it’s something to think about.”

“Yeah, something to think about,” Kate says. “Do you really think friends make the best couples?”

“Well, I don’t know…” Max says.

“Yo, Max! Kate!”

Max and Kate turn to see Chloe striding across the grass towards them.

“I was getting bored in there,” Chloe says. “Are you two doing alright out here?”

Chloe looks meaningfully at Max, who subtly nods her head.

“We’re just talking,” Kate says. “You can steal Max away if you want.”

“Steal Max away? I don’t know what you’re proposing, my dear,” Chloe says with a wink. “And you two are practically a package deal, anyway, you and your tea dates. Are you two want to head back in?”

“I’m kind of good chilling out here for a bit longer,” Max says. “What about you, Kate?”

“I’m good with that,” Kate says with a small smile.

“Cool, I’m always down for some fresh air,” Chloe says.

Chloe wedges herself between Kate and Max and rests her lanky arms around their shoulders.

“I mean, I’m a huge fuckin’ – sorry, language – huge stoner, but I swear that Justin is trying to hotbox the entire building in there,” Chloe says. “It’s a little much.”

The three girls settle in, enjoying the calm, Arcadia Bay night. An ocean wind has blown the clouds away, letting them enjoy the twinkling stars without interference.

“Kate?” Chloe says suddenly, her voice surprisingly gentle.

“Yeah, Chloe?” Kate asks.

Kate smiles and looks up at Chloe, her cheek resting against the other girl’s sleeved arm.

“It’s fine,” Kate says.


“Chloe, really, it’s fine,” Kate says. “You’re a good friend.”

“Damn, have you two been getting all sentimental out here?” Chloe asks. “Fine, fuck it – sorry, language. I’m glad we’re friends too, Kate. You kind of make me not want to be as much of a shithead – sorry, language.”

“Wow, I don’t inspire you to be a better person?” Max asks, feigning offense.

“If you did, I wouldn’t be this way now,” Chloe says. “You could’ve fixed me all those years ago.”

“Hey, technically, you were a star student back before I moved,” Max says. “I think that makes me, like, a good influence or something.”

“Fine, Max,” Chloe says, mussing with Max’s fluffy hair. “You’re my good luck totem.”

“I am become the Tobanga,” Max giggles.

“No way, the Tobanga is way too creepy to be good luck,” Chloe says. “You’re the bobblehead on my truck’s dashboard.”

“Is that a compliment?” Kate asks. “Being a bobblehead?”

“With Chloe, I’ll take what I can get,” Max says.

“And this is exactly why I’m never sentimental!” Chloe says.

Chapter End Notes

I love feedback, as always!
Eventually, the three friends return to the music building. Everyone has really settled down, some people actually sleeping as others hold soft, calm conversations around them. The most activity is coming from Rachel, who is animatedly yet quietly having a conversation with Juliet.

“Wow, I’m surprised that people are treating this like an actual sleepover,” Chloe whispers.

The three of them make their way to their sleeping bags, pulling them closer together so that they can talk freely without disturbing anyone around them.

“I get it,” Kate says. “It’s the nostalgia of it. Maybe people don’t want crazy parties all the time, they want the simplicity of being kids again.”

“Well put,” Max says.

“I mean, damn, we’re not that old yet,” Chloe says, chuckling softly. “But I get it. I’d kill to be a kid again.”

“Oh yeah?” Kate asks.

“Big time,” Chloe says. “I’d figure out a way to handcuff Max to my house so she couldn’t move to Seattle.”

Max laughs, but is also mildly horrified by the idea of the young, skinny twig, nerd version of Chloe handcuffing the young and even skinnier twig Max to prevent her from moving.

“I always forget that you guys spent five years apart,” Kate says. “You two are still so close.”

“Well, Max is a good friend and kept in touch with me,” Chloe says. “Did you know she used to send me letters? Like long, carefully handwritten letters?”

Max’s face burns bright red.

“Don’t tell people that,” Max says.

“No, that’s really sweet!” Kate says. “Letter writing is a lost art.”

“Yup, between writing letters and using instant cameras, Max is truly the vintage queen,” Chloe says.

“What can I say? I hate modern conveniences,” Max says. “If I had an orchard, I’d work ‘til I’m sore.”

“Fuck off, don’t quote Fleet Foxes at me,” Chloe says.

“Fleet Foxes?” Kate asks.

“They’re some indie folk band that Max is obsessed with,” Chloe says. “Don’t let her get started.”

Max closes her mouth. She totally wasn’t about to launch into a long diatribe about the musical merit
of Fleet Foxes. The three of them fall into comfortable silence instead. Rachel makes her way over to where they’re lying down, being careful to avoid stepping on anybody.

“So, what do you think, guys?” Rachel asks. “Pretty successful, right?”

“Totally, Rach,” Max says. “This was such a cool idea.”

“I have to admit, this went way better than I thought it would,” Chloe says. “I was hella worried that everybody would be at the Vortex party tonight.”

“No way,” Rachel says. “I’m telling you, people are getting tired of Victoria and Nathan owning the social scene. They want something different.”

(Apparently,) Max says. “This place is packed. I can hardly believe it.”

“Well, believe it, girl,” Rachel says. “Kate, what about you? Having a good time?”

Kate nods eagerly.

“I am. Though, to be honest, I started enjoying it a lot more once the drinking and dancing stopped,” Kate says, crinkling her nose. “I’m looking forward to a quiet morning with tea, too.”

“And there we have it,” Rachel says, clasping her hands together. “We have something for everyone. I’m so excited. I’m going to start planning our next club event right away.”

“Hey, we should actually do some community service or something,” Max says. “Something to really separate us from the Vortex Club.”

“Good idea,” Rachel says.

“I still keep in touch with the Meals on Wheels program I worked at over the summer,” Kate says. “I could contact them?”

“Yes! I love it,” Rachel says. “Okay, that’ll be our next big thing. Let me know what they say, alright? Do I have your number?”

“I don’t think so,” Kate says.

“Oh my god, how do I not? Total brain fart on my part,” Rachel says, pulling her phone out. “Here, give me your number and I’ll text you so you can have mine.”

“Sure,” Kate exhales, clearly a bit overwhelmed by Rachel’s enthusiastic friendliness. That’s definitely part of Rachel’s charm – just blitzing someone with interest and charisma.

“Cool, so we’re all best friends now, right?” Chloe asks. “The fearsome foursome.”

“The fantastic four,” Max says.

“The four horsemen?” Kate offers.

Everyone’s silent for a moment.

“Damn, girl, not the Bible pull I would’ve expected,” Chloe says. “You’re way more metal than I thought.”

“If we’re the four horsemen, I call being death,” Rachel says.
“Speaking of death, do you guys want to get some sleep?” Max asks. “I’m getting kind of tired, and sleep is the cousin of death, after all.”


“I’m pretty sleepy too, Max,” Kate says.

“Yeah, let’s turn in,” Rachel says. “We want to be awake and ready for tea tomorrow!”

Max wakes up the next morning with a great weight upon her chest and lower body. She groans and rubs her eyes, before looking down and realizing that Chloe’s limbs are sprawled all atop her. Needing to get a drink of water, Max attempts to at least move Chloe’s arm off her chest. As soon as she does, though, Chloe just groans and holds onto Max even more tightly.

Max sighs. She can just suffer from dehydration. That’s fine.

A few minutes later, Kate comes to, blinking blearily and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Max catches her gaze, mouthing the world “help” and looking down meaningfully at Chloe’s death grip on her. Kate just smiles and goes to start setting up their tea-making supplies. Max groans and slumps her head back against her pillow.

Max nearly drifts back off to sleep when she feels Chloe shifting against her. Chloe groans so loudly that it’s surprising that everyone around her doesn’t immediately wake up and she stretches luxuriously stretches out her limbs, smacking Max on the cheek by accident.

“Hey!” Max whispers.

“What?” Chloe asks blearily. “Oh, fuck, sorry Max.”

“I woke up with you trying to squeeze the life out of me, too,” Max says.

Chloe rolls her eyes.

“Don’t complain about that,” Chloe says. “We’ve woken up in hella more compromising situations.”

“…Have we?” Max asks.

“Dude, totally,” Chloe says. “Remember the first night you were back in Arcadia Bay and you crashed in my bed? And my step-demon barged into my room the next morning when we were both still half-asleep in my bed and in our underwear?”

Max buries her face in her hands.

“Oh god, why would you remind me of that?” Max says. “And hey! I had a t-shirt on, at least.”

“Yeah, but I did not,” Chloe says. “So – awkward.”

“Does David know you’re gay?” Max asks.

Chloe just throws her head back and laughs.


“Oh my god, you’re making this story so much worse,” Max says. “I can’t imagine what he was thinking.”
“Dude, it’s whatever,” Chloe says. “You’re definitely the most respectable girl I’ve ever woken up next to.”

“Chloe!” Max whisper-shouts, smacking the other girl’s arm.


“Thank you. I think,” Max says. “Now, could you get your leg off of me? I need some water. I’m dying of thirst.”

Chloe grins wolfishly at her.

“Word choice, Maximo,” Chloe says. “And you’re just so comfortable.”

Max just groans and shoves Chloe’s leg off. Chloe can be so lovable yet irritating all at once – it’s a real skill to have. Max heads to the drinking fountain and slurps down water for what feels like minutes. Anything to stave off her possible hangover. Drinking is definitely not something she expected she’d ever do in high school, but it turns out all things are possibly just by being friends with Rachel and Chloe.

Max makes her way to Kate is setting up the electric kettle and several varieties of tea on the snack table.

“Need any help?” Max asks.

Kate shakes her head.

“This is all pretty easy,” Kate says. “You can help by taste-testing this blend.”

Kate holds up a simple, unadorned tin of tea.

“Looks fancy,” Max says.

“It’s nothing crazy,” Kate giggles. “It’s just blackberry, mint, and green tea.”

“Wowsers, I always forget that you’re actually pretty serious about this stuff,” Max says. “You’re a real aficionado.”

“I admit, I kind of am,” Kate says. “‘There is something in the nature of tea that leads us into a world of quiet contemplation of life.’”

“You’re going to class this place up too much!” Max says. “Where will that leave Rachel and Chloe?”

“Are you two making fun of me?”

Chloe suddenly appears between the two of them, and she slings her lanky arms around their shoulders. Max, as always, flinches when she hears Chloe’s voice.

“How’re you so good at sneaking up on me?” Max asks.

“Because you’re both super observant and completely unaware of your surroundings,” Chloe says. “I have no idea how you do it. You two nerds making tea?”

“Well, Kate was going more into the artistry of it, but sure, we are,” Max says.
“You guys are using an electric tea kettle,” Chloe says. “I’m just saying.”

Kate finishes up brewing her first cup of tea and wordlessly hands it to Chloe, an expectant look in her eyes.

“Alright, fine, I can pass judgement,” Chloe says.

She takes a long sip, pausing for a moment before her face lights up.

“Whoa, this is hella good!” Chloe says. “No wonder you two go on so many tea dates together.”

Max and Kate just look at one another. Chloe constantly references their tea dates, and Max has certainly picked up on that. The question remains, though – why?

“Chloe – do you want to join us the next time we go to our tea café?” Max asks.

“Nah, it’s fine,” Chloe says, suddenly bashful as she rubs the back of her neck. “I don’t want to barge in on Kate and Max time.”

Max notes Chloe’s sudden change in mood, but isn’t sure what to think of it. Chloe clears her throat and keeps on going.

“But seriously, Kate, this is great,” Chloe says. “You should open up your own tea shop or something.”

“To the great disappointment of my parents,” Kate says, chuckling a bit awkwardly.

“C’mon, who cares what your parents think?” Chloe asks. “You have to follow your dreams and all that shit.”

Kate stares down at her shoes as she shifts from foot-to-foot, uncomfortable. Max elbows Chloe’s ribs.

“I mean, not everyone has to live with a step-despot like I do and people’s family situations are all different,” Chloe says in one breath, before clearing her throat. “Well, I’m going to drink some more tea to get the foot taste out of my mouth.”

“It’s fine,” Kate says with a faint smile.

“Yeah, sure,” Chloe says. “Hey, I’m gonna go see if Rachel’s awake and bug her if she isn’t.”

Chloe turns on her heel and walks over to where Rachel’s sleeping bag is, nearly spilling tea all over herself in the process.

“Chloe’s both so brash and so apologetic,” Kate says, once Chloe is out of earshot.

“Yeah, it’s kind of funny,” Max says. “It’s like new Chloe and old Chloe are both raging inside of her.”

“It’s kind of sweet, though,” Kate says. “She always catches herself.”

“She usually does,” Max says. “She’s getting better about it. Especially around you.”

“I’m not some delicate thing,” Kate says. “I mean, I can get why people think that, but…”

“I know,” Max says. “She doesn’t mean anything by it. She’s very overprotective of people she
really likes.”

“Like with you?” Kate asks.

Max smiles fondly over at Chloe, who’s trying her hardest to wake Rachel up.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Max says.

“Do you have feelings for her?” Kate asks, simple and straight to the point.

Max sighs. It seems like everyone else is seeing something between her and Chloe that she just doesn’t see herself – or maybe she just isn’t ready to see it.

*Feelings are impossible.*

“I really don’t know,” Max says. “Honest.”

“I believe you,” Kate says. “I guess we’re in the same boat. We both don’t know how we feel.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Max says.

People slowly begin stirring, breaking through the quiet stillness of the morning. There’s always something so genuine about seeing people just as they wake up, something so intimate, and Max contents herself with people watching as she drinks tea with Kate. Chloe is still talking with Rachel, and Max realizes that this is a side of Rachel she rarely gets to see – Rachel with no makeup, no dramatic punk get-up, her usual otherworldly aura peeled back.

Chloe, though, is always just *Chloe*, no matter the iteration. There’s a fire within her that just burns and burns, no matter the situation or the context or anything. Max feels herself getting lost in that fire, and Chloe catches her staring. To her credit, Chloe just gives her an infuriating little Mona-Lisa-smile, not breaking stride with her conversation with Rachel. Max shakes her head, broken from her silent reverie, and strikes a conversation with Kate instead of getting lost inside her own mind again.

People mill about, some of them heading back to their dorm rooms while others hang around, enjoying the tea that Kate and Max are brewing non-stop. It’s clear that pretty much everyone took the bonding opportunity the night prior to actually bond. A group of people are planning an outing to Two Whales, and for once in her life, Max doesn’t want to go. A quiet morning deserves a quiet day, and she just wants to head back to her dorm room and go through old polaroids.

Eventually, all of the partygoers filter out of the music building, including Kate and Dana who end up leaving together. This leaves just Max, Chloe, and Rachel, left to survey the aftermath of the first Tobanga Club get-together.

“Well, I think that was successful,” Rachel says, a confident grin on her face.

“Fuck yeah,” Chloe says. “We dragged away so many people from that stupid Vortex Club party.”

“It was nice,” Max says. “It was good seeing people treating the sleepover thing seriously and getting to know each other.”

“Though I saw you dealing with some relationship drama, Max,” Rachel says. “You know you don’t have to act as everyone’s therapist, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s *Kate,*” Max says. “And Dana, and Juliet. I love all of them. Of course I’m gonna help them out.”
Max pauses, thinking about what Rachel just said.

“Also, how do you know I was dealing with relationship drama?” Max asks.


Chloe groans.

“You’re such a fucking weirdo,” Chloe says. “I can’t believe everyone falls for your shtick.”

“You fell for my shtick,” Rachel says, snaking her arm around Chloe’s lower back.

Chloe grins and rests her arm against Rachel’s shoulder.

“Yeah, when I was, like, fifteen,” Chloe says. “All fifteen-year-olds are dumb. That’s just basic psychology.”

“You still love me, though,” Rachel says.

Max can feel her cheeks burning. Though it’s silly, sometimes when Rachel and Chloe fall into their own little world when Max is around she feels like she’s peeking in on something that she shouldn’t, like she’s pulling the curtains back on something personal and intimate.

“Get in line, girl,” Chloe says, meeting Max’s gaze and winking.

*That wasn’t subtle.*

Rachel simply looks over at Max and gives her one of those mysterious little smiles that she does so well. Max isn’t quite sure what to make of it.

“Well, kids, I think it’s time we part ways,” Rachel says, clapping her hands on Chloe and Max’s shoulders. “I don’t know about you guys, but I fully plan on doing going back to my dorm room and doing nothing today. Turns out running a club is hard work.”

Max idly wonders if Rachel can read her mind, since doing nothing is exactly what she was planning on doing anyway.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Chloe says. “I’m still hella jealous that you two live on campus. I have to drive home and interact with my mom and step-whatever. Terrible.”

“You can hang out with me, if you want,” Max says.

Chloe just shrugs and fiddles with her beanie.

“Nah, I’m good,” Chloe says. “Besides, I know when you need some alone time. Nothing like a party to drain your social energy, right?”

Max’s eyes widen ever so slightly in surprise. Chloe’s empathetic understanding towards Max’s feelings is always surprising, though never unwelcome.

“Are you sure?” Max asks.

“Yeah, I probably need to crash, too,” Chloe says. “I think Justin got me re-addicted to weed, if that’s even possible. I’m burning through the rest of that bag this afternoon.”

“Sounds…fun?” Max asks.
“Max, don’t act like you didn’t love that one time you toked up with us,” Rachel says, grinning. “But yeah, I think it’s time to call it. I’ll be in touch with Kate, though, figuring out our next, socially-conscious event. I’m glad we’ll have even more moral superiority over the Vortex Club.”

“That’s fuckin’ damning us with faint praise,” Chloe says.

“Keep us in the loop!” Max says. “C’mon, let’s get out of here. We’ll walk Chloe back to her truck so she won’t get too lonely.”

“Aww, you’re so sweet,” Chloe says sardonically, reaching out and pinching Max’s cheeks.

They walk Chloe back to her truck, who spends the entire time groaning and grumbling about having to go back home. Though her complaints become increasingly over-the-top, Max can’t really blame her. David Madsen approaches being a father with the same sort of gruff bullheadedness that he approaches his security guard with, and the tactic really doesn’t work for either role. Max can hardly imagine what living with him full-time must be like, even with the glimpses she gets into that world whenever she hangs out at Chloe’s house.

Rachel and Max wave Chloe off as she speeds away in her rickety rust-bucket, which is miraculous in the sense that it doesn’t spontaneously combust in any given moment. Silence once again settles onto the Blackwell campus as the sound of the laboriously coughing engine of Chloe’s truck fades into the distance. It’s a beautiful morning, in that classic Pacific Northwest way, clear and cool and sunny all at once.

The walk back to the dorm building is silent at first, and Max contents herself by crunching leaves beneath her feet.

“Max,” Rachel says, breaking her from her reverie. “You’re a good friend, you know that? I feel like you spend the entire evening bouncing between Kate, Juliet, and Dana, just trying to put out fires.”

“Putting out fires’ is kind of a strong phrase,” Max says. “I was trying to fire-proof the house, let’s say.”

Rachel grins at that.

“You have a such a way with words,” Rachel says. “You had fun at the party too, right? You weren’t just dealing with drama the entire time?”

“No, I had so much fun,” Max says. “Besides, I don’t mind dealing with drama, especially when it’s between people I care about.”

“I just bring it up because I wanted to say that it’s okay for you to not be so focused on other people all the time,” Rachel says. “You can focus on yourself, and what you want to do.”

“I like helping people, though,” Max says. “Or, I think it’s just easier for me. I don’t know.”

“Easier how?” Rachel asks.

“I guess I don’t really think about myself that much,” Max says. “Or I do, but not in that way. Mostly in the anxious, self-judging way. This getting to be too much of a bummer, isn’t it?”

“Max, it’s fine,” Rachel says. “I know I’m crazy and brash and out-there, but I’m a pretty good listener, too. You can ask Chloe if you need a personal reference.”
Max smiles gently and stares down at her feet as she walks.

“I know,” Max says. “And I’ve said this before, but I’m so glad you were there for Chloe when I was in Seattle. I can’t imagine what it would’ve been like if she didn’t have someone like you.”

“And I’m glad you kept in touch with her,” Rachel says. “She’d talk about you so much it would’ve been annoying if it weren’t so cute. I have a pretty good idea of what would’ve happened if you didn’t keep in touch with her, and it’s not great.”

Rachel pauses for a moment, clearly searching for the right words to say.

“At the same time, you aren’t solely responsible for Chloe’s happiness or unhappiness,” Rachel says. “Or anyone’s. I mean, I’m not saying that you can tell her and your friends to fuck off or whatever. Just – you know Do you get what I’m talking about?”

“I think so,” Max says. “But at the same time, I kind of want to be? Or, I don’t know. I always want to be there for her. For everyone. I always want to be that shoulder to cry on, no matter what.”

“How sweet of you,” Rachel says with a grin. “Just take care of yourself too, alright?”

They’ve reached the front steps of their dorm building. It looks safe and inviting, as always, and Max can feel herself relaxing just by being around it.

“What’s prompting this, Rach?” Max asks.

Rachel just grins and bumps shoulders with her.

“You’ve just been on my mind, Caulfield,” Rachel says, before becoming more serious. “I guess I worry about you. You’re important too, Max. Don’t forget that.”

“Thanks, Rachel,” Max says. “It’s nice having you look out for me.”

“What’re friends for, right?” Rachel says. “Now come on, I have a busy day of vegging out ahead of me.”

“Sounds pretty ideal to me,” Max says, smiling.

Of course, nothing is ever that easy. Max opens the door to her dorm room, and is greeted by a horrible sight. It looks as if a tornado has blown through her room – her bedding is ripped off and tossed in a heap on the floor, all the drawers in her dresser have been flung open, it looks like someone managed to make the clutter on her desk even messier, and, worst of all, her carefully curated collection of polaroids that hang above her bed have been crumpled and torn and lie limply on the floor.

“What the fuck?” Max exclaims, the expletive slipping out before she even knows what she’s saying.

Chapter End Notes

Feedback=good
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

To Max, it’s pretty obvious as to who’s behind this. The Vortex Club, and more specifically, Victoria and her cronies. Though Max is always sure to lock her door whenever she leaves her room, it doesn’t seem like too much of a stretch to assume that Victoria would’ve found some way to break in.

Rachel’s story about the club that tried to go up against Vortex weighs heavily on Max’s mind. Max had been expecting retaliation, but she never expected it to be so swift, or so personal. They invaded her space, her own private hideaway. Is nothing sacred?

Max can hear a door behind her creak open, and she turns around to see Kate poking her head out into the hallway.

“Max, is everything okay?” Kate asks.

“No, not at all,” Max says. “Someone messed with my room.”

Kate peers through the open doorway to Max’s room and her hands fly to her mouth in surprise.

“Oh no!” Kate exclaims. “What happened?”

“I know what happened,” Max says. “It was…”

Max, in a bout of paranoia, checks both ways down the hallway before nodding her head towards her room. They both step inside so they can talk, hopefully without being overheard.

“It had to have been Victoria,” Max says. “I don’t know who else would’ve done something like this, or who would even have access to the girl’s dorms.”

“You really think so?” Kate asks.

“Definitely,” Max says. “This has to be over the Tobanga Club. I just know it.”

“I don’t know,” Kate says. “I mean, it was just your first meeting. And they’re just clubs. They can’t be that important, right?”

“I’ve heard from Rachel that Vortex does crazy stuff to rival clubs,” Max says. “I mean, we put up posters that said ‘Join or Die’ on them and Rachel has been pretty open about getting people to jump ship with her. I wouldn’t be surprised if they felt threatened.”

“But to mess up your room?” Kate asks. “That’s so intimate.”

“I know, I feel kind of gross just being in here,” Max says. “I mean, someone – probably Victoria – managed to break in here and had their hands all over my stuff.”

“What are you going to do?” Kate asks. “Are you going to report this?”

Max rubs the back of her neck. She slowly looks around her room – it’s truly disastrous, and definitely the kind of think that she should mention to someone. If she snitched, though, everyone would certainly find out eventually, and the retribution from Victoria and the Vortex Club would
probably be even worse than this. And, it’s not as if she has any real evidence. It’s not that there are any security cameras in the hallways, despite David’s continuing campaign to install them everywhere.

“I don’t think so,” Max says. “I just don’t think that the school is going to do anything about it.”

“Max, look at your room! This is serious!” Kate says. “I really think that you should tell someone. Remember when Principal Wells gave us that big speech at the beginning of the year about how we all should feel safe and welcome in the dorms here and how we should feel comfortable reporting things to him and the administration?”

“Yeah, but Rachel and Chloe have told me that it’s all nonsense,” Max says. “Do you know who the biggest donor to the school is?”

Kate shakes her head no.

“It’s the Prescotts,” Max says. “They basically run this place. If I try to say anything bad about the Vortex Club, they’re probably going to find out and it’s all going to come back to me.”

“You don’t have to say anything about the clubs,” Kate says. “Just say your room was trashed.”

“But they’re probably going to ask me why someone would target me like this and ask what I was doing out of my room…” Max says, beginning to run her hands through her hair. “I hate this!”

Max sits down on her barren mattress with a sigh.

“Sorry, Kate,” Max says. “I know you’re right, I just – I don’t think I can tell the school. At least not right now.”

Kate goes to sit next to Max and gently puts a hand atop hers.

“It’s alright,” Kate says. “I don’t mean to tell you what to do, and I know that this is probably so scary for you right now.”

“Yeah, this is really freaking me out,” Max says. “I don’t even want to know how they got through my lock.”

“It’s a lot for someone to do, especially over a club,” Kate says. “But hey, Max, if you need anything, you can come to me, okay? My door will always be open for you.”

Max smiles at that and wraps Kate up in a tight side-hug.

“Thanks, Kate,” Max says. “You’re a good friend. Actually, I could use your help right now. I kind of need to put my room back together.”

Kate giggles and looks around the room.

“I can’t believe I didn’t even think of that myself,” Kate says. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

Max goes around the dorms to recruit anyone she can to help her clean up her room – with the exception of Rachel, who she isn’t entirely comfortable with telling just yet. Not because she doesn’t think that Rachel would be supportive – just the opposite, actually. Rachel will probably be too supportive and also suggest that they do something in retaliation immediately, which is exactly what Max wants to avoid. She knows that the news will travel around eventually, and Rachel does seem to hear everything, but for now Max wants to keep that information to herself.
The only person in the dorms at the moment is Alyssa, who Max has always admired for her ability to stay out of the typical Blackwell drama. With her and Kate’s help, Max begins to go through the disaster area that is her dorm room.

The more that Max cleans up, the more she realizes just how deliberate and methodical the sacking of her room was. This whole affair becomes creepier and creepier as the reality that someone completely uninvited came into her personal space and put their dirty fingers through all of her stuff sets in. Her room, her former cocoon hiding her from the world, is no more. That feeling of safety has melted away.

“Guys, this is seriously so gross,” Max says, as the thoughts in her head begin to buzz a bit too loudly. “I can’t believe that some person was in here without me knowing about it.”

“This is a serious violation of your privacy,” Alyssa says. “Whoever did this is a major creep.”

“Will you feel safe sleeping here tonight, Max?” Kate asks.

Max sighs and sits down on the floor. She hadn’t even considered that, since now she feels relatively comfortable since she has Kate and Alyssa with her. But at night? When her mind will inevitably amplify every single little sound, from the footsteps of someone walking to the bedroom to the wind whistling through the trees outside? That might be an entirely different story. Thank God for Kate Marsh.

“Oh man, I’m glad you brought that up,” Max says. “I really don’t know. I mean, someone did manage to get in here seemingly without too much effort, since it’s not like my lock is busted or anything.”

Kate and Alyssa look at one another for a moment.

“You can crash in my room, if you want,” Alyssa says.

“Yeah, same,” Kate says. “I don’t mind sleeping on the couch for a few nights.”

“Guys, no, it’s fine,” Max says, shaking her head. “I mean, whoever did this wouldn’t want to sneak back in, right? The damage is done.”

“I don’t know, Max,” Alyssa says. “This is some serious shit. It’s not like people break into other people’s rooms all that often around here.”

“I’ll be fine,” Max says, not wanting her friends to fret about her too much. “I mean, look, the room is good as new. You can’t even tell that anything happened.”

Alyssa and Kate share another meaningful look, but don’t press the issue any further.

After a very non-productive day of trying (and failing) to do homework, Max puts her study materials away (by which she just dumps everything on her desk and hopes for the best) and starts getting ready for bed. She thinks she has the fear and anxiety over the break-in pushed to the very back of her mind, but as soon as she turns the lights off, she can’t seem to think of anything else.

Max groans and rolls over in her bed. She tries to tell herself that she’s being dumb, that this isn’t a big deal, but the anxiety becomes suffocating. The Vortex Club becomes monolithic and terrifying in her mind, especially between the unstable Nathan and Victoria, who is no saint herself. And if this where the retaliation begins, where do they go from here? Will things escalate?
Max gets up and grabs her earbuds from her desk, hoping that some music will drown out her buzzing thoughts. The distraction works, at first, but her thoughts claw their way to the front of her mind and refuse to leave. Max’s thoughts just won’t slow down. What if they go after Rachel next? Or Chloe? Or even Kate or Dana? What if they have already?

Max sighs and checks her bedside clock. To her surprise, a whole hour has already passed since she turned out the lights. It’s past midnight now, and she has an early class the next day. Stewing in her anxious thoughts isn’t exactly the best thing to be doing right now.

So, Max defaults what she usually does in situations like these. She turns to Chloe.

Max grabs her phone and calls Chloe up, hoping that she isn’t already asleep (not that it really matters, since Chloe has woken Max up plenty of times with late-night texts, calls, or rocks-to-windows). Max taps her fingers impatiently against her bedspread as she waits for Chloe to pick up the phone. With each passing ring, her anxiety spikes just a little higher.

“Max?” Chloe’s voice crackles over the phoneline, groggy and hoarse. To Max, it’s like a splash of cool water on a hot day. “What the fuck – why are you calling so late? Is everything okay?”

“Uh, sorry,” Max says, suddenly beginning to psych herself out of telling Chloe anything. “I – I don’t know. This is dumb. Sorry. It’s nothing.”

“Clearly not, if you’re calling at ass-past-midnight,” Chloe says, her voice losing some of its just-woken-up quality and regaining its usual edge. “C’mon, Max, remember that time I called you at two in the morning because I re-watched ET and I was terrified that he was going to break into my room and touch me with his gross penis finger? You can tell me anything, because I tell you all of my dumbass, embarrassing thoughts.”

Max can’t help but giggle at that and immediately feels more at ease.

“Oh, fair enough,” Max says. “Please never bring up ET and his penis finger ever again, though.”

“It’s so messed up, though,” Chloe says. “They show that movie to kids, you know.”

“No more ET talk!” Max says, though she’s laughing. “Okay, seriously, I’m kind of freaking out. I think Victoria broke into my room last night.”

The line is dead silent for a moment, save for the staticky buzz of Chloe’s breathing.

“What the fuck?” Chloe asks. “What the – explain, Max. Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“I’m sorry,” Max says. “I didn’t want you to freak out about it.”

“Well, I’m kind of freaking out now,” Chloe says. “What happened? How do you know it was Victoria?”

“I came back to my room and it was completely destroyed,” Max says. “All my stuff was just thrown onto the floor. It was crazy. And I actually don’t know if it was Victoria. I’m just pretty sure that it was.”

“I mean, it makes sense,” Chloe says. “Psycho bitch. I can’t believe whoever it was got into your room. That’s fucked up.”

“Tell me about it,” Max says. “I got Kate and Alyssa’s help to clean it back up again, and I thought that would make me feel better, but it’s still so…gross. I don’t know.”
“No, that is gross. Who would even do something like that?” Chloe asks. “Alright, I’m dressed and I have my car keys. I’m coming over.”

Max’s eyes widen.

“No!” Max says. “I just called to vent. You don’t need to do anything like that.”

“I kind of do,” Chloe says. “You feel unsafe in your own room, and I’m sure you don’t want to feel awful and tired tomorrow. Plus, it’s not like we haven’t had hella sleepovers anyway.”

“I can’t possibly ask you…” Max begins to say.

“Dude, I’m practically begging to come over,” Chloe says, and Max can practically hear her rolling her eyes. “It’s fine. The drive to Blackwell is short. I’ll be there in ten.”

“It’s not that short,” Max says.

“Well, speeding is a lot easier at night,” Chloe says, and Max isn’t sure if she follows that logic. “I’ll see you soon, dork.”

“Chloe, wait…” Max begins to protest, but soon realizes that the line is already dead.

Max sighs and flops backwards on her bed. Sometimes, Chloe is just too nice.

True to her word, though, Chloe is there just ten minutes later, announcing her presence by the way of pebbles thrown at the window. Max goes to open it, and is met for her troubles by a rock narrowly missing her head.

“Hey!” Max whisper-shouts.

“Sorry!” Chloe whisper-shouts back. “I had to make sure I got your attention.”

“I have a phone,” Max says.

“That’s not romantic,” Chloe says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “C’mon, I need you to let me in. The building’s locked and I don’t have a dorm building key. I’ll be waiting downstairs.”


Max takes a deep breath and sneaks out of her room. With the curfew, any late-night escapades are inherently stressful, but tonight even more so, with the threat of Victoria (or some other Vortex Club crony) lurking about being so high. Max’s heart threatens to pound right out of her chest as she walks past Victoria’s room, but the hallway remains quiet and empty. Still, though, she tries to keep her footfalls as soft and quiet as she can possibly muster, and pushes open the exit door with the utmost care.

She cracks open the first-floor door and is greeted pretty much immediately by Chloe’s smiling face.

“Hey there, Max-aroni,” Chloe greets. “Ready for the best damn sleepover ever?”

“Do you have a notebook where you keep all of these ridiculous name puns?” Max asks, grinning.

“And you know that I’m just going to head back upstairs and pass out, right?”

“Yeah, whatever, still fun,” Chloe says. “Let’s go!”
Max is continuously surprised by just how excited Chloe gets to do basically anything with her, no matter how mundane. If that’s not a sign of best friendship, then nothing is. As they’re walking back upstairs, Max notices that Chloe is already dressed in her pajamas, with fuzzy, pink slippers shaped to look like rabbits to boot.

“Did you drive here with those on?” Max asks, nodding down at Chloe’s feet.

“Duh,” Chloe says. “What, is that unsafe, or something?”

“I’m not saying anything,” Max says.

“What?” Chloe asks, a big grin on her face. “What is it?”

“Nothing!” Max says.

Max shushes Chloe when they get to her floor, and they tiptoe their way down the hallway and into Max’s room. They shut the door behind them, and Chloe is sure to triple-check that it’s properly locked. She offers to slide the chair up against the doorknob to really secure it in place, but Max figures that’s just a tad too paranoid.

With a dramatic sigh, Chloe leaps face-first onto Max’s bed, her limbs sprawled out and covering every available inch.

“You know we’re sharing the bed, right?” Max asks.

“Oh, are we?” Chloe asks. “What, the couch isn’t comfortable?”

“Chloe,” Max says.

“Just teasing,” Chloe says. “Come on in, Maximo. The water’s fine. Look, I’ll even give you as much space as I possibly can.”

Chloe squeezes herself into the corner formed between the edge of the bed and the wall and pats all of the empty space that she’s created. Max just laughs and gets into bed with her.

Max turns to face Chloe, who’s wearing an expression that Max can’t quite parse. Under that velvety darkness, with the moon pouring its meager sunlight through the cracks in the blinds and Chloe right there in front of her, Max begins to feel safe again. Max is tempted to defuse whatever tension just descended upon them with a silly joke, but her words fail her.

Chloe’s the one to break first, and she clears her throat.


“It’s okay,” Max says, her voice coming out softer and fonder than she was expecting.

“Are you feeling better?” Chloe asks. “Safer?”

“Definitely,” Max says. “You can take Victoria in a fight, right?”

It takes a second for Chloe to register the joke, but when she does, a big smile comes across her face.

“Obviously. I could fuck her up with one arm tied behind my back!” Chloe says.

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Max says.
“Yeah, I guess so,” Chloe says. “Though it’d be pretty fun.”

“Whatever you say,” Max says. “Good night, Chloe.”

“Good night, Max,” Chloe says.

In a move that seems to surprise both of them, Chloe reaches out to sweep an errant strand of hair away from Max’s face. Chloe immediately pulls her hand back, as if the contact with Max’s skin shocks her.

With that, Chloe’s face flushes red and she quickly turns on her other side, facing away from Max. Max simply lies there, on her back, and stares up at the ceiling. She’s not entirely sure what’s happening between her and Chloe, but something is clearly happening. Sleep doesn’t come easily for her.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, I just want to say, from the bottom of my heart, that I really really appreciate all of the love and support I've gotten so far. Every kudos, every bookmark, every comment means so much to me, and I just want to say that I write for you guys. So, just, thanks! I hope you've enjoyed this latest chapter. This fic has really taken on a life of its own, and I can hardly believe it's already up to 40,000+ words! We're just getting to the meat of the conflict, too, so I'm up for a few more tens of thousands of words if you guys are!
Max’s alarm begins chirping just after the sun rises. She wakes up right away, but can’t seem to bring herself to move the few inches it’ll take for her to reach her alarm clock. It’s surprising, then, when a lanky arm suddenly flops across her body in an awkward attempt to shut off the incessant beeping.

It takes a few moments for Max to register that it’s Chloe’s arm, and that, once again, she’s waking up after having shared a bed with Chloe. Max finds it so intimate and strange to wake up next to someone, anyone, let alone her best friend in the entire world, no matter how many times this has happened before. And, of course, there’s no one else that she’d want to share this space with.

But, on top of that, it worked. Chloe’s presence completely soothed any anxieties Max had about another break-in or any other attempts from the Vortex Club at retribution.

“You’re awake, right?” Chloe whispers.

“Yeah,” Max answers, her voice groggy and slurred with the last vestiges of sleep. “I’m awake.”

“Did you sleep well?” Chloe asks.

“I did,” Max says. “Thanks so much for coming over.”

Chloe yawns luxuriously and stretches, her arm brushing unintentionally against Max’s midsection.

“It was my genuine pleasure,” Chloe says. “It’s not like I was going to leave you to suffer here alone.”

“It would’ve have been that bad,” Max says. “It’s just my dumb anxiety. Whatever.”


Max is about to protest, to insist that what she feels isn’t important, but she knows that Chloe will just push back even harder. And rightfully so. It’s not like Chloe has ever let her wallow in her own misery.

“Alright, I hear you,” Max says.

“Good,” Chloe says, pushing herself up to a seated position. “So, what does your day look like? Some balls-early morning class, I guess.”

“Balls-early?” Max echoes.

Chloe just rolls her eyes.

“That’s totally a real phrase,” Chloe says. “I mean, probably.”

Max giggles.

“Anyway,” Max says. “I do have a morning class. It’s American Lit., which I like but it isn’t exactly
the most thrilling thing to talk about so early, and…shit.”

“What is it?” Chloe asks, brow furrowed with concern.

“Victoria is in that class,” Max says.

“Oh fuck,” Chloe says. “Do you want me to come with you? I can act as your bodyguard. Anyone who wants to get at you has to go through me first.”

Chloe mean-mugs and throws up her fists, and Max laughs so hard she nearly falls off the bed. Chloe pouts.

“Sorry, sorry,” Max says, managing to contain her laughter. “It’ll probably be fine. Victoria wouldn’t try anything during class, right?”

“I don’t know,” Chloe says. “She always acts like she owns the place, almost as much as Nathan does.”

“Yeah, but she’s not crazy, like Nathan is,” Max says, to which Chloe pulls a face. “Okay, she’s marginally less crazy than Nathan is. She wouldn’t start anything in class. But what do I do if she confronts me afterwards?”

“Alright, if you don’t want me to come with you, I can at least give you some advice,” Chloe says. “If she tries to talk shit, she needs to get hit.”

“Chloe…” Max chides.

“That’s the sacred rule of the world!” Chloe says. “Talk shit, get hit. Chat shit, get banged. C’mon, Max, this is, like, the golden rule.”

“Not even close,” Max says. “And I’m not going to punch Victoria.”

“Fine,” Chloe says. “Well, I can give you shit advice like turning the other cheek and not stooping to her level and just trying to talk to her like a person, but whatever.”

“Gee, thanks, Chloe,” Max says. “I’ll just try to avoid her at all costs.”

“Classic Caulfield problem-solving,” Chloe says with a grin. “I guess that works. And oh – call me if you need anything. Seriously. If she did trash your room, who knows what she’s willing to do?”

“Thanks, Chloe,” Max says. “I’ll keep you on speed-dial.”

Max shoves her hands into her pockets as she walks to class. Appropriately, the weather has turned grey and dismal, with wispy, white clouds coming in just thick enough to obscure the sun. The sky looks like it’s just about to break out into the archetypal Oregon drizzle, and Max picks up her pace to avoid her thin hoodie getting soaked.

Max walks into her classroom and quickly scans the room, happy to find that Victoria isn’t there yet. With a deep exhale, she walks to her usual desk in the back of the classroom and sits down, contenting herself with staring out the window and watching the clouds drift by.

She periodically checks the clock, too, and with each passing minute gets more and more surprised when everyone but Victoria, seemingly, walks in. It’s not like Victoria at all to be late – in fact, Max usually dreads getting to class early because Victoria will usually be the only person there. The feeling of something settles in the pit of Max’s stomach. It’s something like her usual bouts of anxiety.
and worry, though she’s not sure if she’s worried about or worried for Victoria.

The teacher walks in and looks just about ready to start class when Victoria barges in. Max is surprised to see her without any makeup and an outfit that looks like it was chosen at random from a pile of clothing. There are bags beneath her eyes, which are bloodshot, either from exhaustion or, perhaps, something more.

_Couldn’t sleep after that late night of breaking into my room? But you do look bad, even for that…_

Max’s anger at Victoria begins to fade. Besides, there was no evidence that it was, in fact, Victoria who broke into her room, just the easy assumption. Of course, that raises the simple question: why does Victoria look so awful?

Max realizes she’s been staring at Victoria for far too long now, and that the teacher has started to lecture. She softly clears her throat, refocuses, and flips open her notebook, taking as much time to doodle as she does to write down pertinent information.

Class flies by with so much of Max’s mind occupied by Victoria. Max actually jumps when she hears the tell-tale scrape of chairs against linoleum and the sound of heavy backpacks thudding against peoples’ backs that signals the end of class, so lost in her own thoughts was she. For a moment, she considers going up to Victoria and just talking to her, but Victoria is wearing her meanest scowl and shoves her way out of the classroom and down the hallway. Strange.

Max has an hour-long break between classes, and decides to head over to the school’s cafeteria for a quick snack, but not before shooting a text to Chloe about Victoria’s unusual appearance and behavior.

Given that the school is attended almost exclusively by the ultra-rich (with a few exceptions, of course, like Max herself), the cafeteria is more like a fine-dining bistro than a typical high school slop delivery system. In any case, Max is just happy they have fresh pastries, since she’s been fiending for a muffin since she woke up. The cafeteria is almost completely empty, too, with most people in class at this time of day.

Max decides to get a head-start on the Am. Lit. homework she was just assigned as she munches down on her pastry. Just as she begins to get in the flow of things, with the soft patter of rain hitting the windows as her soundtrack, the sound of footsteps break her concentration. Max looks up to see Taylor striding towards her, a furious look on her face.

“Hey, Taylor,” Max says, trying to keep her tone friendly.

“Don’t ‘Hey, Taylor’ me,” Taylor says. “Are you happy now?”

“I guess?” Max answers. “Wait, what is this about? Are you here to mess with me more? Because I’m still super bummed about what you guys did to my room.”


Max furrows her brow. There’s no way that Taylor doesn’t know about Max’s room being trashed, since she and Victoria do everything together. Literal partners in crime. Unless, of course, it really wasn’t Victoria who broke into her room.

“Seriously?” Max asks. “My room. I came back yesterday morning after the sleepover and it was totally ruined.”
Now it’s Taylor’s turn to look confused.

“Who would do something like that?” Taylor asks. “That’s totally crazy.”

“I know!” Max says. “I – I kind of thought that Victoria did it.”

“Victoria? No way!” Taylor says. “The girl’s dorm is a sacred space.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Max says.

“Besides, she’d never do anything that risky,” Taylor says. “She wouldn’t do anything to mess with her chances of getting into the very best university. You know that our school will contact whatever college we get accepted to if we do something bad, even if it’s, like, the last day of school?”

Max’s mind is spinning. It honestly worse to find out that it wasn’t Victoria who broke into her room, because then it could be anyone from Vortex. Even one of the boys. Plus, a reminder about the ever-looming presence of college is enough to send Max into a whole other pit of despair.

“Okay, fine, but if it’s not Victoria, then who?” Max asks. “Who would do something like that?”

“Max, we aren’t here to go all detective over your room. It wasn’t Victoria. That’s all you have to worry about,” Taylor says. “No, we’re here to talk about your little Tobanga Club.”

Right. Of course. Why else would Taylor talk to me?

“Look, we aren’t trying to start anything,” Max says. “There’s room for more than one club on campus.”

“You aren’t trying to start anything? Really?” Taylor asks. “Even with your cute ‘Join or Die’ posters and scheduling your first event on the same night as a huge Vortex Club party? Give me a break.”

“I’m serious, Taylor,” Max says. “We want the Tobanga Club to be something totally different. A more laid-back social club. We didn’t start the club just to mess with ou guys.”

Max knows that isn’t completely true. There was always a bit of antagonism towards the Vortex Club in the planning stages, but Max always believed that the club could be something so much more. She wanted to provide an alternative to the Vortex Club, not just crate something in direct opposition.

Taylor sighs and sits down opposite Max.

“You know, I really believe that you think that,” Taylor says. “But I don’t know if your little girlfriend Chloe believes that. And I know that Rachel didn’t start the club out of the goodness in her heart.”

“What are you talking about?” Max asks. “Rachel was totally on board from the very start.”

“Yeah, sure,” Taylor says. “Rachel says a lot of things, to a lot of people.”

Max feels even more confused. She’s always thought of Rachel as the sweetest, most open person, but here Taylor is talking about her like she’s someone to be distrusted, to be suspicious of.

“It was Rachel’s idea to make the club what it is,” Max says. “It was her idea to throw a sleepover and not just a straight-up party.”
“Yeah, on the same night as one of our big events,” Taylor says. “Knowing that she’d draw people away from Vortex. Plus, it’s no secret that there’s bad blood between Rachel and the Vortex Club.”

Bad blood. Max can’t handle Blackwell drama.

“What are you accusing me of, Taylor?” Max asks, feeling exhausted. “What are you accusing us of?”

“Nothing yet,” Taylor says. “Just be careful. The Vortex Club doesn’t like competition. Especially like this.”

“I don’t get why we can’t just get along,” Max says. “And coexist.”

“Max, you’re too nice for your own good,” Taylor says, standing up. “Just be careful.”

_That sounds like a threat, too. Everybody takes this place way too seriously._

“Wait, Taylor, my room,” Max says. “If it wasn’t Victoria, then who? Who would do something like break into my room?”

“I have no idea, Max,” Taylor says.

With that, Taylor walks off. Max watches her as she leaves, her mind racing. So, the Tobanga Club is definitely in Vortex’s crosshairs. But, at the same time, Victoria wasn’t the one who broke into Max’s room, if Taylor is to be believed. And Taylor didn’t seem to be lying, though Max knows she’s a very trusting person by nature.

Max sighs and slumps forward, her forehead coming to rest on the table. They’ve only had one official Tobanga Club meeting and already the drama is too much for her to handle. Why can’t everything just be simple? It seemed so easy when they were all just dreaming the club up in Chloe’s room. Now everything seems so serious.

“Wait, so it wasn’t Victoria?” Chloe asks.

“That’s what Taylor said,” Max says.

The two of them are in Chloe’s truck, driving over to the Chloe’s house now that the school day is over. Max has decided not to stay in her room at all, for fear of further retaliation. And, besides, sleeping over at Chloe’s house is nice.

“And do we really trust Taylor?” Chloe asks derisively.

“I don’t know!” Max says. “It’d be pretty dumb if she was just straight-up lying about it. And she was pretty convincing. God, this is all so crazy.”

“Hey, don’t take the lord’s name in vain,” Chloe says.

Max pulls a face, and Chloe just laughs.

“Sorry,” Chloe says. “I think I’ve been hanging out with Kate too much lately. Alright, serious time. So, let’s say that Taylor is telling the truth and Victoria didn’t do it. Who did?”

Max sighs and slumps forward, her cheek resting against her upturned hand.

“I don’t know,” Max says. “I really don’t know.”
“Oh god,” Chloe says suddenly.

“What?” Max asks. “What is it?”

“No,” Chloe says. “There’s no way.”

“C’mon, Chloe, just tell me what you’re thinking,” Max says.

“Oh, who else cares about the Vortex Club so fucking much?” Chloe asks. “Who cares even more than Victoria does?”

“You’re not really saying that…” Max says, her voice trailing off as she realizes just how plausible it is.

“I don’t want this to be true,” Chloe says. “Obviously. But what if it’s Nathan?”

“I really hope not,” Max says. “I don’t like Victoria, but she’s a million times better than Nathan. At least Victoria’s allowed in our hall to begin with. Nathan isn’t even allowed to step into the girl’s dorm!”

“Like I said, I don’t want it to be true,” Chloe says. “Nathan is such a fucking creep. Fuck, I hope it’s not true.”

“I know,” Max says.

“We need to figure this out,” Chloe says. “This is some serious shit. We need evidence.”

“Yeah, but how?” Max asks. “It’s not like we can just ask Nathan if he’s been breaking into girl’s dorm rooms recently, and everyone he’s close with also hates us.”

“I don’t know,” Chloe says. “But we need to do something. Have you told Rachel yet?”

Max shakes her head. The longer she waits, the less her own reluctance to tell Rachel makes sense to her. Rachel has always been so supportive, but Max just knows she’d want to do something to get back at Vortex. Plus, even if she doesn’t believe it, Taylor’s attitude towards Rachel has stuck in the back of Max’s mind. Even if it doesn’t make complete sense, that had to have come from somewhere. Right?

“Why not?” Chloe asks. “This is Tobanga Club shit, and we’re in this together. I mean, Vortex has started retaliating immediately. We need to do something about this.”

“Yeah, but what?” Max asks. “I don’t want to fight with them. I don’t want to fight with anyone. I just want to run this club and have fun.”

“We all want that, dude,” Chloe says. “But having Victoria or Nathan or whoever-the-fuck breathing down our necks isn’t exactly fun. You should tell Rachel.”

Max slumps down in her seat. She knows she shouldn’t avoid this any longer.

“Hey, do you know if something happened between the Vortex Club and Rachel?” Max asks.

“Taylor sort of implied that something happened.”

Chloe shrugs.

“I don’t know, she’s sort of just hated them for a while,” Chloe says. “Or not hated, maybe. That’s a strong word. Let’s say she’s been on the outs with the club for a while now.”
“Wasn’t she a member?” Max asks.

“Yeah, she was,” Chloe says. “All the way through junior year. Last year. But something changed over the summer. Swore she’d never go back.”

“Holy shit, how did I never hear about this?” Max asks.

“You never seemed that interested in Rachel’s partying side,” Chloe says nonchalantly. “Plus, even I don’t know everything about her and Vortex. She’s the kind of person that keeps a lot of things close to the chest.”

“You two are so close, though,” Max says.

“I know,” Chloe says. “But Rachel – she’s her own person, always has been and always will. She likes it that way, the whole lone-wolf shit. Crazy.”

“And you didn’t like that,” Max says.

Chloe sighs as she pulls up into her driveway. She turns the motor off and just sits for a moment, staring out the front windshield, before turning in her seat to face Max.

“I told you all of this before,” Chloe says. “I used to be into her, I asked her out, she turned me down. Fucked me up for a bit, but I got over it. It wouldn’t have worked out anyway.”

“Because she keeps everything close to the chest,” Max says.

“Yeah, something like that,” Chloe says. “I thought I was like that, too. The lone badass. But I talk too fucking much and I end up spilling out all my problems on whoever’ll listen.”

“I like that about you,” Max says plainly. “You’re not a mystery. You’re just…you.”

Chloe grins and weakly punches Max’s shoulder.

“Is that a compliment, Maximo?” Chloe asks. “I can’t tell if that’s a compliment.”

“It’s not anything, I don’t think,” Max says. “It’s just true.”

Chloe opens her mouth to speak, but mostly just looks blindsided for a moment.

“Damn, you can pull out the sentiment at a moment’s notice,” Chloe says.

“Yeah, sorry, I don’t know where that came from,” Max says.

“Hey, I’m not complaining,” Chloe says. “But let’s get out of this fucking truck at least.”

Max laughs and opens her passenger-side door, enjoying the fresh air (Chloe’s truck always smells a bit like old weed and gasoline).

“So, if I may bring back this long fucking conversation to the very beginning,” Chloe says. “I say we call up Rachel and have her come over. Emergency Tobanga Club meeting.”

Max rubs the back of her neck.

“I don’t know,” Max says. “I don’t want to turn this into a thing.”

“Max, your room got fucking broken into!” Chloe says. “Your sanctuary or cocoon or whatever
appropriately artsy bullshit words you use to describe it has been properly fucked with. This is a big deal.”

“Chloe…” Max says.

“You wouldn’t have called me last night if it wasn’t a big deal,” Chloe says.

Max looks down at her feet, scuffing her soles against the pavement as she walks.

“Look, I’m trying to help,” Chloe says. “I don’t want those heinous assholes at the Vortex Club fucking with you.”

Max looks up at Chloe in surprise. Chloe cares about her, a lot, and she always has – but to hear her nearly panicking in her attempts to help out – it means a lot to Max. It’s good to have someone like Chloe in her corner at all times, no matter what.


“They broke into your room?” Rachel spits out. “Max, I was in my room, like, that entire day. Why didn’t you come to me for help?”

“I don’t know,” Max says, which is partially true. “I guess I hoped the whole thing would blow over.”

“Max, they broke into your room,” Rachel says, while Chloe murmurs, “exactly what I’ve been saying,” beneath her breath.

“They did,” Max says.

“We need to do something about this,” Rachel says. “We can’t let this happen and not do something about it.”

“We don’t even know who did it,” Max says. “It could’ve been anyone.”

“Max, come on,” Rachel says. “Someone broke into your room the night of our very first club gathering. That’s not a coincidence.”

Max shrugs weakly. This is all getting to be too much for her.

“I just don’t want to escalate things,” Max says.

“We can’t let them get away with this shit, though,” Chloe says.

“Exactly,” Rachel says. “Sure, we’re the new kids on the scene, but we can’t let the old bullies just push us around. We need to fight back.”

Max flops backwards on Chloe’s bed.

“I’m no good at that,” Max says.

“Well, that’s why you have us,” Rachel says.

“Yeah, we love fighting,” Chloe says.

Max knows that Chloe is just trying to help, and Rachel seems to be as well, but the way they egg
each other on is the tiniest bit scary.

“What would you guys even do?” Max asks. “You’re going up against the two most… I don’t know, popular? Notorious? Whatever-you-call-them people at the school.”

“We need to hit them where it hurts,” Chloe says.

“Yup,” Rachel says. “All they do is throw parties. We need to make sure their next party is the worst they’ve ever had.”

“No, no,” Max says, beginning to feel a bit woozy. “Guys, this is too much.”

“Max, they broke into your fucking room!” Chloe says.

Max really doesn’t need reminding of that anymore.

“An eye for an eye, Max,” Rachel says. “It’s only right.”

“No, we did not come this far to fall back on some Old Testament bullshit,” Max says.

“You wanted to start Tobanga to get back at Vortex!” Rachel says. “To get back at Nathan and Victoria and all of those hoity-toity assholes!”

“Yeah, but just to start a club!” Max says. “I didn’t want to literally exact revenge on them! Besides, it was just a dumb idea we came up with when we were all high! This was supposed to be fun!”

“Yeah, well, things change,” Rachel says, folding her arms across her chest.

“I know you don’t like this, Max,” Chloe says gently. “But they messed with you. They messed with you so directly. I can’t just let that go.”

“I know, Chloe,” Max says. “I know.”

“Are you in or not?” Rachel asks. “If we’re going to mess with a Vortex Club party, it’ll be a lot easier if we’re all in on it.”

Max looks from Rachel, her face hard-lined and serious, to Chloe, who looks, surprisingly, far calmer and gentler, though there’s a fire burning in her eyes. Max knows that Chloe will protect her to the ends of the Earth. And maybe Rachel will, too.

Max doesn’t want to do this. But she knows that Chloe and Rachel would go ahead with it anyway, and somewhere deep-down Max is holding onto the hope that she’ll be able to convince the two of them to go easy on the party if she’s there too. Maybe even convince them to not go through with it at all.

“I don’t like this,” Max says. “For the record. But I’m in. I’ll help.”

Rachel claps her hands and smiles happily.

“Good girl, Max,” Rachel says. “Alright, let’s get down to planning.”

Chapter End Notes
Hello friends! Sorry for the slightly late upload. I hope you guys enjoy this chapter!
More setup for more drama, yo
“Max, are you alright?” Kate asks.

Max jumps ever so slightly in her seat. She had been zoning out, staring out the window as the fragrant scent of tea slowly quieting her mind.

“Sorry,” Max says. “I’m just a million miles away right now.”

Max shakes her head. Poor Kate. She went through the trouble of inviting Max out to get tea, and Max can hardly stay focused at all.

Kate chuckles softly and places her hand atop Max’s.

“It’s fine, really,” Kate says. “What’s on your mind?”

“Ah, I don’t know,” Max says. “I don’t know how much I can talk about this.”

“You don’t know much you can talk about it?” Kate asks. “Or how much you want to?”

“Both, I guess?” Max asks, running the back of her neck. “I shouldn’t be so nervous about telling you. It’s not like you’d blab to anyone.”

“Max, this is a blab-free zone,” Kate says with a smile. “You know that.”

Max returns that smile with one of her own.

“Yeah, I suppose I do,” Max says. “Well, Chloe and Rachel are planning something in retaliation to the break-in. As I knew they would, because those two are crazy.”

“That does seem in-character for the both of them,” Kate says. “What’re they planning?”

“So much. So, so much. They want to crash the next Vortex Club party,” Max says, shaking her head. “They’ve roped me into it, too.”

“Max, oh no!” Kate says. “You’re part of this, too?”

Max furrows her brow, a bit surprised at Kate’s reaction.

“Of course,” Max says. “Look, I’m not thrilled about this, but they’re my friends. And it’s our club. I can’t ditch them now.”

“I don’t know, Max,” Kate says.

“I’m still hoping that I can convince them not to go too far,” Max says. “It’s hard to be the voice of reason, though, when they don’t want to be reasonable to begin with.”

“I really don’t see this ending well,” Kate says. “Like, at all. You guys are going to crash a Vortex Club party? What does that even mean?”

“Well, Rachel and Chloe came up with a whole plan,” Max says. “They’re nothing if not ambitious. So, you know how they’re throwing the party in the football field? Well, Rachel wants to use the materials that are already at our disposal.”
“Meaning?” Kate asks.

“Meaning this plan is going to involve the field lights, confetti cannons, and speakers,” Max says. “I’m sure you can piece that one together.”

Kate slumps forward, resting her chin against her interlaced fingers. If possible, that makes Max feel even less sure about this whole affair.

“This sounds like a really bad idea, Max,” Kate says. “You could get into serious trouble for this.”

“I know,” Max says. “That’s why I’m freaking out and can’t focus on anything else. But it’s Rachel and Chloe. I have to help them out.”

Kate sighs.

“If you say so,” Kate says. “Just be careful, okay? I don’t even want to think of what would happen if you guys got caught.”

“Oh, you know us,” Max says. “Always so careful.”

“So, do we all remember what we’re going to do?” Rachel asks.

The three friends are gathered just outside Blackwell sports field. Max can hardly believe that they’re actually about to do this – her heart is pounding in her chest and sweat is beginning to form at the top of her hairline.

“Of course,” Chloe says. “Don’t look at me like that, I can remember things. I’m going to get the confetti cannons and just go crazy, you’re going to fuck with the sound system, and Max is going to flip on all the stadium lights.”

Max sighs and nods. This is it. She could chicken out right now, but there’s no way Chloe and Rachel would let her get away with it.

“And what’re we doing once the plan is complete?” Rachel asks.

“We’re meeting back up in the parking lot,” Max says. “Where your car’s parked.”

“Good girl!” Rachel says with a smile, and happily claps her hands together once (Max jumps slightly at the sound). “Okay, this is going to be great. The Vortex Club won’t know what hit them.”

“They’re going to fucking spazz,” Chloe says. “You know that Victoria and Nathan are huge control freaks. They’re going to hate this.”

“Guys…” Max starts to say.

“Max, I know you’re not a fan of this,” Rachel says. “But we have to stand up for ourselves. Just because we’re a new club doesn’t mean they can just push us around.”

“And I’ve said this a million times, but they broke into your fucking room!” Chloe says.

“Alright, alright, I got it,” Max says. “We’re doing this. Okay. We’re doing this.”

Chloe claps her hand against Max’s back.

“Hey, don’t worry,” Chloe says. “We go in, fuck with their stupid party for a bit, ruin everyone’s
night, and leave. Easy.”

“Yeah. Easy,” Max echoes.

There are two ways to turn on the stadium lights. One is to break into the control room for the stadium, though that’s made difficult by the room’s proximity to the partygoers. The other is to simply go to the breaker panel installed on the exterior of the stadium. It’s so simple, and means that Max doesn’t have to go into the stadium itself for this plan to go off, which she’s certainly happy about. She just needs to find the panel and hit everything. The lights turning on also serves as a signal for Rachel and Chloe.

No matter how much planning they’ve done, no matter how many times they’ve gone over this, Max can’t help but be nervous. For herself, certainly, but mostly for Rachel and Chloe, who’ll have to break into different rooms in the stadium itself. Whether the plan works or not is unimportant to Max – she just hopes that none of them get caught by security.

Max circles around the exterior of the stadium. Thankfully, given that it just barely wraps around the circumference of the track and football field it contains, it isn’t that big (at least, compared to college or professional stadiums). The only direction she’d gotten as to where the breaker panel is came from Rachel, who told her that it’s “on the side opposite to campus,” which narrows things down (if only just barely).

Max uses her phone as a flashlight as she tries her hardest to find this breaker panel. The wind is cold and biting, and the thin fabric of her hoodie provides little protection against it. Max curses under her breath and zips the hoodie up, trying to conserve as much body heat as she possibly can.

*I’m a wimp. It’s not even that cold here in the winters.*

Finally, she catches a glimpse of the breaker panel, about a hundred feet off in the distance, attached to a lonely concrete column. Max lets out a sigh of relief. No matter what happens from here, at least she was actually able to find the stupid thing. There’s one anxiety down. On to bigger and bolder anxieties now!

The bleachers of the stadium are held up by a mix of spindly metal pillars and concrete columns, providing ample camouflage for students looking to make out. Thankfully, Max doesn’t see any (not that she’s really looking), but she does nearly run right into someone who seemingly materializes out of an unseen exit, clutching onto a box of cigarettes and a lighter.

“Whoa!” Max says as she steadies herself, panicking both from the sudden appearance of another person and from her own underlying paranoia about this entire night.

Max gets her wits about her, and realizes that it’s just Juliet, not a Vortex Club acolyte. Max lets out a lengthy exhale as she tries to just force her heart rate to go down.

“Max,” Juliet says, a confused lilt to her voice. “What are you doing here? I thought you were locked in some kind of feud with the Vortex Club.”

“Uh, well, y’know…” Max says, unable to perform under pressure in any way. “I’m…getting some fresh air?”

Max can feel panic rising in her once again. Though it is just Juliet, there’s no way that Max can go ahead and mess with the breaker panel in front of her. If Juliet is prone to one thing, it’s spilling the beans, whether she means to or not.
“You know what? I’m sorry I asked,” Juliet says.

Juliet pulls out a cigarette and places it loosely between her lips. Her lighter fails on her the first few times, and it takes a couple of under-the-breath swears to get it working.

“You smoke?” Max asks.

“Bad habit, I know,” Juliet says. “Though I guess you’re used to it, Chloe is a fiend for cheap cigarettes.”

“Yeah, don’t I know it,” Max says. “How’s the party?”

Juliet shrugs.

“Pretty fucking lame, actually,” Juliet says. “Might just be me, though. Dana is being an idiot and it’s dragging down my mood.”

“How so?” Max asks.

“She’s going around flirting with any pretty girl who’ll even glance at her because she can’t deal with her feelings towards Kate,” Juliet says. “It’s awful to watch.”

“That does sound pretty bad,” Max says.

“And I’m not like you,” Juliet says. “I can’t just talk to her and make it better. I don’t know how you do it.”

“I don’t know, either,” Max says. “I never even knew I was any good at it, but you guys keep telling me I am.”

“Yeah, because you are,” Juliet says. “I don’t know. It’s not like we’re here to fix Dana’s problems. It’d just be nice if she weren’t such an idiot sometimes.”

“Dana’s not an idiot!” Max says. “She’s just making some bad choices.”

“Yeah, Max, and idiots tend to make bad choices,” Juliet says, before sighing and putting her cigarette out against one of the support struts of the bleachers. “I’m going to get back in there and try to talk some sense into her. Or smack some sense into her, if I need to.”

“Hey, no violence,” Max says. “Maybe you should just get her out of there? Somehow?”

“Believe me, I’ve been trying,” Juliet says. “But, with the way the night has been going, I know I should try a little harder.”

“You can drag her out,” Max says. “I don’t think that counts as violence.”

“It definitely does, but I’m also not saying that I won’t do it,” Juliet says. “Well, I’m heading back in. Wish me luck, Caulfield.”

“Luck!” Max says.

Juliet walks back into the stadium, and Max’s body lets go of all the tension she didn’t even know she was carrying in her shoulders. Of all the people to run into outside of a Vortex Club party, Juliet is probably the safest option. Hopefully, Juliet will be successful in getting Dana out of there before Max and co. start messing with everything. Max waits for a few moments, imagining that Juliet is successfully pulling Dana away from the party.
And then, she continues her trek to the breaker panel.

The breaker panel is small and unassuming, just a grey, metal box affixed to a concrete column. Wires shoot out the top of it, making it look strangely organic, like the roots of a tree. The panel opens easily, and Max is surprised that it isn’t locked. She can’t imagine that this is the first time that someone’s planned a prank that revolves around messing with the electricity in the stadium. Maybe no one has been this dumb before.

Max grabs her phone and uses it as a flashlight. The bright light is immediate and shocking, and she recoils before blinking a couple of times and focusing on the breaker panel. Every switch seems to be labeled, though some of the writing is smudged or were simply written by someone with poor penmanship. There’s a cluster of four switches that seem to control all of the stadium lights, and Max reaches out and grabs them.

Her heartbeat immediately spikes. The abstract planning of this prank was bad enough, but to be here, about to go through with it? It’s almost enough to make Max faint. Max has never been one to even think about bending the rules, let alone outright breaking them as she’s about to do right now. If they ever got found out, Max doesn’t even want to think about what the consequences would be. It wouldn’t be as bad for her, but for Chloe, who already has a file the size of a Tolkien novel (if Tolkien wrote about petty juvenile delinquency), the consequences could be severe.

This is ridiculous. This is all over some stupid clubs. We’re hardly even a club, we’ve had one meeting!

Still, what they’re doing isn’t that bad. It’s certainly not as bad as breaking into someone’s room. Turning on the lights is hardly even an offense, really. It could even be spun as a safety thing. Who wouldn’t want to see their immediate surroundings?

Okay, I’m really trying to justify this. I’m doing this because Rachel and Chloe need my help. Who knows what they’d get themselves into without me around.

Max takes a deep breath. She knows exactly what Chloe would be saying to her right now if she were here. Don’t chicken out. Don’t be afraid of the consequences. Don’t care about the rules. Just go for it.

Max flips the switches. There’s a satisfying weight to the action, and they click into place in the “on” position. Immediately, all of the lights turn on, and Max can hear the partygoers shouting in surprise.

Immediately, Max’s gut twists up into a knot and it feels as if thousands of needles are pricking at her skin. Her room having been broken into isn’t anything to scoff at, but nobody’s even sure who did it. And this response, to Max, feels so disproportionate. The break-in affects one person – Max. Screwing with this party affects every single person attending, including Dana and Juliet, assuming they’re still there. Max, always so concerned about what’s right or what’s fair, can’t see which way the scales of justice tip in this case. She has the feeling like it isn’t particularly favorable, though.

So, she doesn’t stick around to find out how their plan goes. She shoves her hands firmly into the pockets of her hoodie and she walks quickly back towards the dorm building, her anxiety giving her a sudden burst of energy.

As she’s walking away, Max hears the familiar bursts of the confetti cannon going off – Chloe must’ve been successful in procuring them. Rachel’s voice comes over the loudspeaker next, and she’s shouting something about how terrible the Vortex Club is and plenty of other melodramatic declarations about the current state of Blackwell Academy. The specific words fade into the distance, and Max is trying her hardest not to listen, anyway. She’s amazed, though, by Rachel’s audacity, to
let her voice be projected out across the field for all to hear as she curses the Vortex Club and their infamous leadership.

If Rachel has a grudge against Vortex, she’s certainly letting it all show now. To her credit, she’s letting herself be the face of everything, from organizing the Tobanga Club to setting up this prank. Max, even as she tries not to think about everything that’s going on, can’t help but wonder what’s fueling Rachel’s hatred of the Vortex Club. She had always known that Rachel didn’t like them, but it seems as if something serious happened that nobody is willing to talk about.

Max returns to her room and immediately changes into her pajamas, thankful to be back in her hideaway and that nobody saw her in the hallway. She tries her hardest to sleep, and when that doesn’t come easily, tries to at least lay still and ignore her buzzing phone. No doubt Chloe and Rachel want to meet up to celebrate their success or just to figure out where Max is, but she doesn’t want to leave her room anytime soon.

Hours later, and Max finally drifts off to sleep.
Max plans on spending the entire Sunday inside of her room.

She wakes up feeling like she’s hungover, even though she didn’t drink at all the night before and she went to bed even earlier than she normally does. Perhaps breaking rules is bad for herself.

It’s nice outside, almost mockingly so, and Max quickly closes her blinds to prevent the morning sun from pouring in. Outside, the hallway is buzzing with activity, and Max can pick up pieces of conversation – it’s clear that people are talking about what happened at the party. All the more reason to hide.

Max goes through the container beneath her bed that she squirrels snacks and cheap, college kid excuses for meals away in. She has a couple cans of soup, a pile of ramen noodles that Chloe stole from somewhere (Max doesn’t really want to know, nor is she keen on eating stolen goods), a few half-eaten boxes of sugary cereal and a box of cookies from her mom. Not exactly the fixings for a feast, but it should get her through the day. Max has never been so thankful for the hand-me-down microwave that Rachel gave her – that’ll certainly come in handy later.

In step one of total avoidance of everything that’s happened, Max takes the battery out of her phone, just to be safe. On one hand, it doesn’t feel great to intentionally ignore her friends, but on the other she has absolutely no desire to confront them about anything. So, her phone lies, disemboweled, on her desk.

Step two is total distraction, so Max fires up her laptop and navigates to Netflix, fully preparing to watch TV until her brain absolutely melts. She cracks open a box of cereal and munches down, ignoring the fine spray of crumbs she’s spreading across her bedspread.

Max sinks into her bed. Avoidance is definitely good.

Max is halfway through a season of a TV show she just started when the sound of knocking cuts through her mental haze. She jolts upright, sending the now-empty box of cereal flying across her room. The knocking continues, and she pulls out one earbud to try and locate where the sound is coming from. She’s hoping that the knocking isn’t on her door, but deep down, she knows that it is. There’s no way that both Rachel and Chloe would let her hide forever.

Max sighs and contemplates simply not answering them at all. She could plead absolute ignorance; she is right in the middle of an episode, after all, and her sound could’ve been turned all the way up.

There’s no way that they’d buy that, though, and it’s not like the knocking is getting any less loud or frantic. With an audible groan, Max sets her laptop aside and plods slowly to her door. She peers through the peephole first, just to confirm that it is, in fact, Rachel and Chloe who’re the ones knocking.

Max takes a deep breath and opens the door a crack, hoping to feign illness or ignorance or something, but Chloe isn’t having any of that. She shoves the door open and barges into Max’s room.

“Dude, what the fuck?” Chloe blurs out. “What the fucking fuck happened to you last night? We were supposed to meet up in the parking lot to make our daring escape.”

“Yeah, Chloe made me wait, like, an entire hour for you,” Rachel says. “Nobody found you,
“No, nothing like that,” Max says. “I wasn’t feeling so hot afterwards, so I just came back here. And I’ve been here ever since.”

“And you couldn’t answer your phone? I thought I’d blow out my speaker I was calling you so much. We were worried about you!” Chloe says. “I was worried about you!”

“Look, I’m sorry,” Max says. “I still don’t think we should’ve messed with the Vortex Club like that. Makes me feel gross. You know Dana and Juliet were there too, right?”

“You know what I’m going to say, Max,” Chloe says, folding her arms across her chest.

“They messed with your room.” Yeah, I know, Chloe.

“And c’mon, it’s not a big deal,” Rachel says. “It was just a harmless prank. So the partiers got covered in confetti and had to see themselves. So what?”

“I don’t know,” Max says. “It feels like we’re going too far.”

“Max, they went too far already,” Rachel says. “They started it. What else can we do? You need to learn to stand up for yourself.”

Max swears her spine begins to deflate as it slumps over. She sits down on her bed and contemplates the irony of shrinking at the mere suggestion that she stand up for herself.

“Hey, you know what? Cool it,” Chloe says, smacking Rachel’s arm. Max can feel the bed depress as Chloe sits down beside her. Her presence, as always, is an immediate source of comfort for Max, even if Chloe was just furious at her.

“I’m just saying that it’s harmless,” Rachel says. “It’s not like we dumped pig’s blood on anyone, nobody got hurt.”

“I’m worried about what they’re going to do in response,” Max says. “Or what happens when the school finds out we screwed with the breaker panel and all the equipment and everything!”

“Nobody’s going to find out, Max,” Rachel says. “Vortex isn’t going to blab, because it’s not like everything they do is school-sanctioned. Besides, if anyone’s going to get blamed, it’ll be me. People heard my voice. Anyone could’ve been out there by the breaker panel.”

Rachel does have a point, though it’s of little comfort to Max. Out of all of them, Rachel certainly stuck her neck out the most, and would certainly get in the most trouble because of it. But it’s not as if Max wants anyone to get in trouble – she didn’t want to go through with this plan in the first place!

“Yeah, I guess so,” Max says, feeling more and more exhausted with each word that comes out of her mouth.

“I know so,” Rachel says.

“I guess I’m not good at this rule-breaking stuff,” Max says. “Not like you guys are.”

“Man, and you’ve been friends with Chloe for how long?” Rachel asks.

“She knew baby Chloe the best,” Chloe says. “Not the current me.”
“Yeah, five years is a long time,” Max says. “And you’re so different now, Chloe. “

“Since she met me, right?” Rachel asks. “I know I’m a bad influence.”

It’s said jokingly, but Max senses a harder edge behind Rachel’s words that she can’t quite parse. Does Rachel think that Max doesn’t approve of her friendship with Chloe in those five fateful years?

Max has a hard time plucking any words from the corners of her brain, so she just shrugs noncommittally instead.

“Well, I’m glad you’re doing okay, Max, and you weren’t, like abducted last night, or anything,” Rachel says. “I have to head out, I have a busy day of planning the volunteering portion of our club. Do you lovebirds care to join me?”

Max has to stop her mouth from dropping open in shock automatically.

“You’re still doing that?” Max asks. “Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, lay low for a bit? Until this whole thing with the Vortex Club blows over?”

“No way,” Rachel says. “I’m sticking with my ‘blitz the school’ plan. Besides, I already have a meeting set up with the volunteer coordinator of Meals on Wheels thanks to Kate, and there’s no way I’m missing and letting that reflect poorly on her.”

“Oh my god,” Max says. “You’re crazy.”

“I’ve been told that’s my appeal!” Rachel says. “If you guys aren’t coming, I’ll let you know how it goes. Later!”

Rachel waves and disappears through Max’s door. As always, Max feels like she was just caught in a windstorm. Rachel tends to have that effect.

“Dude, are you alright?” Chloe asks.

“I’ll be fine,” Max says. “I just don’t like any of this.”

“I think we’ve seen the worst of all this shit,” Chloe says. “They got us, we got them back. Simple. Now, they should leave us alone.”

“I really don’t believe that,” Max says. “But thanks, Chloe. I know I should’ve called you last night. I just felt...not great.”

“I’m not here the judge. Fuck, I’m the last person to judge,” Chloe says. “But you need to get out of your own head.”

Max sighs. She knows. She knows all too well.

“They’re not going to mess with us here, right?” Kate whispers.

Max shakes her head.

“I really hope not,” Max says. “I’m not sure if they even know we’re here.”

The two friends are working side-by-side, organizing meals for their local Meals-on-Wheels chapter. It’s been a week since the fateful Vortex Club party, and so far, there’s been no retaliation. Though that might be a comfort for other people, Max thinks it makes things worse – with each passing day,
the threat of the Vortex Club seems to loom even larger above her.

But they’re off campus now, and Max desperately hopes that Victoria and Nathan and whoever else aren’t dumb enough to mess with a volunteer organization like this. And, besides, Max likes donating her time at places like these. This is the potential side of the Tobanga Club that Max wants to develop the most – the side that’ll be some kind of positive force.

“I like this,” Kate says plainly. “I think I like this more than the party you guys threw. I mean, no offense.”

“No, none taken,” Max says. “I like this too. Makes me feel like a good person.”

Though with petty revenge being a part of her life now, Max doesn’t know how true that actually is anymore.

Am I overreacting? Probably, but that’s what I do.

“You are a good person, Max,” Kate says.

“I don’t know,” Max says. “You’re a good person. I just like to think of myself as one. I should’ve reported that my room was broken into to the school. Now look what I’ve gotten myself into.”

“Well, the Vortex Club hasn’t done anything yet, right? Maybe you’re in the clear,” Kate says.

“What, with Nathan and Victoria running the show? I seriously doubt it,” Max says.

“Have you noticed that Victoria has been skipping classes?” Kate asks.

Max shakes her head, but does think back on the last time she really noticed Victoria – back when she looked haggard and exhausted. That still doesn’t sit well with Max, even though she’s not exactly Victoria’s biggest fan.

“Not really,” Max says. “I kind of like not seeing her around, as awful as that sounds.”

“No, I’ve heard her teasing you. And everyone else. That’s completely understandable,” Kate says. “She doesn’t strike me as the type of person to skip classes, though.”

Max shoulders slump forward. Blackwell Academy is completely insane.

“There are so many weird mysteries at this school,” Max says. “And I’m not sure if I want to solve them. Who broke into my room? What’s up with Victoria? Why is Nathan so crazy?”

And what happened between Rachel and the Vortex Club last year? What happened that’s so intense that nobody even wants to talk about it? What could happen to Rachel that’s so bad that she wouldn’t even want Chloe to know?

As much as Max trusts Kate, spilling the Rachel drama all over her doesn’t exactly seem like the best idea.

“That’s what happens when you get a bunch of rich kids, artsy weirdos, punks, and jocks together,” Kate says. “There’s no way there’s not going to be…everything that’s been going on.”

Max laughs and looks at Kate.

“Which category do you fall into?” Max asks.
“Artsy weirdo,” Kate says, laughing in turn. “Rich kid. Religious weirdo, but I don’t think there are enough of those here to give it its own category.”

“Rich kid?” Max asks.

“It’s Blackwell, you shouldn’t be so surprised by that anymore,” Kate says.

“Yeah, fair enough,” Max says.

Max just gets back in the rhythm of packing the meals when she hears someone calling her name. She looks up to see Chloe standing in the doorway, twirling her keys around her finger.

“Yo, Rage Against the Maxine,” Chloe says. “You’re with me. We’re on delivery duty.”

“But we’re still packing meals,” Max says.


Max mouths the word “sorry” at Kate, who just smiles and waves her off.

“Sorry for stealing her away, Kate,” Chloe says. “I promise to bring her back before eight.”

“No promises!” Chloe says.

“I hope your truck doesn’t frighten any old people,” Max says.

“Nah, it’s only scary to uptight weirdos like David and to members of homeowners associations,” Chloe says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Old people are cool, they can handle it.”

Chloe reaches into her pocket and pulls out a lazily-folded, mostly crumpled-up piece of paper. She hands it to Max.

“Here, can you navigate for me?” Chloe asks. “We need to hit every address on this list.”

“You got it,” Max says.

The first handful of addresses are for individual homes around town, ranging from mobile homes to fairly nice, cozy places more out in the suburban areas. Everyone they deliver to is very kind and gracious, and Max can feel her mood improving with each person they deliver to. Chloe’s almost surprisingly charming, and Max is impressed by how well she interacts with people who’re clearly alarmed by her blue hair and tattoos.

“Dude, you’re like the old person whisperer,” Max says as they’re back in the truck after another successful delivery.

“I’m amazing, I know,” Chloe says. “Okay, what’s the next delivery, Max-wine? Let’s keep this gravy train rolling!”

“Let’s see…oh, it’s that retirement home that’s not a retirement home,” Max says. “You know the one.”

“What the what now?” Chloe asks.
“It’s, like, an apartment building with all old people, but they don’t need constant medical attention like in most retirement homes,” Max says. “It’s supposed to let them be more independent, or something.”

“Sure, why not,” Chloe says. “Who’re we delivering to?”

“Margaret Chase, it says,” Max says.

“Well, I hope Margaret Chase is ready to get Meals-on-Wheelsed!” Chloe exclaims.

Chloe’s truck squeals as it roars off down the street. Max clutches onto her seat.

They’re surprised to find that the building has a gated parking lot complete with a security guard, but meal delivery is no surprise and the guard lets them in without a fuss.

“When I get old, don’t let them put me in some janky apartment building like this,” Chloe says, as they’re riding the elevator up. “Just take me out back and shoot me.”

“Chloe! Don’t say things like that,” Max says.

“You know I’ll do the same for you,” Chloe says.

“Not the issue here,” Max says.

Chloe just shrugs. The elevator dings, and they’re deposited on the correct floor. They make their way to Margaret’s unit and knock. They lean against the chintzy wallpaper-covered wall as they wait for her to come and open the door.

The door slowly creaks open, and both of them turn to see an elderly woman who must be Margaret Chase open the door. She’s thin, wiry, and surprisingly tall, nearly Chloe’s height. Her hair is still full and health-looking, though it’s an ashy white color and is swept back in a tight bun. Her eyes, though, are her most immediately striking feature, being a piercing, intelligent blue.

“You two are new,” she says. “Come on in. I’m Margaret.”

She sticks her hand out, clearly intending for them to shake her hand. Chloe and Max look at one another, both surprised that this woman seems to be all-business.

“Nice to meet you, Margaret,” Chloe says, shaking her hand. “I’m Chloe.’

“And I’m Max,” she greets.

Max goes to shake Margaret’s hand next. Her grip strength is weak, though it’s clear she means for it to be an emphatic, official handshake.

“Now come on in,” Margaret says. “No use dawdling in the hallway.”

Chloe and Max look at one another again, and enter the unit.

It’s a charming space, and it’s clear that Margaret spends a lot of time decorating. There are various throw rugs and cushy pillows with fanciful designs and patterns on very available surface. The furniture looks straight out of some luxurious boudoir from a bygone era. There are pictures, presumably of Margaret’s family, seemingly on every shelf that they can see.

Chloe clears her throat and sets the meal down on a kitchen counter.
“Ms. Chase, would you like me to put your food in the fridge?” Chloe asks.

“Oh, call me Margaret,” she says. “Only my children call me Ms. Chase. And the fridge is fine, dear.”

Max, who can never help herself, wanders silently around the living room, looking at the various pictures that are on display. The black-and-white pictures immediately jump out at her. They must be of Margaret herself, who was apparently quite the looker back in the day. Hanging on another wall are more recent pictures, showing Margaret with her children. They look familiar in a way that Max can’t quite place, with their blonde hair and sharp expressions.

“Do you need anything else, Ms. – Margaret?” Chloe asks.

Chloe’s voice breaks Max from her silent reverie, and she turns to actually pay attention to what’s going on around her.

“No, I’m quite alright now that I have my meals,” Margaret says. “You know, I was worried about you at first, with your hair and tattoos, but you’ve been very polite and helpful.”

“Well, don’t judge a book by its cover, I suppose,” Chloe says, rubbing the back of her neck.

“Always a good lesson to learn,” Margaret says. “Thank you both.”

Max and Chloe say their goodbyes and start heading out of the unit, when one picture captures Max’s attention. It’s very recent, with Margaret’s appearance reflecting current reality. But standing next to her, of all people, is Victoria. Max can’t help but stop and stare. It seems so obvious now – sure, it’s not like Chase is an uncommon surname, but at the same time, she should’ve put something together.

“Max, c’mon,” Chloe says.

By now, Margaret has noticed Max’s staring and walks over to stand beside her.

“Ah, yes, my granddaughter,” Margaret says. “Victoria. Do you know her? You must be about the same age as her. She goes to a nearby school. Blackwell, I think it’s called.”

Max can see Chloe burying her face in her hands in the corner of her eye, but Max’s interest is immediately piqued.

“Yes, I – I do know her,” Max says. “We’re classmates. We live in the same dorm building, actually.”

“Oh, how nice,” Margaret says. “You must be friends with her. She’s such a sweet girl.”

Chloe mimes laughter, and Max glares at her until she stops.

“Yeah, she’s something,” Max says.

“Have you spent time with her recently? I’m worried about her,” Margaret says.

Max furrows her brow. Kate being worried about Victoria is one thing, but to hear the same thing from Victoria’s own grandmother? That’s something else entirely. Maybe there really is something going on.

“I haven’t, actually,” Max says, which is technically true. “Why, what’s wrong?”
“I don’t know,” Margaret says. “She usually calls every weekend, the sweet thing, but I haven’t heard from her in – oh, I don’t know – three weeks now? I hear from her parents that she has some unruly friends. I hope they haven’t done anything.”

Unruly is one way to describe Nathan.

As Margaret speaks, Max tries to piece the timeline together in her head. Three weeks ago would be the date of the first Tobanga party, if she’s recalling events correctly, and the Monday after that weekend Victoria came to class looking haggard and tired. It seems as if that first Tobanga Club meeting sparked even more than Max had imagined.

“I’ll keep my eye on her, Margaret,” Max says, feeling very sneaky as she does.

“Good,” Margaret says. “I would love if she would come visit me in person, but ah, she has more exciting things to do. I remember being in high school, what a fascinating and formative time.”

“Yes, of course,” Max says.

“I’m boring you,” Margaret says. “No, don’t try to deny it, I can tell. I’ll let you ladies go. Please look after my darling Victoria for me.”

Max and Chloe share a look, before looking back at Margaret.

“We’ll try our best,” Chloe says, trying her best to be diplomatic.

“Yeah, we’re on it,” Max says.

“Thank you both,” Margaret says. “Are you going to be volunteering regularly for Meals on Wheels? Maybe we’ll see each other again.”

Max glances over at Chloe again, who simply shrugs.

“I certainly wouldn’t mind doing this again,” Chloe says.

“Yeah, things will be busy with exams coming up, but we’ll try to come out again,” Max says. “It’s been fun helping people like this.”

“Well, good for you,” Margaret says. “I hope to see you again.”

Max and Chloe say their own goodbyes before heading out of the apartment. As soon as the door closes, Chloe turns to look at Max, her eyes wide and a look somewhere between amusement and utter shock gracing her features.

“Dude, what the fuck?” Chloe blurts out.

Max shushes her and frantically waves her away from the door to Margaret’s apartment.

“Not so loud!” Max says.

“Fuck it, she’s old as mummified dick,” Chloe says. “My dude, my bro, my sister, we fucking met Victoria’s grandma! That is so fucked!”

“I wish you wouldn’t be so loud,” Max says. “But I get it. I’m so confused.”

The elevator dings, and they walk inside. Once the doors close, all the questions they’ve
“Why is Victoria’s grandma in this place? Couldn’t they afford anything nicer?” Max asks.

“I know! I was thinking that shit the whole time!” Chloe says, nearly bouncing where she stands. “The Chase family is hella rich! And – is Victoria apparently a total mamma’s girl? Or grannymamma’s girl, technically?”

“Apparently!” Max says. “And what’s going on with Victoria? She starts having some kind of breakdown the moment we start our club?”

“Man, I’m glad you worked the timing of all that shit out,” Chloe says. “Seriously, what the fuck is happening? And most importantly…”

The elevator dings once again as it reaches the ground floor, but Chloe apparently doesn’t notice, as her voice only gets louder as she continues her train of thought. The doors begin to slide open.

“Why did we have to come to a fucking old folk’s home to learn all this shit about the Chases?” Chloe asks.

It takes a moment, but Chloe realizes that they’re, in fact, standing in the lobby of the building. A few residents of the old folk’s home stare at her, shock splayed out across their wrinkled feature, and the security guard traps her in a furious gaze.

“Sorry,” Chloe says, scrunching her features up in a shameful cringe.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here,” Max says.
Max and Chloe dutifully finish up the rest of their deliveries, but they can’t stop discussing the revelation about Victoria’s grandmother. Their conversation continues even after they park in Blackwell’s lot.

“Dude, we have to tell Rachel,” Chloe says.

The conversation comes to a screeching halt as Max finds the right words to use. She loves Rachel, of course, but she doesn’t think that giving her even more fodder against Victoria is the right thing to do.

“I don’t know,” Max says reluctantly.


“I just – I don’t think we should,” Max says, suddenly remembering how awful she is at saying no to her friends. “There’s so much drama between her and Victoria. Do we really want to add more fuel to that fire?”

“What do you think is going to happen?” Chloe asks. “It’s not like Rachel’s going to fuck with Victoria’s goddamn grandmother.”

Max makes a frustrated sound and runs her hand through her hair.

“Can you just trust me on this one, Chloe?” Max asks. “Please?”

Chloe sighs and slumps in her seat.

“I love you, Max, but you know that Rachel’s my friend too, right?” Chloe asks. “I don’t want to keep things from her.”

She keeps things from you.

Max bites her tongue, though.

Chloe shakes her head.

“Fine, Max,” Chloe says. “You’re acting hella weird about this, but fine.”

“Rachel, this is such a bad idea,” Max says.

“You have no sense of adventure,” Rachel says dismissively as she double-checks the refreshments table. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I’m starting to really dislike that phrase,” Max says. “A lot bad could happen. We just screwed with a Vortex Club party, and we turn around and throw our own?”

“You talk about that club like they’re made up of a bunch of gangsters and hit-men,” Rachel says. “They’re just high school students. Like us. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I thought you were the resident witch-queen, not just some pissant little high school student” Chloe butts in, unhelpfully.
Max sighs as Rachel smiles one of her devious, devilish grins.

“Well, I tend to rise above the rabble of Blackwell,” Rachel says. “Look, Max, don’t worry about it. This is hardly even a party. We just need to make sure people know the Tobanga club is alive and well. Us millennials have short memories. If we aren’t always on the campus scene, people will forget about us.”

“Seriously?” Max asks.

“I know you’re questioning all aspects of what I just said, but yes, seriously,” Rachel says. “This is just a quick get-together. Chill out, Max.”

Max is in the sort of mood where every attempt at telling her to “calm down” or “chill out” makes her less calm and less chill. Still, she bites her tongue and sits down on one of the thrifted beanbag chairs with a sigh. Chloe smiles fondly at her and flops down next to her.

“Dude, it’s going to be fine,” Chloe says. “The Tobanga Club is fun, right? And besides, so what if they try to prank us? That might be kind of funny, actually.”

Max sighs again. Chloe is clearly invested in the club, certainly more than Max is at this point. Max hates that she so desperately wants to bail on the club that was mostly her idea to begin with, but she can only imagine bad things happening with this collision course they seem to be on with Vortex.

“Plus, I think we managed to convince Kate to come,” Chloe says. “You’re into that shit, right?”

“Are you trying to dangle Kate as bait for me?” Max asks.

“ Weird phrasing on your part, bruh, but obviously,” Chloe says. “You love Kate.”

Max looks at Chloe curiously as she says that, but elects to simply drop out of the conversation entirely. Chloe and Rachel carry on talking as Max slumps deeper and deeper into her beanbag chair.

Dance music is pumping through the speakers in the room. That, in addition to the spinning, multicolored disco light that’s sending bright beams in every direction, adds a frenetic, festive mood to the party that isn’t matched by Max’s energy. She sits in a beanbag chair in the corner of the room, slumped forward with her chin in her hands.

So deep in her morose mood is Max that she doesn’t even see Kate walking up to her until she speaks.

“Max, what’s wrong?” Kate asks.

Max looks up at her, and wordlessly scoots over, making space for Kate to sit down. Kate raises an eyebrow – the beanbag chair isn’t exactly the most spacious seating option – but she settles in regardless.

“This was supposed to be fun. Starting our own club,” Max says. “Now I can’t even enjoy our own meetings because I’m worried that the Vortex Club is going to swoop in and do something insane. I’m kind of surprised you’re here, honestly.”

“I’m here to support you guys,” Kate says. “Besides, plenty of my club meetings have gotten derailed. That’s never stopped me.”

“What is Vortex Club members who messed with you?” Max asks.
Kate shrugs.

“Usually,” Kate says. “Some of them would stop by like they want to attend the meeting but end up making snide remarks the whole time, some would just eat all of the snacks I provide and leave, and others would just yell mean things as they pass by my meeting space.”

“Kate, that’s horrible!” Max says.

“The Vortex Club isn’t great, Max,” Kate says. “I’m not a fan of the way you guys retaliated, but I am a fan of the club. So far, you guys have done a pretty good job at making this club inclusive. None of Vortex’s elitist silliness.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Max says. “And volunteering last week was night. I guess I’m still freaked out about Nathan. The guy is seriously deranged.”

“He has a bad reputation,” Kate says. “And all of his notoriety carries over to Vortex.”

“You can say that again,” Max says. “He’s most of the reason I’m worried about them.”

“I don’t blame you for that at all,” Kate says.

Max nods, and the pair fall into silence for a moment. The get-together is buzzing with life all around them – true to Rachel’s word, this isn’t much of a party, even with the disco ball sending beams of light around the room. The music is soft, the dancing is energetic and fun without being too crazy, and most people seem to be content simply lounging around and talking amongst themselves. Even though anxiety is clogging Max’s veins, tonight is coming close to the platonic ideal she has in her head of what a Tobanga Club meeting should be.

Max’s mind begins to wander, and with Kate sitting right next to her, she can’t help but think about the last time she talked to Juliet, outside the Vortex Club party. She wonders if they got caught up in the prank, and if Dana did anything that she ended up regretting. She certainly hopes not.

“Hey, Kate,” Max says. “Have you hung out with Dana recently?”

Kate slumps forward, resting her chin between her knees.

“I was kind of wondering when you’d bring that up,” Kate says. “I haven’t, actually. I sometimes think she’s avoiding me.”

“Really?” Max asks, regretting how bad she’s been getting at keeping up with her friends, given the recent drama swirling around the Tobanga Club. “You think she’d do that?”

Max wouldn’t be completely surprised, given the way Dana was apparently acting at the Vortex Club party. Still, at the same time, Dana is a very caring person. Would she really blow Kate off on purpose?

Kate faintly shrugs, her shoulders brushing up against Max’s given that they’re side-by-side on a single beanbag chair.

“We usually hang out a lot,” Kate says. “But we’re not in any classes together, so we have to plan out time to spend time together. I haven’t heard a whole lot from her lately. And she’s been keeping her door shut if she even is in her room.”

“I wish I had good advice for you,” Max says. “But I’m not exactly a genius at the whole romance scene.”
Kate giggles.

“I know, Max,” Kate says. “And sometimes, people don’t need advice. They just need to vent.”

“Yeah, that’s fair,” Max says. “Besides, most of the time I have no idea if I’m giving good advice. I’m just spewing out whatever comes to mind.”

“That seems to work for you, though,” Kate says.

Speaking of spewing out whatever comes to mind, I have to ask, because I’m awful and nosy,” Max says. “Do you still feel the same way about Dana? Any developments there?”

Kate sighs and stares upwards. The lights from the disco ball spin across the ceiling in dizzying patterns, always halfway at odds with the rhythm of the music.

“I think so,” Kate says. “I keep telling myself that it’s just a phase, or some kind of passing fascination. But I don’t think it is.”

“It certainly doesn’t seem like it,” Max says. “You guys are so cute. But what are you going to do about it?”

Kate laughs.

“I don’t know,” Kate says. “Nothing. I’m not really the type to make the first move.”

“Have you made any moves?” Max asks. “I ask without judgement, because I definitely haven’t.”

“I suppose I haven’t,” Kate says. “Although, back in kindergarten, I held hands with a girl as we walked home from school.”

“What? Scandal!” Max says, smiling broadly. “It’s like I don’t even know you.”

“I know,” Kate says. “It really changes everything you know about me, right?”

“Whatever happened to her?” Max asks. “I don’t know why I’m so curious, this was way back in kindergarten.”

“Max, you’re curious about everything,” Kate says. “I don’t remember it all too well, but my parents are fond of telling the story of how the very next day, she spread mud in my hair. We weren’t friends after that.”

“Why would she do that?” Max asks.

“It was kindergarten, Max,” Kate says. “Someone gets mud in their hair every day. Now you have me wondering what she’s up to now. I can’t even remember her name.”

“Wouldn’t it be crazy if…”

Max is rudely interrupted by the sound of the front door slamming open. People swear and shout, and someone even turns the music up in retaliation. Because standing there in the doorway, flanked by some of his Vortex Club lackeys, is Max’s worst nightmare. Nathan Prescott, in the flesh.

“Sorry for the interruption,” Nathan sneers.

“Nathan, what the fuck?” Rachel shouts over the music.
“I wanted to see what this ‘Tobanga Club’ was all about,” Nathan says. “So far, I’m not impressed.”

“Great fucking evaluation, dipshit,” Chloe says. “Now how about you get the fuck out of here?!”

“Don’t act so high and mighty,” Nathan says as he strolls into the room with all the swagger of a junior investment banker. “You had no problem inviting yourself to our party, so I thought I’d crash this one.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re really broken up about one of your million shitty parties getting fucked with,” Chloe says. “I thought you’d be too fucking bougie for one of our parties, anyway.”

“Oh, I am,” Nathan says. “And I’m not surprised that someone of your…social standing would use ‘bougie’ as an insult.”

“What the fuck are you trying to say?” Chloe asks, taking a step closer to Nathan.

Nathan simply smiles smugly right back at her. Rachel places her hand on Chloe’s chest and holds her back, preventing her from doing anything she might later regret. Though, to be fair, she wouldn’t regret a whole lot against Nathan.

“What are you doing here?” Rachel asks. “Stop playing around. If you’re not here for a reason, just leave.”

Rachel’s calm demeanor and level tone manages to lower Max’s anxiety, though only enough to get her to stop clutching onto Kate like she’s a lifeboat on churning waters. Just hearing Nathan talk still sets Max’s teeth on edge. It still amazes Max that he has so many friends, when he always comes off as unpleasant at best to be around.

“Well, I wanted to warn you all,” Nathan says, and takes a pause.

“Are you threatening us?” Chloe asks.

No, not threatening. Warning,” Nathan says. “Because I’m such a nice guy.”

“Great. What’s your fucking warning, then?” Chloe asks.

“It’s going to get a little crowded in here,” Nathan says.

Nathan claps his hands once. Everyone stands around on the balls of their feet, waiting for something to happen. Max looks around, wondering if the trick is somehow so subtle that she’s missed it. Chloe opens her mouth, about to say something derisive, when people begin flooding in through the front door.

Max watches, stunned. It’s like a fire drill in reverse, with people pushing and shoving to get into the burning building. Everyone who’s rushing in seems to be glassy-eyed and sweaty, dressed up in tight dresses and button-down shirts, making it clear that they’ve just come from whatever Vortex Club party is being thrown tonight.

“Your club is supposed to be ‘all-inclusive,’ right?” Nathan shouts over the growing din of the crowd. “Well, here’s your chance to prove it. This is the most popular your shitty little club is ever going to be.”

Kate stands a little closer to Max as people continue to file into the room. Almost immediately the place is wall-to-wall of sweaty bodies, all moving and grinding together, everyone from Vortex clearly wanting to keep the party going no matter what. Max has no idea how Nathan convinced
Max puts an arm around Kate’s shoulders.

Max hears shouts and swearing growing louder amongst the crowd around her, and two people right in front of her are parted like stage curtains as Chloe finishes pushing her way through the mass of bodies, with the smaller Rachel following behind her. Chloe stands up on the beanbag chair to get a better view of the room and just to breathe more easily. Her three friends join her, squishing together to fit in the chair that was clearly not designed for what they’re doing.

“This is fucking crazy!” Chloe shouts. “I can’t believe that little rich-boy twerp would do something like this.”

“What are we going to do?” Max shouts back. “It’s not like he can get in trouble for inviting people to our party.”

“I guess, but c’mon,” Chloe says. “This is like the party-fucking-foul of the century.”

“I don’t like this!” Kate shouts. “Can we leave?”

Max looks over at Kate, who’s clinging pitiably to Max and Chloe, both to keep her balance and to keep herself from freaking out. Rachel and Chloe look at one another.

“You three go,” Chloe says. “I need to make sure Nathan doesn’t pull any more shit.”

“Hey, no way!” Rachel shouts.

“We’re not leaving you here to fend for yourself,” Max says.

“Jesus fuck, guys,” Chloe says. “They’re a bunch of drunk high schoolers, not fuckin’ bears or some shit. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m not one for leaving friends behind, but I really don’t like this,” Kate says.

Chloe vigorously rubs Kate’s shoulder before patting her back a few times.


Rachel, Kate, and Max share a look amongst themselves. Max definitely doesn’t want to leave Chloe behind, but it’s clear that the get-together is ruined, and if Kate starts breathing any faster her head is liable to explode. The jagged buzz in Max’s own gut isn’t a promising sign either.

“Text if any more insane shit goes down,” Rachel says.

“Or if you need rescuing,” Max says. “Or if you just really want to talk to us.”

“Ah, you adorable little shit,” Chloe says, ruffling Max’s hair. “I’ll see you guys later. At least get Kate out of here before her hair puffs up any more.”

Kate’s hands immediately fly to her hair, put up in its usual voluminous style. Max can’t help but laugh – the increased humidity of the room has done comically amazing things to Kate’s hair.

“Peace, Chloe!” Rachel shouts. “We won’t forget you! But I do have first claim on your truck if you do die here tonight.”

“Fuck off, bitch,” Chloe says.
And that’s that. A grinning Chloe waves them off as Rachel begins to force her way through the shifting mass of people around them. Rachel reaches her hand out behind her, which Max eagerly takes. Max does the same, and Kate holds on tight. It takes even more pushing and shoving than Max had expected, but it’s all worth it for the pure blast of fresh air they receive once they make it to the doorway.

“Holy fucking fuck,” Rachel exhales. “I can’t believe this.”

“Did we just get kicked out of our own club?” Max asks.

“We totally did,” Rachel says. “I can’t believe Nathan!”

Rachel begins to pace, the tails of her flannel shirt trailing behind her like some kind of cape.

“He’s always screwing with me,” Rachel says. “Max, we have to do something to get him back.”

“Rachel, you know how I feel about this,” Max says.

Rachel spins on her heel and faces Max, her gaze intense and steely.

“Don’t you want to stand up to him?” Rachel asks. “Don’t you want to do something?”

“I mean, yeah,” Max says. “But, c’mon, Rachel.”

“No,” Rachel says. “I understand your reluctance, but we have to do something. Nathan’s idiot partygoers are going to absolutely destroy the music building. Our space!”

Max sighs and turns her gaze upwards. It’s a dark night, the moon’s light obscured by a thick gauze of gray clouds. There aren’t even any stars to be seen, given the cloud cover and the light pollution.

“I’m going back to the dorms with Kate,” Max says. “I’ll see you later, Rachel.”

Rachel’s expression remains unchanging, but eventually she nods.

“Fine,” Rachel says. “I’m sure Kate’s had enough of us. Keep your phone on, Max. You’ll hear from me soon.”

Max nods once as a goodbye and walks off into the dark campus with Kate.
just things kids do

Chapter Notes

First off, I want to apologize for not uploading a chapter last week. Work stuff + personal life stuff has left me pretty exhausted and without a whole lot of time to write. Things have leveled off, now, and I'm ready to drop this chapter of major drama on you guys. Stuff is happening now! Not great stuff! What will Max and co. do?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Rachel, this is a terrible idea,” Max says.

“You agreed to come,” Rachel says dismissively.

“Yeah, because you didn’t tell me where we were going,” Max says. “You said it was ‘official club business’ and left it at that!”

“I wasn’t lying,” Rachel says. “It doesn’t get much more official than this.”

Max sighs and hangs her head. She wants to keep arguing, but she knows that Rachel’s just going to shut her down over and over again. Because, of course, nothing ever changes. Not where Max is involved.

Noticing that she’s fallen behind Chloe and Rachel in her somber contemplation, Max swears beneath her breath and picks up the pace, shoving branches aside and stomping through the underbrush. Their destination, as Max has just learned, is the Prescott estate, which is unsurprisingly yet forebodingly surrounded by a dense, shadowy forested area. Chloe’s truck is parked on a nearby street, on the other side of the trees, which will hopefully obscure the vehicle enough in order to allay any suspicion. It’s doubtful that it’ll actually work, given that this is a nice neighborhood and Chloe’s truck looks like tetanus on wheels, but Max will take any comforting thought that crosses her mind at this point.

“Could you keep it down?” Chloe whispers. “You sound like bigfoot back there.”

“Hey, I can only do so much,” Max says. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“Both of you, shut up,” Rachel hisses. “Look.”

Rachel holds down a few branches, and through the opening they can see the actual mansion the Prescotts live in. It’s huge and ugly and gaudy, something that clearly wants to take on the grandiose features of a bygone era of design but was clearly designed by an architect looking make some quick cash of the Prescott fortune.

_Belly of the beast._

“I hate to even ask,” Max says. “But what are we planning on doing here?”

“It’s nothing bad, Max,” Rachel says, her tone of voice like that of someone speaking to a small child. “We’re just going to teepee the place. Fun, right?”
“What? No, not fun!” Max says. “This is insane. You know how crazy the Prescotts are. If they find out that we’re…”

“They’re not going to find out,” Rachel says. “I overheard Nathan talking to Victoria earlier today, and apparently both of his parents are out on business trips and Nathan spends, like, every night doing drugs or partying it up or whatever other obnoxious rich kid shit he does. No one is going to be here. So, we’re doing this.”

Rachel swings her backpack off her shoulders and sets it down with a thud. She unzips it, revealing that it’s filled to the absolute brim with rolls of toilet paper.

“Jesus, girl, where’d you get all this?” Chloe asks.

“Stole it from Sam,” Rachel says.

“You stole these?” Max.

“Are you going to freak out over every little thing?” Rachel asks.

“It’s hard not to,” Max mumbles.

Rachel shoves her hand in her backpack, grabs a roll of toilet paper, and holds it out in front of Max.

“Take it,” Rachel says.

“I don’t want to do this,” Max says.

“Take it, Max,” Rachel says. “This is our club. We do this together.”

“No, I really don’t want to do this,” Max says, taking a step backwards.

“What, you want to leave it to me and Chloe?” Rachel asks. “Have us get in trouble instead of you?”

“That’s not what I mean at all,” Max says, a desperate edge in her voice. “I just…”

“Take the damn toilet paper roll, Max,” Rachel says. “This isn’t a big deal.”

Why isn’t anything a big fucking deal to you, Rachel?

Max desperately wants to say her thoughts out loud, to say something, anything, but she swallows her anger. And so it goes that nothing really changes. Max glances over at Chloe, whose expression is dark and unreadable. It’s not clear if Chloe is frustrated with Max’s reluctance, at Rachel’s unending insistence, or simply with something else entirely.

And, in spite of herself, Max grabs the roll of toilet paper, deciding right then that she’s not going to throw it. For a moment, Max wonders if she’s completely overreacting, which she knows is entirely within character for her. Maybe it really isn’t a big deal, and maybe there won’t be any consequences, and maybe this is just a thing that malcontent high schoolers do, they throw toilet paper at the homes of schoolmates that they don’t like. On the other hand, this is the Prescotts they’re dealing with, and there’s little evidence suggesting that they’re not mostly crazy, if not straight-up evil.

“C’mon, let’s go,” Rachel says.

Rachel takes a few steps forward, getting clear of the trees and the underbrush and stepping out onto the freshly manicured lawn that surrounds the mansion itself. Max finds herself tensing up, though
she doesn’t know what she had expected. It’s not as if the grass itself would be booby-trapped, though it wouldn’t surprise her if the Prescotts had some sort of security system installed.

Chloe grins and follows suit, stepping out onto the grass and giving a silent fist-pump as she does. This leaves Max, clutching onto the roll of toilet paper in a white-knuckled death grip, staring out at Chloe and Rachel.

“Come on, Max,” Rachel whispers.

Max lets out an audible sigh and steps out past the trees. She didn’t know how much a comfort they were until they’re no longer around her, leaving her feeling exposed and somehow smaller than before. She’s a small girl in a large field, and she certainly feels like she’s on enemy territory now.

Without any warning, Rachel cocks her arm back and silently flings a roll of toilet paper towards the mansion. It unravels mid-flight, the white of the paper arcing almost artistically against the sunset sky. The end of the roll manages to land securely on a balcony, the rest of it draping gracefully down the side of the house. Chloe gives her an emphatic thumbs-up before launching her own roll. She misses the house, but manages to get it draped over a couple of manicured hedges.

Rachel really winds up for her next throw, and she manages to get the roll of toilet paper to land on the very roof of the mansion, its long, white tail dangling over the side. Chloe takes it as a challenge and launches her roll even further. It ends up landing completely out of view, meaning it’s either somewhere up on the roof or managed to clear the mansion entirely.

Chloe apparently decides that she wants to cover every corner of the mansion with toilet paper, and walks further and further away from Rachel and Max, sending roll after roll up into balconies and catching them on rain gutters and other architectural protuberances. Max can feel her heart pounding in her chest – Chloe is getting awfully far from the trees, from safety. In response, Max takes a few steps backwards, instinctively moving away from the open field.


The sound of Chloe’s voice makes Max flinch, as if any noise they make will magically alert the absent Prescotts to their presence. Rachel cheers, though, and it’s clear that only Max is at all afraid of the consequences.

“Rich bastards!” Rachel echoes. “We’d be better off without them!”

“Amen!” Chloe says.

Max is thankful that Rachel and Chloe are so caught up in throwing their rolls of toilet paper that they don’t notice that she isn’t throwing any herself. Max just clutches onto her roll more tightly, knowing in her gut that for every second more that they spend there, the likelier it becomes that they’ll get caught.

“Fuck you!” Chloe shouts, clearly not paying attention to the volume of her voice at all anymore.

And, right on cue, a voice comes booming from the distance.

“Hey, is someone out there?”

The three girls freeze and look to one another. The whole estate was supposed to be completely empty, but it’s now clear that they were misinformed. Max wants to turn and run, but it feels like something has shut down all of her muscles, like the signals from her brain have gotten scrambled and can’t find their way through her body.
“This is security,” the voice says. “If there’s someone there, identify yourselves.”

None of them are sure where the disembodied voice is coming from, though it's faint and sounds like it’s coming from the opposite side of the estate, closer towards front gate of the considerable property. The mansion is obscuring them from view for now, but they’re otherwise completely out in the open. In Chloe’s eagerness to fling toilet paper rolls onto the roof, she’s gotten uncomfortably far away from the safety of the trees. Rachel’s in a slightly better position, but not by much.

“We have to hide,” Max says.

“Where?” Rachel asks. “We have to make it back to the trees. If we can.”

There’s the clear sound of footsteps padding across the grassy lawn. Chloe turns around, her eyes wide. She’s further away from Rachel and Max than they are from the safety of the forested area.

“Fuck,” Chloe says, her voice a shouted whisper. “Guys, get the fuck out of here.”

Chloe motions with her hands, as if trying to shoo them away.

“Chloe, what are you saying?” Max asks. “Let’s just go.”

“I have to distract this asshole,” Chloe says. “If you guys don’t leave right now, we’re all going to get caught, and I’ll look like a serious jackass.”

Rachel looks nervously towards the trees. Max still doesn’t want to leave, but now for a very different reason.

“Don’t be fucking idiots! Leave!” Chloe says.

Rachel backs up for a few steps before turning around and heading towards safety. Max looks at her, bewildered, finally so pissed off she can’t help but speak.

“Where are you going?” Max asks. “What happened to not caring about the consequences or taking the brunt of the Vortex Club or whatever else you said?”

“I can’t get in trouble with the Prescotts again,” Rachel says. “Not like this.”

“What does that mean?” Max asks. “You’re just going to leave Chloe behind?”

“Guys, what the fuck could you possibly be talking about?” Chloe hisses.

“No time to talk, Max,” Rachel says, and runs off towards the trees. “Sorry.”

Max watches in utter disbelief as Rachel disappears into the tree line – there’s a flash of her red flannel against the green leaves, and then nothing. She’s gone. Max turns to look back at Chloe, who’s staring back at her with pleading eyes. Just a few moments prior, every instinct in Max’s body screamed at her to leave, but now? With Chloe standing by herself, looking to possibly add to her rap sheet that’s already too long for someone her age? There’s no way that Max is going to let her to take the brunt of this.

“You have to leave right now if you’re going to make it,” Max says. “My record is basically spotless. I don’t want to think of what’ll happen to you if you get into trouble with the Prescotts. Go.”

Max speaks so quickly and with so much force that Chloe doesn’t even respond properly. She makes a noise in protest, seems to consider everything for a split second, and then sprints off towards the trees – but not before pressing her lips to Max’s cheek. Max hears something like “I owe you one,”
though her mind isn’t registering much of anything at the moment.

Finally, with a deep sigh, Max drops her roll of toilet paper and jogs forward, hoping to distract the security guard long enough for Chloe to make it to safety. Max practically runs right into the security guard right as he rounds the corner of the mansion. He’s a stern-looking older man, with flecks of grey in his hair and the slightest hint of a pot-belly. In fact, he looks similar to Chloe’s stepfather, only meaner. He’s clearly out of breath, leaving Max to wonder just how far away he was when he first heard Chloe’s yelling.

“Hey, sir,” Max says, trying her hardest to sound confident, though her voice falters.

“What the…” the security guard falters as he sees Max. He bends forward, putting his hands on his knees, clearly trying to catch his breath. “This place is too fuckin’ big.”

Finally, he stands back up and gives Max a good once-over. Given his expression, he was clearly not expecting the trespasser to look the way she does. He looks around, his eyes sweeping over the numerous rolls of toilet paper hanging off the mansion like streamers.

“You did all this?” he asks in disbelief.

“I did,” Max says. “All me.”

“All you,” he says. “You did this by yourself?”

Max rubs the back of her neck. She feels her whole body growing uncomfortably warm, and sweat beginning to bead on her temples. She hates lying, even though she’s doing it for an ostensibly good cause.

“I did,” Max says. “Just a rowdy teenager, you know?”

That claim seems pathetic even to her, but the security guard just grunts and folds his arms across his chest.

“And that was you?” he asks. “Swearing up a storm?”

“Yes,” Max says, unwilling to say anything further and possibly give herself up.

“Do you know whose estate this is?” he asks.

Max isn’t sure what to say. On one hand, admitting that she knows that this property belongs to the infamous Prescotts suggests that her TP assault was premeditated, which can’t be good. Perhaps admitting ignorance is best? Max knows she’s incapable of dealing with situations like this.

“I guess not,” Max says, trying to remain as vague as she possibly can.

“You guess not,” the security guard repeats back to her. “Well, if you really don’t know, this place belongs to the Prescotts. They’re going to want to hear about this, and when they do, you’re in for a world of trouble.”

Max sighs. She doesn’t mind doing this for Chloe’s sake, but she also doesn’t even want to think about what the Prescotts will do to her.

“Luckily for you, the Prescotts are out of town,” the security guard says. “So, they’re too busy to deal with you. For now.”

Max doesn’t exactly want to wait around for whatever punishment the Prescotts whip up for her, but
at the same time, it’ll be nice to not have her life destroyed for a little while longer.

“Unluckily for you, the police are going to have to deal with you for tonight,” he finishes.

“What?” Max blurts out.

Her heart is thumping in her chest with such anxious intensity she’s surprised it doesn’t burst right through her ribcage.

“Yeah, what’d you think? I’d just let you go with a slap on your wrist because you’re just some little high school student?” the security guard asks. “Listen, the Prescotts hate people messing with them. The police are getting involved.”

Max hangs her head. She remembers the time she thought that starting a club was going to be fun.

Luckily for Max, the lone police officer who answers the security guard’s call happens to be the same one who’s at Two Whales almost every morning for coffee. So, at the very least, he knows Max and will hopefully give her the benefit of the doubt. The look of unabashed surprise on his face as he steps out of his car and sees that it’s indeed Max who’s being accused of TPing the place would’ve been hilarious if Max weren’t so riddled by anxiety.

“Hey, Max,” the cop greets. “What’re you doing here, huh?”

Max shrugs. Lying is exhausted. She feels winded, her muscles weak and unresponsive, like she’s just run a marathon.

“Teenage rebellion?” Max suggests, clearly not even attempting to sell any lies anymore.

The cop sighs and lets his gaze wander about the mansion.

“You and I both know that’s not true,” the cop says. “You’re the least rebellious young person I know.”

Max stares down at her feet, the mere act of speaking becoming too much for her.

“The security guard says that you’ve been claiming you came here alone,” the cop says. “But I don’t know if I believe that. You weren’t here with those two troublemaker friends of yours, were you? Rachel and Chloe?”

One of the torturous aspects of living in such a small town is that everyone knows each other, either personally or by reputation. It’s strange to hear about Rachel and Chloe in such a singular, dismissive way, though. The “troublemaker friends,” the “bad influences” that Max sticks around with, even though they’re “no good for her.” Max has heard every form of criticism about them, even in the short time that she’s been back.

“No, I was here by myself,” Max says, figuring everything would be worthless if she throws her friends under the bus at this point. “It was all me.”

The cop sighs.

“Protecting your friends is a very noble thing to do,” the cop says. “But are you sure this is what you want to do?”

Max nods, finally finding it within herself to stop staring at her feet and look the cop in the eyes directly.
“Alright, Max, if you’re sure,” the cop says, seeming to understand what Max is doing. “We’re going to have to take you to the station.”

“Wait, what?” Max asks. “Am I being arrested?”

The cop opens his mouth to speak, before closing it again. He exhales audibly and glances at the security guard, who seems thrilled to see Max on the verge of getting in serious trouble.

“This is the Prescotts we’re dealing with,” the cop says vaguely.

The security guard nods emphatically, as if he’s on the same side as the cop.

“Shouldn’t have messed with them, girl,” the security guard adds in, unhelpfully.

The cop levels his gaze at him, but says nothing.

“Alright, come with me, Max,” the cop says.

Riding in the back of a police car is strange. The seat in the back is more like a plastic prison, all hard edges and ninety-degree angles. It’s designed for maximum discomfort, and it’s certainly doing its job. Every single turn and bump sends Max rattling around the backseat, and it barely takes a minute before Max starts wishing she could rip her seatbelt off and fling herself out of the moving car.

“Sorry about this, Max,” the cop says. “But I had to make it look like I was doing something in front of that security guard. He’ll tell the Prescotts everything, and there’s no way they’d be happy if I just let you go with a warning.”

Max genuinely doesn’t care whether the Prescotts feel happy or not, but also remembers that they donate heavily to the local police force. It’s a well-known “secret” that the Prescotts basically own Arcadia Bay.

“What’ll happen to me?” Max asks.

“We’ll keep you at the station as we write up a report,” the cop says. “We’ll let you call someone to come and pick you up, too.”

“Oh god, this is going to follow me around, isn’t it?” Max asks. “What happened here?”

“There are consequences to everything, Max,” the cop says. “Even if it doesn’t seem fair. Especially if it doesn’t seem fair.”

Max hangs her head. That certainly sounds about right.

The local police station is a dismal place, likely because the worst crimes committed in Arcadia Bay tend to involve drunk fishermen getting into brawls and high school students getting caught smoking weed, and as such the police get the bare minimum of funding year in and year out. The inside of the station is gray and drab, made even worse by the soul-sucking fluorescent overheads that coat everything in an unnatural, grayish light.

Max follows the cop back to his desk, where he begins writing up his report on the TPing incident. Max slumps in the cheap, hard-backed metal chair that she was offered. Her head is swirling with unpleasant thoughts. What is she going to tell her parents? What’s going to happen to her scholarship? Is Principal Wells going to punish her further for this?
It’s the Prescotts. Max figures they’re going to push as hard as they can to get her in trouble through the school, if not try to get her charged for vandalism or trespassing or whatever else they can think to stick her with.

“Alright, Max, I tried to keep everything as vague as I could on the report,” the cop says. “And I’m not actually charging you with anything, so nothing will show up on your record.”

“Thanks,” Max says, feeling a bit breathless. “Why are you – why?”

“Because I know you’re a good kid, Max,” the cop says. “I’ve been going to Two Whales since you were a little grade schooler. I’m not going to stick you with something that might follow you around forever. I don’t know what your school is going to do about this, though. That I can’t help with.”

“Well, you’ve already helped me so much,” Max says. “So – thank you.”

The cop just nods and shuffles around some papers on his desk.

“Of course,” the cop says. “Plus, Joyce would spit in my coffee if she ever found out I got you in trouble for this.”

“Are you kidding me? Joyce is going to kill me for this,” Max says.

“I suppose she’s a woman you don’t want to disappoint,” the cop says. “Anyway, are you ready to get out of here? You can call someone to pick you up.”


Max pulls her phone out and searches through her contacts. She immediately thumbs to Chloe’s number and calls it, waiting for her to pick up. Her brow furrows with every passing ring – what could Chloe be doing that prevents her from answering the phone? If there’s any moment Max needs Chloe to just be responsible and answer her phone, it’s right now.

Max sighs and looks through her contact list again, searching for people who have cars. She supposes she can just take the bus, but the prospect of spending more time inside her own head and thinking about what just happens seems miserable to her. She also really wants to talk to Kate, but she doesn’t own a car. Decisions, decisions.

Max is standing outside of the police station, clutching onto the strap of her shoulder bag as if it’ll keep her afloat amongst all of this insanity. It’s getting late in the day, and there are storm clouds gathering in the distance. The sun is still blazing through just above the horizon, a grim beam of orange light amongst the dark gray of the rest of the sky.

Max doesn’t even have the words to express the relief she feels when she sees Juliet’s Mini Cooper pull up alongside the curb. Juliet steps out of the car, her expression a mixture of concern and amusement.

“You know, Max, I thought if something like this every happened, it would be me in jail and you picking me up,” Juliet says.

“I don’t have a car,” Max says, the hint of a smile gracing her features. “You’d be stuck here if you ever got arrested.”
“Ha, funny,” Juliet says. “Get in, you. Let’s get you back to campus.”

The ride is silent for the first few minutes. Max is even more fine than she thought she’d be with not talking about what just happened, and Juliet seems to sense that Max isn’t in the mood to talk.

“So…” Juliet says, her curiosity clearly beginning to get the better of her. “What happened, exactly? You’re seriously the last person I ever thought would call me to pick them up from a police station. You and Kate.”

“It’s a long story,” Max says.

Max sighs and slumps down in her seat.

“It’s not a long story, actually,” Max says. “I’m just bad at talking about things. So, you know how my club and Vortex have been going at it?”

“Yeah, it’s all anyone ever talks about anymore on campus,” Juliet says. “I heard a rumor that it was either you or Chloe who messed with the lights during that one Vortex Club party. Is that why I ran into you that night?”

Max makes a noise of discomfort and stares out the window. Juliet just smiles faintly.

“It’s fine, Max, you don’t have to answer,” Juliet says.

“Right,” Max says, clearing her throat. “Uh, anyway, Rachel came up with a plan. I still have no idea why she thought this plan would make anything better, but I guess it doesn’t really matter now. She wanted to TP the Prescott estate. And that’s what we did.”

“And you got caught,” Juliet fills in.

“Well, I got caught,” Max says. “So that Chloe and Rachel wouldn’t get in trouble.”

“Wow, you did that for them?” Juliet asks. “You’re a really good friend, Max. I don’t even know if I’d do that for my friends.”

“I don’t know, it made sense,” Max says. “Chloe and Rachel already have way too much on their juvie records, and now they’d get charged as adults. They’d get really screwed over.”

“You’re a good friend,” Juliet says again.

This talk about friendship brings Max’s mind back to Rachel, and her insistence on running away. It was strange – she was so willing to be the face of the Tobanga Club, but the first sign of any real trouble and she splits. Max isn’t sure what to make of it, but she’s also not sure if she wants to bring it up to Juliet, who has a history of spilling secrets.

“You’re thinking about something,” Juliet says.

Max looks at her, confused, wondering what gave her away. Juliet just laughs at her expression.

“Your nose crinkles up when you’re having deep, dark thoughts,” Juliet says.

Max sighs and shakes her head.

“I didn’t even know that about myself,” Max says. “Anyway, uh – it’s nothing. Just can’t believe this, you know?”
Juliet looks at her as if she doesn’t believe her, but doesn’t say anything further.

“Yeah, I really can’t, either,” Juliet says. “You’re the last person I’d expect to be involved in something like this.”

“I know,” Max says. “Hey, do you think Principal Wells is going to get involved in this?”

Juliet keeps her eyes on the road.

“Probably,” Juliet says. “I have a friend who TAs for the administration office, and there’s been plenty of talk about your rivalry with the Vortex Club.”

As always, Max is both impressed and thankful for Juliet’s ability to be connected to everything that happens on campus.

“Bad talk, I assume,” Max says.

“I didn’t want to put it like that,” Juliet says. “But yeah, I guess you could say that. Principal Wells thought you’d take some people away from the Vortex Club and make their parties smaller and less crazy that way. Clearly, that’s not happening.”

“Yeah, clearly,” Max says. “Oh god, I’m going to get in so much trouble for this.”

“I wish I could soften the blow for you,” Juliet says. “But this isn’t looking too great. Sorry, Max.”

“Well, that’s what I was getting into,” Max says.

Max contents herself by looking out of the window of the car for the rest of the ride. Arcadia Bay, her hometown, the place she grew up in, looks completely different right now. The angles of the buildings look wrong, parallelograms instead of rectangles. The light seems to take on a different quality, and Max can’t decide if it seems too dim or too harsh or somehow a little bit of both. Even the gathering storm, the dark clouds hovering above the ocean, looks more menacing than ever, though the rain is no stranger to Oregon.

“Max, you have to know that this kind of behavior is absolutely unacceptable,” Principal Wells says. “The Prescotts are an important family in this town, and, beyond that, they’ve been instrumental in the development of this very institution.”

Max shrinks in her seat. Bearing the brunt of the consequences is draining, especially when she knows this whole situation came about because of Rachel’s idea. Max tries her hardest to look anywhere that Principal Wells isn’t. The deep, golden, late-afternoon light is streaming in with surprising menace between the blinds covering the windows.

“I’m surprised, more than anything,” Wells continues. “I’d expect this behavior from Chloe or Rachel, but not from you. Which reminds me – where are your two friends? You must have spoken with them recently.

Max shrugs weakly. It’s been a day since the incident, and she hasn’t even seen her two friends, let alone spoken to them. All she knows is that no one has seen them in class, and Chloe’s phone continues to go to voicemail. Max would put more of her energy into concern if she wasn’t already so riddled with anxiety over the incident at the Prescott estate.

“I don’t know,” Max says, and fights the urge to sigh when she sees the suspicious look Wells gives her. “Honest, I don’t know. No one has seen them since yesterday.”
“I’ve heard,” Wells says. “That’s a concern as well. I wanted to talk to all three of you at once about your club.”

“Our club?” Max asks.

“Yes, of course,” Wells says. “You know, I had hoped that your club could grow into a positive alternative to the Vortex Club. Unfortunately, your actions at the Prescott Estate seems to have proved that hope to be foolish.”

“What’s going to happen to us?” Max asks.

Wells purses his lips into a thin, straight line and studies Max.

“Even though you’re a new student, you have a good reputation around campus, Max,” Wells says. “Don’t look so surprised, I have to be observant to be a good principal. No, people like you. They like you because you’re a good kid, Max. I still believe that.”

Max is about to let loose a sigh of relief.

“But,” Wells continues. “Yesterday’s actions can’t go without punishment.”

Max’s sigh turns into a breathy exhale as she slumps down further in the surprisingly stiff leather seat. She wishes she had Rachel and Chloe with her. Well, she wishes she had Chloe with her.

“Yes, sir,” Max says.

Wells rubs his temples.

“This is why I wanted the whole gang together,” Wells says. “Well, you can tell them yourself. You are to disband the Tobanga Club immediately. You won’t hold any more meetings or parties or anything.”

The Tobanga Club was Max’s idea, and she’s fully willing to let it die with a whisper, without its other two founding members. Max certainly can’t deny to herself how exhausted she feels about the entire affair.

“Alright,” Max says simply.

“Just – alright?” Wells asks, a surprised lilt to his voice.


Wells leans back in his chair and studies Max with an expression of both surprise and concern.

“Yes,” Wells says. “Yes, I suppose you can. You understand your punishment, correct?”

“I do,” Max says. “No more Tobanga Club.”

“That’s right,” Wells says. “No more Tobanga Club.”

Chapter End Notes

prescotts=bad
but

feedback=good
There’s a finality to it all, especially as they move into the core of the winter months and continue their inexorable march to the end of the year. The Tobanga Club is dead, and Max let it die without protest. She returns to her room, exhausted, drained. The contents of her room manage to surprise her – she hardly recognizes the class schedule hanging by her door and her messy piles of textbooks and loose-leaf notes, given the lack of brain power she’s invested in actual schoolwork these past few weeks.

She tosses her phone on her desk, surprised that nobody has tried to contact her. The story about the Prescott estate must have spread around school by now like a virus, given how insular and gossipy everyone is. Perhaps everyone thinks it’s best to simply leave her alone, at least until Victoria and Nathan figure out how to deal with her. Whatever the case may be, anxiety still grips at Max’s heart and squeezes, making each breath labored and every pump of blood through her veins bordering on miraculous.

Not wanting to do anything else for the day, and being completely content with skipping classes, Max lies down on her bed and promptly falls asleep.

Max is awoken by four sharp raps on her door. She bolts upright. The sudden interruption of her sleep isn’t entirely unwelcome, given the stress dream that was occupying her mind. With an audible yawn, Max pads over to her door and opens it.

Chloe and Rachel are standing in the doorway, both with downtrodden, sullen expressions on their faces. Max just stares blankly at them for a moment, her grogginess and general anxiety from the last couple of days making her mind slow to process everything.

“How nice of you two to show up,” Max says, more of an edge to her voice than she realized she was even capable of. “Where have you guys been?”

“We’ve been at the junkyard,” Chloe says. “Hiding out.”

“You’ve missed classes,” Max says, knowing fully well that school is the last thing on everyone’s mind.

“So have you, by the looks of things,” Chloe says. “We need to talk.”

“It would’ve been nice if you guys wanted to talk when I needed to get picked up from the police station,” Max says.

Chloe’s eyes widen.

“The police picked you up?” Chloe asks. “What the fuck?”
“Yeah, that security guard got the police involved,” Max says. “Nothing happened to me, though. No charges or anything.”


“Have you guys heard about the club?” Max asks.

“Yeah, news of that travelled fast,” Rachel says.

Max waits to respond, and is surprised when Rachel doesn’t place the blame on her for getting caught or not advocating for the club’s existence or whatever other reason she could surely pull from nowhere.


“Well, regardless, we need to talk,” Chloe repeats. “C’mon. I’d rather not do this on campus.”

“Sure,” Max says, caught off guard by Chloe’s serious demeanor. “Let’s go.”

Chloe nods and stalks off down the hallway, not waiting for Rachel or Max at all. Max glances at Rachel, who meets her gaze for a second before shifting her eyes downward, and then down the hall towards Chloe.

“C’mon,” Rachel says. “Let’s not keep her waiting.”

Silence settles over the three friends like a thick, woolen blanket as Chloe drives them to wherever it is they need to go. Chloe’s slumped to the side, barely controlling the steering wheel with one lazy hand. Rachel stares straight forward, watching the center line of the road disappear behind them. And Max sits with her back ramrod-straight, afraid that any movement on her part will break whatever fragile, temporary peace has built up between them.

Max isn’t sure what Chloe and Rachel did or talked about at the junkyard, but whatever it is has Chloe agitated in a way that Max has hardly seen before. She suspects she’ll find out soon enough.

Max is surprised that Chloe pulls up to the trailhead for the path up to the lighthouse, though she finds small comfort in the fact that they’re here, and not at the junkyard. American Rust was always Chloe and Rachel’s, no matter how hard they tried to include Max. Their walk up to the lighthouse is silent, too, and for once Max wishes someone would just open their mouths and talk.

Chloe sits down in the dirt around an old, abandoned camp fire, and Rachel and Max follow suit. The silence continues.

“Chloe, what’s going on?” Max asks, the desire to pierce the veil of silence too overwhelming for her to resist any longer. “What has you like this?”

“It’s probably best if Rachel explains herself,” Chloe says, with a deep sigh.

Max turns to look at Rachel, who, for once, looks like the small, young, high school girl that she is, and not the image of the mysterious, mystical outsider that she likes to project.

“I haven’t been entirely honest to you guys,” Rachel says. “About a lot of things.”

“Yeah, you haven’t,” Chloe says, with all of her usual venom. To hear it lobbied at Rachel, though, is strange.
“I had my own reasons to start the Tobanga Club,” Rachel says. “Reasons that aren’t great.”

“Does this have to do with whatever happened between you and the Vortex Club?” Max asks.

“It does,” Rachel says. “I, uh, I stole money from them. From the Vortex Club.”

“What?” Max blurts out.

“Long story short, I owed money to this guy, Frank,” Rachel says. “He’s not that bad, really, but not the kind of guy you want to be in debt to. The Vortex Club is so fucking rich, too. They just pool money from their biggest members in order to pay for all of their ridiculous parties.”

Max slumps forward and rests her head in her hands. This is even worse than she had been imagining.

“It was easy,” Rachel says. “I was close with Victoria and Nathen back then, and the funds for the Vortex Club were just kept in a joint account all of the senior members could access. So, I took some to pay off Frank. I said it was going to party supplies. Simple.”

“Honestly, I don’t give a shit about you stealing from them,” Chloe says. “I’m mad that you didn’t tell me you were in trouble with Frank. I’m mad that you didn’t let me help you figure something out. I’m mad that you got us into some dumbass grudge match with the Vortex Club, especially when Max wanted to create something genuinely cool.”

“I didn’t want to get you involved, Chloe,” Rachel says. “I’ve said it a million times. I can handle myself.”

“Clearly not,” Chloe says.

They fall silent after that, the sounds of the forest surrounding them instead.

“I kind of care you stole from them,” Max says, surprising even herself by speaking up. “I know that none of us like Victoria or Nathan or whoever, but that’s serious. You just…can’t do that.”

Rachel appears to be too stunned that Max is even speaking up against her to even be angry or frustrated.

“It’s pretty fucking insane, Rach,” Chloe says.

“Can you just let me finish?” Rachel asks, snapping back to her usual, fiery personality.

Chloe just holds her hands up as if to say “please, continue.” Rachel sighs harshly.

“All right,” Rachel says. “I stole money from them. It was fucked up. Whatever. But Victoria, or Nathan, or somebody found out. And they retaliated.”

“What’d they do?” Max asks.

“Well, they didn’t tell their parents, which was nice. They weren’t really supposed to be using quite so much money to throw these parties. Especially Victoria, whose parents will blow the bank on photography supplies for her but would freak out of they ever found out about her other spending habits,” Rachel says. “Nathan, though, quietly let the school administration know. Little rat.”

“Jesus, Rachel, the school knows about this?” Max asks.

“I never said this was a happy story,” Rachel says. “Wells, of course, wanted to avoid a scandal, so
he didn’t let anyone else know about what happened. He couldn’t let anyone know his star students were throwing lavish parties on their parents’ dime, and he definitely couldn’t let anyone know that I stole money from them. Especially when those parents are huge donors to the school.”

“What a mess,” Max says.

“Yeah. No shit,” Rachel says.

“What’d Wells end up doing, then?” Max asks.

“Well, I’m probably not getting into college. Not that I wanted to anyway, but still,” Rachel says. “That little incident is on my sealed record now. Nobody knows besides me, Wells, and every admissions officer in the country when I try to apply. And my parents aren’t exactly happy with me now. That’s the real reason I’ve been living on campus. I’ve been doing a work study to pay for that.”

“Oh my god,” Max says. “How does no one know about this?”

“Nobody wants the story to get out,” Rachel says. “Everyone has their reasons, myself included, obviously.”

“I’m still kind of surprised that starting the Tobanga Club was the only revenge you could think of,” Chloe says.

“Oh, believe me, I have bigger and better things planned,” Rachel says. “Just when Max brought up the idea to start a club, I saw an opportunity. I knew that Nathan and Victoria would be pissed.”

Max furrows her brow.

“So, you used just use this whole time?” Max asks. “You didn’t even care about what we were doing?”

“Max, c’mon…” Rachel starts.

“No!” Max says, with a force that surprises even her. “I’m tired of this.”

She stands up and begins stalking back and forth, as Chloe and Rachel watch her with increasing concern.

“I can’t believe you used us like that! You had us fucking with the Vortex Club because of some old grudge?” Max asks. “You couldn’t just let us be a club?”

“Hey, they started it!” Rachel says, standing up in turn. “They broke into your room and fucked it all up! You wouldn’t stand up for yourself, or for the club, so I had to.”

“You didn’t have to do anything! You probably made it worse by insisting on firing back,” Max says. “And you were the one who started everything. You stole money from them. Maybe you don’t see that as a big deal, but that’s insane. That’s so not okay!”

“Well, if I recall, you wanted to start the club because Victoria was mean to you that one day,” Rachel says. “This isn’t all one me.”

“No, I wanted to start this club because I was having fun hanging out with you guys, and I wanted to do it more,” Max shouts. “And because I was making so many new friends here, which never happens to me, and I wanted to spend time with them, too. I wanted to do something cool on this
“campus and now I’m going to be known as the girl who threw toilet paper at the Prescott estates!”

“You didn’t have to take the fall for that,” Rachel says, though the fire in her voice is starting to dissipate.

“Of course I did!” Max says. “You ran away, so that’s that. And because I wasn’t going to let Chloe get in trouble!”

“Oh my god!” Rachel screams in frustration and stalks off, towards the cliff’s edge.

The sunset is beautiful, almost mockingly so, the horizon lit up in a dazzling array of pinks and whites. Rachel is reduced to a silhouette, standing there with the wind catching her flannel shirt. Max folds her arms and sits back down.

“Fuck, guys!” Chloe blurts out suddenly. “Do you two feel better? Yelling at each other like this?”

“No,” both Max and Rachel say, almost at the same time.

“I can’t believe I have to play moderator,” Chloe grumbles. “Rachel, you shouldn’t have done...a lot of things. But fuck, that shit’s in the past. I’ve done a lot of stupid shit, and at some point, you just have to accept it and move forward. And Max, I’m sure Rachel was in a tough spot with Frank. I know him too, and it’s no fun owing him money.”

Max wants to fire back, but she bites her tongue. Rachel, thankfully, does the same.

“Look, this semester has been hella fun, but also kind of fucked up,” Chloe says. “That’s just life. I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but we need to be bigger than all this shit. Seriously.”

“Fine,” Rachel says.

Without another word, Rachel walks past Max and Chloe and starts heading back down the trail.

“Where are you going?” Chloe asks.

“Back to the dorms,” Rachel says, though with the tone of voice that suggests that might not be true. “I’m taking the bus.”

“Fuck, I can drive us all back,” Chloe says.

“No, it’s fine,” Rachel says. “Don’t follow me, either.”

Chloe takes a step forward, and that’s it. She stands there, watching as Rachel disappears down the trail.

“Chloe, I – ” Max begins to say, but is cut off by a loud groan of frustration from Chloe.

“Max, I really like you standing up for yourself, but this was probably the wrong time to grow a backbone,” Chloe says. “I already said, like, half the shit you did. And I know she’s beating herself up over this.”

“I know,” Max says. “I think that was sort of building up for a while, though.”


Max folds her arms across her chest and leans against a nearby tree, letting the grooves of the bark
massage her back. She forces herself to stop and just think, to think about what Rachel’s been going through and everything that’s been going on. It’s a lot, too much, especially for the waning months of high school. Max wants to curl up and disappear, but she stays on her feet.

“Do you think it’s all true?” Max asks. “That everything’s on her record, and she won’t be able to go to college?”

Chloe shrugs, and goes to sit down on the bench by the cliffside that overlooks the ocean below. Max joins her. The sun is sinking lower in the sky, painting the horizon with daring reds and angry pinks now. A breeze is rolling off the crests of the waves, and carries with it a characteristic coolness.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” Chloe says. “I don’t think she’d lie about that. Of course, it’s not like she was planning on going to college anyway.”

“What, then?” Max asks. “Do you really think she’s going to be a model?”

“I don’t see why not,” Chloe says. “She has the looks, and she can market herself like nobody else. Her troubled teen years will probably help. Makes for a good story.”

“Rachel is a lot of ‘good stories’ for one person,” Max says.

“I know,” Chloe says.

Chloe fishes around in the back pocket of her jeans before pulling out a smashed, mostly empty box of cigarettes. She lights one up as Max glares at her.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Chloe says.

Max just shakes her head.

“I thought I was the one who always got to see beyond her stories,” Chloe says. “I guess that’s not true. I was just like everyone else.”

Max can see now why Chloe is so broken up over this. It’s not that Rachel screwed up and made mistakes, it’s that she did all those things without letting Chloe in until her back was to the wall. Though they kept in touch, Max knows that her sudden absence from Chloe’s life left real, lasting wounds, and that Rachel has always tried her best to tend to those wounds, in whatever way she knew how.

“Maybe she cared a little too much,” Max says. “She wanted to solve her issues with Frank without getting you involved. That might’ve been her way of protecting you.”

Chloe scoffs and shakes her head.

“I don’t need protecting,” Chloe says. “I need to be there for my friends when they need me. Even if I’m fucking shit at it, I need that.”

“Well, nobody’s perfect,” Max says. “Not even Rachel.”

“I suppose fucking not,” Chloe says, and takes a long drag of her cigarette.

Quiet settles over the two friends, though it’s nothing uncomfortable or even unwelcome. Max has let loose a lot of words in the past few minutes, and it’s good to let her voice rest for a moment. The breeze from the ocean is turning into gusts of cold air, and Max instinctively moves closer to Chloe. Chloe still says nothing, but leans slightly against Max, just to let her know she’s there.
“I was mad at you for a long time after you left,” Chloe says.

Max sighs and hangs her head.

“Yeah, I know,” Max says.

“I kind of wish you would get angry at me about that. Like you just did with Rachel,” Chloe says. “It wasn’t fair. You sent me long, rambling emails and letters like, every fucking day, all of them full of apologies for being so far away. You should’ve gotten mad.”

“I couldn’t have. Because I knew you were frustrated with me,” Max says. “I told you all my dumb thoughts because I hoped it would make it seem like I was still with you.”

“I know, but it wasn’t your fucking fault you moved,” Chloe says. “Whatever. I didn’t bring this up to hash out those issues again. I was mad at you for a long time, but I got over it. I knew, and I always knew, deep down, even when David would piss me off and I’d curse you out for being miles and miles away, that our friendship was more important than the shit that surrounded it.”

“Are you saying our friendship with Rachel is more important than all the other shit?” Max asks.

“I guess so,” Chloe says. “I’m guess I’m saying that you can be mad at your friends, and no matter how much or how little they deserve that anger, they’re still your friends.”

“I’m still pretty mad,” Max says. “I’m going to be ‘TP girl’ forever. I just know it. I’m going to be the girl who killed the Tobanga Club.”

Chloe laughs suddenly, and Max just glares at her.

“Sorry,” Chloe says, noticing Max’s expression. “TP Girl. That’s kind of funny. Who would’ve thought that you would end up with the worst reputation amongst the three of us?”

“Not funny, Chloe,” Max mutters.

“Sorry, sorry,” Chloe repeats. “Too bad we missed Dana’s Halloween party. That would’ve been a killer costume.”

Max stands up suddenly, and begins pacing.


“No, it’s not that,” Max says. “I totally forgot about Dana and Kate. I wonder if they’re working out any of their issues.”

“Jesus, Max,” Chloe says, throwing her arms up in the air in defeat. “Their problems aren’t yours. Be a selfish little shit for once. Be like me. Fucking be a jerk-off and tell everyone they can go screw themselves.”

“But that’s how I feel better about myself,” Max says. “I don’t like doing things for myself when I know someone else would appreciate my time.”

“And that’s why you’re ‘TP Girl,’” Chloe says. “Not that I was any big help. I let you take the blame as much as Rachel did.”

“Rachel was ready to cut loose on the both of us,” Max says. “Besides, I’ve never been in trouble with the police. You have a long list of shit on your juvie record, if you remember.”
Chloe groans and claws off her beanie, absentmindedly mussing up her shaggy hair in frustration. “I don’t care if it makes sense,” Chloe says. “I should’ve taken the fall for us!”

“Chloe, it’s fine,” Max says. “Hardly anything came of this. I mean, the club got shut down, which sucks, but I’m not in any serious trouble. It’s not like I got charged with a crime or anything.”

“That’s not the point,” Chloe says. “What kind of friend am I if I let you take the blame for my shit?”

“Is that what this is about?” Max asks. “Chloe, you’re my best friend. It’s not conditional on anything! And even if it were, which it never would be in a million years, but even if it were, it wouldn’t change anything. You do so much for me. You come over when I can’t sleep, you force me out of my comfort zone, you’re always at my side when I need you. And you wanted to get back at Vortex because they messed with me, not because you had some weird history with them like Rachel did.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t want me to do anything in revenge,” Chloe says. “I should’ve listened to you instead of charging head-first at the problem.”

“What do you want me to say, Chloe?” Max asks. “I wasn’t happy about that. That’s true. But I can’t do anything about that now. At least I can look back and see you had good intentions. That’s all that really matters now. You can’t keep beating yourself up.”

“I’ve just started beating myself up,” Chloe says. “I should’ve started sooner. Maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess now if I had.”

“You can’t think like that,” Max says.

“I know,” Chloe sighs. “It’s hard not to, though.”

“I know,” Max says.

Chloe takes a deep breath and stares up at the sky. Max follows her gaze to see that the sun has almost sunk beneath the horizon, a small glimmer of orange the last remnant of the day. The wind has picked up, too, and Max’s thin hoodie doesn’t do much to protect against the cold.

“This week has been fucked up and depressing,” Chloe says. “Want to do something not awful?”

Max manages to crack a smile at that.

“Definitely,” Max says. “As long as it’s away from campus. I really don’t want to go back and have to face everyone talking about me and toilet paper.”

“Yeah, that wouldn’t be very Charmin,” Chloe says.

Max sighs.

“How dare you,” Max says.

Chloe just laughs and throws an arm around Max’s shoulders.

“How about we get pizza from that sketchy pizza place and eat it on my roof?” Chloe asks.

“Are you seriously assuming that I don’t want your mom’s cooking?” Max asks.

“Unfortunately, tonight you can’t partake in the famous Price cuisine, because she and the step-dirt
are on a…” Chloe gags theatrically before continuing. “…a date night. Like the aberrant deviants
that they are.”

“That’s cute,” Max says. “Well, it would be cute if she were married to anyone other than the
school’s security guard.”

“Don’t have to tell me thrice,” Chloe says. “C’mon, let’s go.”

It feels so familiar, to be sitting up on the roof, the glow from Chloe’s room providing gentle
illumination, as the stars twinkle brightly against the dark velvety sky but certainly don’t provide
enough light to see at night. Their pizza box rests precariously on the dirty shingles of the roof, and
Max has to continuously push it back into place to stop it from sliding off entirely onto the lawn
below.

“Hey, have you thought about that photo contest thing at all?” Chloe asks around a mouthful of
pepperoni pizza.

“Oh shit!” Max exclaims, nearly sliding off the roof herself in surprise. “I totally forgot about that.
Oh my god, Ms. Burch is going to kill me if I don’t enter.”

“Yeah, and she definitely won’t sleep with you if you don’t enter,” Chloe says.

“Gross, Chloe,” Max says.

“Hey, I’m not judging you,” Chloe says. “But seriously. Any update on the project?”

“I’m serious when I say I haven’t thought about it at all,” Max says. “With the Tobanga Club I didn’t
have time to think about it. I guess I do now.”

Chloe grunts in agreement before taking another bite of pizza.

“Have you been applying to colleges like you said you would?” Max asks.

“Ugh, said that I wanted to talk about things that weren’t fucked up and depressing,” Chloe says.

“C’mon, I want to know,” Max asks.

“Well, you’ll have to wait a little longer,” Chloe says. “What about you? Applying to all those fancy-
pants art schools you’re always talking about?”

“Oh, definitely,” Max says. “So far, I’ve applied to…”

Max delves into the numerous schools she’s applied to and the photography programs that they’re
offering, and how one school has really good facilities, but this other school has world-renowned
professors, and so on and so on. Chloe listens with a smile on her face, and Max revels in everything
just being normal for a moment, before she has to go back to school and face the rumors about her
that have certainly spread to every corner of campus.

Once the night air becomes just too bracing and the pizza has lost absolutely all of its heat, Max and
Chloe clamber back in through the bedroom window and get ready to sleep. Of all places, Chloe’s
room is the original hideaway, the one place that Max knows she can always go to when she wants
to escape the world. Even after all that’s happened, the magic hasn’t worn off, and Max finds herself
able to forget about Blackwell, if just for now.
Chapter End Notes

I think I somehow made Chloe into the most emotionally mature person in the series (besides Max herself, ofc)

Feedback is fun, guys. Kudos, comments, whateva
“Hey, you’ll be fine,” Chloe says. “I’m sure people won’t even care about this.”

“Are you kidding me?” Max asks. “This is Blackwell Academy we’re talking about. People are still making fun of Kate for going to church every Sunday. I actually screwed up. There’s no way that anyone lets this go.”

“Well, I see you’re miss positive this morning,” Chloe says. “And you didn’t screw up, Rachel and I did.”

“Yeah, but nobody here knows that,” Max says. “I told everyone – Wells, that police officer, and the security guard – that I was there alone.”

“Nobody will believe that,” Chloe says. “You’re friends with me. C’mon. People are idiots if they think I didn’t have anything to do with it. And I did. It was mostly my fault.”

Max just shakes her head. Blackwell tends to be gossip-happy at best, and the feud between the Tobanga Club and the Vortex Club is probably the most interesting thing that’s happened in Arcadia Bay in months, let alone what’s just happened on campus. And, as expected, heads turn and whispered conversations bubble up in the background as Max and Chloe make their way across the quad.

“I don’t like this,” Max says.

“Dude, just ignore them,” Chloe says. “They’re probably just checking out your cute butt.”

Max fixes Chloe with a withering glare.

“What? It’s cute. I don’t blame them,” Chloe says.

Max just sighs and shakes her head.

“For once, I just want to get to class and ignore everything,” Max says. “God, I hope I don’t run into Nathan.”

Chloe looks upwards thoughtfully, before nodding sagely.

“Actually yeah, that would be really bad,” Chloe says. “Yeah, I kind of forgot about Nathan. He’s going to lose his shit.”

“So much for comforting me, huh?” Max asks.

“Hey, I have to keep it real too, homie,” Chloe says. “Besides, what’s the worst that Nathan could do? Dude’s just a little twig. Who even cares.”
Max doesn’t believe that at all, but Chloe’s words are comforting enough that she wants to believe, if only to stop her heart from thudding in her chest for a moment.

“I guess so,” Max says. “Hey, how do you feel about being my bodyguard for the week? For when Victoria and Nathan inevitably try to mess with me?”

“Wow, dude, you make it seem like such a chore to hang out with you,” Chloe says. “Of fucking course I will. If you think I have better things to do than be attached at the hip to you at all times, you have another thing coming.”

Max laughs.

“Thanks, Chloe,” Max says. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Well, there was that time…”

“Don’t say it!”

Max knew that Nathan would come after her eventually, she just didn’t know that he would corner her after her very first class, before Chloe can come and protect her. Almost as soon as she steps outside of her classroom, Nathan corners her against the row of lockers, with Victoria in tow. Nathan rips Max’s earbuds out.

“There you are, you little bitch,” Nathan growls. “Thought you could fuck with me, huh? Starting your own stupid club and fucking up our party wasn’t enough for you, was it? You had to come after my family?”

Max would find it all so hilarious if Nathan wasn’t so clearly unhinged. No one came after Nathan’s family – they threw toilet paper at his house. And Max wasn’t even involved in that!

“Nathan, Jesus Christ…” Victoria says beneath her breath, apparently, and surprisingly, thinking the same thing Max is.

“Come on, it’s not a big deal,” Max says, desperately wanting to remove herself from this situation.

“You should’ve just kept this shit at school,” Nathan says. “You’ve changed the rules. I guess anything goes now, huh?”

“I already got in trouble for this,” Max says. “Just give it a rest.”

“Oh, I know all about what Wells did,” Nathan says. “He did the whole school a favor, shutting down your shitty little club. The ‘all-inclusive’ club. That’s everything wrong with this world these days.”

“Just leave me alone, Nathan,” Max says. “You should be happy, right? My club is gone, and I killed it. Just leave me alone.”


“Whatever,” Max mumbles, trying to ignore the way her heart is pounding in her chest.

Max is just about to slide her earbuds back in and completely shut out the outside world when she hears loud footsteps coming from down the hallway.
“Hey!”

Nathan and Victoria turn around to see Chloe standing in the middle of the hallway, fists clenched.

“Leave her the fuck alone, you fucking fucks,” Chloe says, her voice reverberating down the hallway.

Max can’t help but smile, both at Chloe’s insistence on making this as much of a scene as she can, and at her overuse of expletives.

“We were just leaving, weren’t we?” Nathan says, leering back unpleasantly at Victoria. “You’ve trained your lapdog well, Max. I’m almost impressed.”

“Actually, it’s called being a friend, dipshit,” Chloe says. “Not that you’d know anything about it, especially since Victoria looks like she’s about to throw up just from standing near you.”

Max glances over at Victoria, who really doesn’t look great. Immediately, Max thinks back to everything she’s heard about Victoria not doing so well lately, from seemingly everybody. She doesn’t know the cause behind it, but she’s starting to have some ideas about it.

Nathan just growls and stalks off. Victoria gives one pathetic, plaintive look towards Max, before following after him.

“Oh god,” Max says, once they’re out of earshot. “Thanks for the save, Chloe.”

“Seems like you were handling him just fine on your own,” Chloe says. “Little punk.”

“I just hope he doesn’t follow through on his threats,” Max says. “Even if they were all super vague.”

“Nah, he won’t,” Chloe says. “I know him. He’s a coward at heart.”

“Still…” Max says.

She’s about to go on when she feels a buzzing in her pocket. She pulls her phone out to see that she has a text from Victoria, of all people. She’s not even sure how Victoria got her number.

Victoria (8:35 AM): MEET ME. MY ROOM. ONE HOUR

“Who is it?” Chloe asks, craning her neck to look over Max’s shoulder.

Max shows her the text, and she frowns.


“I don’t know,” Max says. “Something weird has been going on with Victoria lately. I want to figure out what that is.”

Max’s phone buzzes again. It’s another text from Victoria.

Victoria (8:36 AM): DON’T BRING THAT BLUE-HAIRED WEIRDO WITH YOU

Chloe makes a disgusted noise as she reads the text.

“Blue-haired weirdo? It’s a purple-blue hombre, bitch,” Chloe says.
“That’s what you get offended over?” Max asks.

“Whatever,” Chloe says. “And I don’t feel good about this. What if she – I don’t know – what if she tries to talk to you about fashion or something? You don’t know anything about fashion! Ugh, this is a disaster.”

“C’mon, Chloe,” Max says. “It’ll be fine. You can even be hiding out in my room the whole time. It’s right across from Victoria’s.”

“Ugh, fuck, alright,” Chloe says. “I’m not going to be enjoying myself, though!”

“You better not be ‘enjoying’ yourself in my room,” Max says.

Chloe pauses.

“Shit, I didn’t even think about it that way!” Chloe says, playfully shoving Max. “Way to be a perv, weirdo.”

“You’re the perv here,” Max says. “You’re just a bad influence on me.”

“Good bad influence, you mean,” Chloe says.

“Definitely not,” Max says.

With Chloe hiding inside Max’s room, Max stands in front of Victoria’s room, her fist hovering just inches from the door. She doesn’t know what has her so worried – Victoria can be mean, but she’s ultimately pretty harmless, and she seems to be almost as annoyed with Nathan as Max herself is.

So, with a deep breath, Max brings her knuckles to the door. It opens with such rapidity that Max nearly slams her fist into Victoria’s face by accident.

“Oh!” Max says. “I mean, hey. You wanted to talk?”

“Yes,” Victoria says. “And I’m proud of you for not bringing your attack dog with you.”

Max swears she hears muffled protests coming from the other side of her door, but she isn’t so sure. Otherwise, she simply doesn’t dignify that statement with a response.

“Come on in,” Victoria says.

Victoria turns and waves for Max to join her, and Max realizes just then she’s never actually been inside Victoria’s room. It’s intimate, for lack of a better term, to enter someone else’s private space, and Max steps through the doorway with care. It’s especially strange with Victoria, who’s so openly brazen with her insults yet keeps her personal life close to her chest (save for the fact that her parents are unnaturally wealthy, which she so enjoys waving about in everyone’s faces).

The room is pristine, like the contents of a hip interior design magazine were carefully deposited into the space. Max swears the room is bigger than her own, though that may be because the space is well-used and there aren’t assorted piles of clothes, loose-leaf paper, and textbooks strewn about the floor. Max doesn’t even want to sit down and risk disturbing any of the well-placed furniture.

“Sit down, freak,” Victoria says. “It’s not going to bite.”

“You’re the one who wanted to talk to me,” Max says, folding her arms across her chest and decidedly not sitting down. “You could be a little nicer.”
Victoria narrows her eyes, and Max considers back-tracking and needlessly apologizing, but she sets her jaw and remains silent. Incredibly, Victoria’s expression softens and she sighs harshly.

“Fine,” Victoria says. “You can sit down, though. My couch is super comfy, especially according to Taylor. She’s over here enough to know.”

Max nods and sits down – it is comfortable, certainly more than the couch in her own room. Her posture remains stiff, the feeling that she needs to be on her guard around Victoria not soon going away.

“So, what’s up?” Max asks. “You usually never want to speak to me. Ever.”

Victoria begins to roll her eyes, but apparently decides against it.

“It’s about Nathan,” Victoria says. “He’s been losing it lately. I don’t know what’s up.”

“Just lately?” Max asks.

“Look, I know you have a raging hate-boner for Nathan, but he’s one of my best friends,” Victoria says. “He’s like a brother to me. So, my concern for him is a little more serious, not like you getting upset because he says something that hurts your feelings.”

“Seriously?” Max asks.

“Ugh, you get what I’m trying to say,” Victoria says. “Nathan’s been reacting really strongly to… everything, lately.”

“This is sounding a little vague,” Max says.

Victoria groans and flops backwards dramatically on her bed, her slender forearm coming up to cover her eyes.

“I shouldn’t be telling you any of this,” Victoria says softly.

“So, why are you?” Max asks. “You asked me here.”

“I know,” Victoria says. “I – you may not believe this – but I know it’s the right thing to do. To tell you.”

So she does have a heart.

Max waits for Victoria to continue, who once again groans dramatically.

“It was him,” Victoria says. “Nathan. He broke into your room and fucked it all up.”

Max isn’t surprised by anything anymore, and this news hardly phases her. If anything, she’s more surprised that Victoria is willing to tell her this at all and give up Nathan like this. Still, that miniscule, white-hot point of anger that sparks every time Nathan is around or even merely brought up grows just a little more in her chest.

“It wasn’t you,” Max says.

Victoria sits straight up, with a dark expression on her face.

“Of course not, Max,” Victoria says. “The girls’ dorm is a sacred space.”
“Really? You’ve never been one for sisterhood, or anything,” Max says.


Max remains silent. Victoria slumps forward, resting her chin in her hand.

“He wanted me to come with him that night,” Victoria says. “To break into your room. He was so fucking set on it. I tried to convince him not to, but he wouldn’t listen to me. He thought you guys needed to be taught a lesson or something.”

“He must’ve needed you to get in,” Max says.

“Basically,” Victoria says. “I thought he’d cool off and just leave it all alone when I told him I wouldn’t go with him, but he just got angrier. He got Courtney to let him in instead. Skank.”

“Is that why you’ve been so…off, recently?” Max asks.

“Jesus, is it that obvious?” Victoria snaps. “Yes, I’m worried about Nathan. And I’ve been stressing about everything else in life.”

“Sorry,” Max says reflexively. “Hey, but if we are going to be open with each other…”

Max lets her voice trail off as she realizes that she’s not sure if she should be bringing her surprising introduction to Victoria’s grandmother. It’s not as if she had intended for that to happen – it just did. Max realizes that Victoria is staring at her, and decides to soldier on.

“I met your grandma,” Max says. Victoria looks like she’s about to say something, but Max plows forward, wanting to explain herself before so that there’s no confusion between the two of them. “It was when my club was working with Meals on Wheels. The route Chloe and I had took us to the apartment she lived in.”

“That stupid apartment building…my parents…” Victoria grumbles, clearly angry but not in the way that Max had expected. “Sorry. So, you met my grandmother.”

“I did,” Max says. “She’s worried about you. Said that you hadn’t called her in weeks.”

The room is silent and tense for a moment, before the slightest of grins tugs at the corners of Victoria’s lips. Max finds the sight surprisingly endearing.

“She always worries,” Victoria says. Victoria looks down at her hands for a moment. Max is surprised to see her like this – for once, she looks like a normal girl, and not the image of perfection she always tries to keep up. “T-thanks for telling me, Max.”

“Of course,” Max says.

“I should call her,” Victoria says. “Maybe she’ll know what to do about Nathan.”

“I can’t believe it,” Max says. “I mean, I can, but it’s my room.”

Max doesn’t appreciate what they did, but she can at least understand the anger that Chloe and Rachel felt over the whole issue with her room. Especially now that she knows that it’s Nathan who did it.

“It’s pretty messed up,” Victoria says. “I can admit that.”
“Why me, though?” Max asks. “Not that I’d ever want him to, but I’m surprised he didn’t go after Rachel. Given their history.”

“You know about that, huh?” Victoria asks. “I don’t know why he went after you. Maybe he thought you’d be the easier target.”


“Excuse me?” Victoria asks, sitting up straight.

“I get it,” Max says. “I’m the weird, new, quiet kid. I’m the easy target.”

Victoria rolls her eyes.

“Don’t be so dramatic. You’re the new kid who came to school already best friends with Rachel, the most popular girl on campus, and Chloe, the criminal/punk that pretty much everyone is afraid of,” Victoria says. “No, I don’t think that you’re the ‘easy target.’ Nathan might, but that’s him.”

“So, what, then?” Max asks.

“This isn’t what you came here to talk about,” Victoria says.

“C’mon, Victoria,” Max says.

“No,” Victoria says. “I let you in my room and snitch on Nathan and you think we’re friends? Get over yourself.”

Max falls silent, not wanting to push too much. Victoria sighs once more.

“Just get out,” Victoria says.

Max nods and sits up, heading to the door. Just as her hand reaches the doorknob, Victoria clears her throat.

“Be careful around Nathan, though,” Victoria says.

Max turns back to look at her, surprise clear on her face.

“Don’t give me that look,” Victoria says.

Max finds herself grinning as she leaves Victoria’s room. She heads to her room first, a bit surprised to find Chloe lying on her bed, one of her lanky arms draped over her eyes.

“I kind of thought you’d be trying to listen in on my conversation,” Max says.

“Through two doors and the hallway?” Chloe asks. “Nah, no way. I was still freaking out on your behalf, if that makes you feel any better.”

“I don’t know what you were so worried about,” Max says. “It actually wasn’t awful. I learned a lot, I think.”

“Alright, what the fuck is going on,” Chloe says. “Did I fall into some crazy alternate dimension where Victoria isn’t a royal bitch?”

“I’m not saying I like her,” Max says. “But it was a surprisingly productive conversation. I learned that it was Nathan who broke into my room, for one.”
Chloe growls and clenches her fists.

“Of course it was. Little punk,” Chloe says. “I wish we could’ve fucked up his shitty mansion some more.”

“Chloe…” Max says.

“Fine, fine, whatever,” Chloe says.

“So yeah, it was Nathan,” Max says. “And Victoria’s freaking out about it. Apparently Nathan hasn’t been himself recently. She’s stressing out about that and everything else, sounds like.”

“Queen bitch has a heart,” Chloe says. “Sort of. I don’t know why she wastes so much energy worrying about Nathan, but maybe mere mortals like us aren’t supposed to know.”

“That’s what’s going on,” Max says.

Chloe nods thoughtfully.

“Well, what now?” Chloe asks. “We know that Nathan broke into your room, but we can’t exactly do anything more against him. Not if we want to stay at his school.”

“You’re worried about that now?” Max asks teasingly.

Chloe rolls her eyes and punches Max’s shoulder.

“Whatever,” Chloe says.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do now,” Max says. “Just normal school stuff, I guess.”

“Yeah, guess so,” Chloe says.

Chapter End Notes

Aww, Max and Victoria almost have a heart-to-heart
Weeks pass. They slide into the latter days of November, Thanksgiving break finally coming upon them. With no club and no drama to occupy her mind, Max buries herself in her schoolwork more than she ever has before, figuring that all of her excess energy can go somewhere. Besides, it serves as a good distraction, something she desperately needs. She puts the finishing touches on her college applications as well, wanting to spend as much time as she can on them before she sends them all out. With whatever remaining free time she has, she tries to hang out with Kate and Chloe. She doesn’t see too much of Rachel anymore.

Rachel is still around, of course, they’ll pass each other by in the hallways or see each other from across the hallway in the girls’ dorm. Given how much time Rachel usually spends with Chloe, it can be easy to forget that she’s actually friends with everyone, and can so easily insert herself into anyone’s group of friends. Lately, Max sees Rachel hanging out with the skater dudes, or the cheerleaders, or anyone but Max and Chloe. Though it’s somewhat odd to see Rachel acting like this, Max can’t exactly blame her. Max doesn’t even mind it all that much – she knows she needs to work everything out with Rachel, but she also knows that it’s going to be an uncomfortable and emotional process. She’s had too much of that lately.

Max thinks about the photography contest, too. The entries need to be submitted at the end of the year, which is coming up much more quickly than Max is entirely comfortable with. She makes no headway on it, though, her recent photographs coming during more introspective moments away from people – not exactly good material for the “empathy” theme.

Life has settled into a sort of holding pattern that’s not entirely uncomfortable, but not entirely fulfilling, either. Max lets herself slip from day to day, with no great struggles or grand drama holding her back.

Max shivers as she makes her way across the Blackwell quad with Chloe and Juliet. She’s bundled up more than she usually is, an oversized parka covering up her usual hoodie and t-shirt. Chloe’s wearing a heavy leather jacket with a thick shearing collar over a thrifted, novelty Thanksgiving-themed wool sweater. Juliet, of course, looks like a runway model in her luxury-items-only outfit.

“What the fuck is up with this weather?” Chloe says through chattering teeth. “It’s only November. And it’s Oregon. What the fuck?”

“It’s going to be the coldest winter in Arcadia Bay in, like, a decade,” Juliet says. “Some people are calling it the end of the world.”

“I believe that,” Max says, her arms firmly folded across her chest in order to conserve as much body heat as she can. “It never even got this bad in Seattle during the winter when I was there.”

“This sucks,” Chloe says simply. “Though I wouldn’t mind if the world ended. That might be kind of exciting.”

Juliet and Max both look at one another before glaring at Chloe, who just shrugs.

As they make their way across the quad, they see Dana putting up a big flyer on the main bulletin board as her hands shake from the cold. Wordlessly, Max walks up beside her and helps hold the
flyer up as Dana affixes it with pushpins.

“Thanks, Max,” Dana says.

“No problem,” Max says. “What’s this for?”

“Oh, this?” Dana asks, cocking her head towards the flyer. “It’s for the yearly winter ball. There’s a contest for it in which different clubs can submit proposals for the theme and for entertainment and refreshments and whatever. Then the winning club basically runs the whole thing.”

“It’s really a way for the school admins to avoid doing all the work,” Juliet says.

“And the Vortex Club wins every year anyway,” Dana says.

“Damn, I was really pulling for Kate’s abstinence club to come through this year,” Chloe says.

Max elbows her in the ribs. She whines in response.

“Maybe I’m being serious!” Chloe protests. “I bet Kate can organize a mean fuckin’ party.”

Max just rolls her eyes.

“Too bad the Tobanga Club isn’t a thing anymore,” Dana says sadly. “I bet you guys could’ve won.”

“Yeah, don’t remind me,” Max says.

“Sorry!” Dana says. “I’m just saying. I kind of miss the Tobanga Club. The Vortex Club has been a major bummer lately, too.”

“Really?” Max asks, curious.

“Yeah,” Dana says. “Victoria hasn’t been participating much lately, so a lot of the party planning has fallen on Nathan. And Nathan’s idea of fun doesn’t really match up with anyone else’s idea of fun.”

“No surprise there,” Chloe says. “Probably a bunch of weird bondage shit and black and white photography. The worst kind of photography.”

Everyone just turns and looks at her.

“What? I pay attention to those rumors about him too,” Chloe says.

“You think black and white photography is the ‘worst kind of photography?’” Max asks.

“Obviously,” Chloe says. “I’m not dedicating any of my time to any art form that can be replicated with an Instagram filter.”

Max just sighs and shakes her head. There’s silence for a moment before Juliet clears her throat.

“Anyway,” Juliet says. “No point worrying about the winter ball now. We should get to class; I’d hate to be late to photography.”

“For once, I agree with you,” Chloe says. “If only to escape this fucking shit weather.”

The group slowly begins to amble towards the main building, though Max remains behind, examining the flyer for the winter ball. For a moment, the cold doesn’t get to her.
“Max?” Chloe says once she realizes that Max is no longer following them. “Max!”

Max doesn’t register her voice at first.

“Earth to Mad Max,” Chloe says, striding back towards her. “You good, dude?”

Finally, Max realizes that there’s a whole world around her. She shakes her head, tearing her eyes away from the poster and smiling at Chloe.

“Yeah, sorry,” Max says. “I’m good. Let’s get to class.”


Max and Kate are once again sitting in their usual spot in the tea shop. Given the surprising winter chill, Kate has swapped out her usual cardigan and skirt for a thick, woolen sweater that swallows up her thin frame and a pair of dark jeans. Max is keeping warm, in part, thanks to an old beanie she borrowed from Chloe.

The tea helps too, of course, the both of them enjoying strong, caffeine-heavy blends to help push them through the increasingly heavy workload as they reach the end of the semester. They take some time to simply enjoy their tea before diving into their conversation, as they often do.

“I hate to bring this up again,” Kate asks. “But do you ever miss your club?”

Somewhere along the line, people stopped referring to the Tobanga Club as “Rachel, Chloe, and Max’s club,” and solely as “Max’s club.” Max knows that Kate doesn’t mean anything by it, but she wonders if that change in language is due to the all-too-real fact that she alone killed it.

“I don’t know,” Max says. “Sometimes I wonder if it was all more trouble than it was worth. Like, we set out with good intentions, but…”

“Sometimes good intentions are all you need,” Kate says. “Though they didn’t save my bible study club.”

“Hey, Chloe and I came to a couple meetings!” Max says.

Kate giggles.

“Only the times I said I was bringing in baked cookies,” Kate says. “I’m just teasing you, Max, it’s fine.”

Max pouts in response. Kate just laughs harder.

“You really don’t miss it, though?” Kate asks. “I do, sometimes. I’m not one for parties, really, but yours were…nice. Comfortable.”

Max isn’t unappreciative of the appreciation Kate still has for the club, but this still isn’t exactly her favorite topic to discuss. Though Nathan’s threats haven’t come to fruition (yet), she (still) hasn’t been able to shake her moniker as “the TP girl” and she (still) hasn’t managed to patch anything up with Rachel.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Max says. “I feel like nothing has been resolved from all of that drama. It just feels like everything is still in limbo.”

“Some time has passed since that all happened,” Kate says.
“Yeah, but not enough,” Max says.

Kate smiles fondly at Max and pats her hand.

“Sorry, I know this is sort of a sore subject for you,” Kate says.

“No, it’s okay,” Max says. “Our tea dates are always good for…y’know, less than comfortable conversations. I just don’t know. Knowing what I do now about Rachel – it’s hard to be really enthusiastic about what we were doing.”

“But ignoring that, what do you think?” Kate asks. “Let’s say that Rachel only had the purest of intentions in starting the club. What then?”

“Then…” Max lets her voice trail off, and really thinks back to everything about the Tobanga Club, before drama and the Vortex Club completely subsumed it. “Then, maybe it’s not all bad. I mean, of course it’s not all bad. I’m just only thinking about the bad.

“Oh yeah?” Kate asks, taking a sip of her tea.

“Yeah,” Max says. “You’re right, for sure. Our parties were a lot more…comfortable. But what I liked most was that Chloe was really into it. That was nice to see.”

“She did always seem really enthusiastic about it,” Kate says.

That’s a good way to put it,” Max says, grinning. “She was so excited about decorating the place, and getting everything set up perfectly, and choosing the best party music, of course. It was nice seeing her so invested.”

“That’s a good way of putting it,” Kate says. “Invested.”

They sip their tea and move onto easier topics. Max thinks about bringing Dana up, someone else Max hasn’t talked to in a while, but ultimately decides against it. She doesn’t want to push Kate too hard in one direction, even though she has her own opinions on how that relationship should develop.

“How is it still so cold?” Max asks, teeth chattering as she pushes the door open to her room.

“Guess all that Prescott money can’t pay for some fucking insulation for this balls-old building,” Chloe says.

Max unwraps herself from her oversized parka and stands in the middle of her room, arms folded across her chest, looking unhappy. Chloe looks at her blankly for a moment, before beginning to laugh.

“Is my pain amusing to you?” Max asks sardonically.

“Sorry, just reminds me of when we were kids,” Chloe says. “Every winter you would freeze because you were just a tiny little stick.”

Chloe pulls the blanket off the bed and wraps it around Max’s shoulders.

“I remember you being a little beanpole, too,” Max says.

“Eh, I was like thirteen,” Chloe says. “What’d you expect?”
Max rolls her eyes, but snuggles into the blanket all the same. She plops down on her bed, letting the fabric settle around her. Chloe takes a seat to her side. They’re silent for a moment, and Max contents herself simply with staring out the window, taking in all the grey outside. The colder months in Arcadia Bay don’t feature a lot of snow, the color simply drains out of the world and the rain falls slightly more frequently than it usually does.

“Yo, Earth to Max,” Chloe says, snapping her fingers in front of Max’s face. “Are you writing poetry in your head? Being all artsy?”

Max laughs.

“Yeah, sorry,” Max says. “Something like that.”

“What’s on your mind?” Chloe asks.

Max sighs and flops backward, still safely contained in her blanket burrito. It’s been a couple days since her tea date with Kate, but she’s still thinking about what they discussed – about the Tobanga Club.

“Do you miss it?” Max asks, echoing Kate’s original question. “The Club, I mean. Have you even been thinking about it?”

Chloe sighs and dives onto the bed next to Max with a loud whump.

“Of course I have, dude,” Chloe says. “I’m kind of surprised you want to talk about it, though. The ending of all that was hella fucked up for you.”

“I’m serious, Chloe,” Max says. “I don’t care if you desperately want the club to still exist, I know you don’t blame me for that. I’m curious.”

“Then yes, I miss the club,” Chloe says. “Rachel and I went to a veritable shit-abundance of Vortex Club parties, because of her weird obsession of dominating the school’s social scene, and I gotta be honest with you – all those parties blew. Just of a bunch of rich weenies acting like they were doing blow and having sex like rock stars in Los Angeles, when they were really sipping piss-beer and fingering each other in the bathroom.”

“That’s quite an image you conjure up there,” Max says, scrunching her nose up.

Chloe laughs.

“I know you probably don’t believe me, since you just happened to attend the best Vortex Club party ever, with Juliet and Dana as your dates,” Chloe says. “Honestly, I’m still pretty jealous of that, Max-a-million-girlfriends. But my description is nothing short of one-hundred-fucking-percent accurate.”

“So Tobanga really was a big change,” Max says.

“Big time, Maxerino,” Chloe says. “People usually don’t realize this, but just saying that everyone is welcome and not putting pressure on people to act like maniacs is a big deal. That shit actually works.”

Max can’t help but think about the poster for the Winter Ball. If there was ever a moment for the Tobanga Club to leave a lasting mark on the school, it would be that. But, of course, the club is no more.
“You’re making me mad at past-Max for screwing everything up,” Max says with a grin.

“No, you’re mad at me and Rachel for being big, flaming wrecks,” Chloe says, laughing. “If only you could turn back time, if you could find a way…”

Max sits up straight.

“Are you quoting Cher at me?” Max asks. “You? You of the punk rock and the heavy metal?”

Chloe flips her off.

“Cher is an OG punk,” Chloe says. “Don’t even front, homie.”

Max holds her hands up in surrender.

“Alright, whatever you say,” Max says. “Does your mom know that you’re in love with Cher?”

“Don’t you dare breathe a word to her about this,” Chloe says. “I have a reputation to uphold. And I don’t want to bond with my mom over motherfucking Cher.”

“I thought she was the OG punk?” Max asks.

“I only said that, like, three sentences ago!” Chloe says. “You can’t throw that back at me already!”

Max just laughs at her, and Chloe can’t help but join in. As they lie there, laughing like complete idiots, Max can’t help but feel a surge of affection for Chloe. Sure, she’s made her fair share of mistakes lately, but she’s been sticking to Max like glue these past few weeks. Max finds it nice – just like the old days.

Speaking of the old days, Chloe invites Max over to her house for dinner for only the second time this semester so far. Max hasn’t even realized how much she’s been eating at the school’s crummy cafeteria until Chloe points it out, and she, of course, leaps at the chance to have some more of Joyce’s incredible cooking.

That afternoon, before they’re supposed to head over to the house, Chloe is unusually agitated. She paces about Max’s room, fusses with her hair and her clothes (and her clothes, too, are odd – she’s dressed in a stylish yet inoffensive oxford shirt and a pair of jeans with a minimal amount of rips), and she seems incapable of holding a full conversation with Max. Her responses either clipped and too short or completely nonexistent, as if she’s distracted by something else.

“Okay, dude, are you okay?” Max asks, after Chloe once again answers one of her questions with a complete non-sequitur.

“What?” Chloe asks. “I mean – yes. Totally fine. Why wouldn’t I be fine? Who are you – or who is anyone, really – to question my lack of fineness? Of which there isn’t a lack, naturally.”

Max just stares blankly at her, losing the thread of her response a few words in.

“I’m totally cool,” Chloe says, with the expression of a person who is decidedly not totally cool.

“Chloe, I know I don’t need to remind you about this,” Max says. “But you can talk to me about anything. Seriously. Anything.”

Chloe groans and flops her arms about, looking genuinely distressed (albeit in a somewhat comical way).
“I just – I’m going to talk to my parents about something,” Chloe says. “That’s, like, half the reason I wanted you to come over for dinner. Moral support.”

“What’s the other half?” Max asks.

“Your cute butt, of course,” Chloe says, managing to crack a genuine, if strained grin at that. “Hey, aren’t you curious about what I want to talk to my parents about?”

Max just shrugs.

“I figure you’d tell me if you wanted me to know ahead of time,” Max says. “And I’m going to find out soon enough. Besides, I know it must be something important, since I’ve almost never seen you like this. Whatever it is, you have my full support.”

Chloe just stares blankly at her.

“…Damn, that was a way better answer than I had been expecting,” Chloe says. “Even for you.”

Max smiles and squeezes Chloe’s shoulder.

“So, are we ready to go?” Max asks.

“Yeah, totally,” Chloe says. “To the old tetanus-mobile!”

The ride over to Chloe’s house is tense, the air suffused with the steady buzz of anxiety, which is radiating from Chloe in waves. Max can feel it clearly, and the way Chloe drives, herky-jerky and white-knuckled, are as clear of signs as any that she’s not feeling completely put-together.

That thick and heavy atmosphere doesn’t improve at all once they step into the house – in fact, it gets worse, more humid, dripping with unclear tension. Chloe says little and even fails to quip back at David, and she eats little, her hands in tight fists around her fork and knife. Max tries her hardest to joke around with her and try and spark some conversation, but Chloe responds with vague non-answers or uncomfortable chuckles.

Eventually, by the time they’re just finishing up with dessert, Max can’t take it anymore. She’s never seen Chloe quite this agitated in a long time, and she now so desperately wants to know what’s bothering her so deeply.

“Chloe,” Max says, her voice knifing through the woolen atmosphere.

Chloe reacts like she’s just stuck her fork into an outlet, and whips her head around to look at Max.

“Is everything okay?” Max asks delicately.

Chloe gapes at her, the gears in her head whirring before grinding to a halt.

“Chloe?” Joyce asks.

“I have something to tell you guys,” Chloe finally blurts out.

“Well, what is it?” David asks. “Spit it out, girl.”

Whatever it is that Chloe has to confess is so overwhelming that she doesn’t even muster up the energy to fire back at David this time, either.
“I’m not going to college,” Chloe says, nearly shouting as if she won’t be able to get it out otherwise. “That’s my decision, and it’s final. End of discussion.”

The tension that had been building up the entire evening finally snaps and shatters, the fallout blanketing the dinner table.

“What?” Max squeaks.

Chapter End Notes

More setting the groundwork for the final arc (that I have planned...), and also hanging cliffs. I'm hanging cliffs all over this shit
Hey, I want to apologize again for posting this chapter late - life has been crazy, yadda yadda. I'm probably going to have to speed my posting schedule up, actually, since I want to finish this story before Nanowrimo starts...which is ambitious of me. I know how I want this story to end, it's just a matter of getting there. I have plenty of dangling plot threads, of course, and there's no way I'm leaving them unfinished.

Also, I just wanted to remind everyone that this is an AU in which Max actually kept in contact with Chloe - the story doesn't really make sense otherwise.

The feet of David’s chair whine as he stands up, the sound reverberating about the room. Chloe meets his gaze, nervous but defiant.

“What did you just say?” David says, every consonant like a gunshot.

“You heard me,” Chloe says. “I’m not going to college.”

David grits his teeth, his masseter muscles bulging beneath his cheeks. Before he can really dig into Chloe, Joyce speaks up.

“Chloe, this is – this is a big decision,” Joyce says. “We should discuss this as a family first.”

“I don’t need anything to be discussed,” Chloe says. “I don’t need to hear anyone out. I didn’t even tell Max about this.”

Joyce gapes at her, before simply shaking her head. She turns her attention to Max.

“Is that true?” Joyce asks.

“I didn’t know,” Max says. “Honest.”

Chloe nods emphatically.

“Honestly, what is the plan here?” Joyce asks. “What are you going to do with your life? Education is important. I’ve always told you that. David certainly tells you that. Even William…”

“Yes, I know that Dad cares about school,” Chloe cuts her off. “That’s kind of why I was so nervous about telling you.”

“That’s why?” David asks gruffly.

“Of course,” Chloe says. “When I was younger, he would always have these big dreams of me being a scientist or doctor or something. Well, those dreams kind of went away when he did.”

Chloe’s voice trails off the more she goes. Max is amazed by how open Chloe is being around David; it’s even rare for her to be this open with Joyce. Chloe is certainly taking this seriously, even
more than Max would’ve ever expected.

“Oh, Chloe…” Joyce says.

“And I have a plan,” Chloe says.

David scoffs, like he finds that very idea ludicrous.

“I have a plan,” Chloe repeats.

“What is it?” Max asks, knowing that any answer will surprise her at this point.

“Trade school,” Chloe says. “I’ve done some research, and there’s a pretty good school a couple towns over that offers courses on auto repair, and…”

“Wait, ‘auto repair?’” David asks. “You want to be a damn mechanic?”

Max can hardly believe what she’s hearing.

“Yes, I want to be a god damn mechanic,” Chloe says. “What’s wrong with that? I’m good at it. My truck didn’t even have an engine in it when Rachel and I found it. I’ve even helped you with your disaster of a car.”

“Chloe,” David growls.

“Seriously, what?” Chloe asks. “Mom, what do you think?”

Joyce takes a deep breath, clearly wanting to be the calming presence at the dinner table. Max can tell that she’s just as taken aback as David is, just isn’t showing it quite as plainly.

“I’m surprised,” Joyce says deliberately. “You were always so into science when you were a kid, and I was hoping you’d move in that direction…”

“It’s not so different,” Chloe says.

“Yes, but…” Joyce says. “It’s never what I pictured for you.”

Chloe just rolls her eyes, but a grin forms on her lips.

“C’mon, mom, has any part of me turned out the way you pictured?” Chloe asks. “I’m taking a different path through life. I think that’s perfectly fine.”

For Max, at least, everything is staring to make more and more sense. Chloe isn’t one for classrooms and busywork and staring at a computer screen or taking notes or any of that. Maybe the Chloe of the past was, little middle school Chloe who won awards for science and got straight-As, but not the Chloe of right now. Max figures that Chloe wants the immediacy of working with her hands. And now, all the time Chloe spends in American Rust and fussing over her truck makes a lot more sense.

“I think that’s a great idea,” Max says.

All eyes are on her. It’s expected with Joyce and David, but even Chloe looks utterly baffled by that admission. Max almost wants to laugh. Or to take a picture of everyone’s faces so that they can all laugh about it years from now.

“Look, it’s obvious that Chloe wouldn’t do well in a normal university,” Max says. “Even if she was only taking classes she liked. That wouldn’t be good for her. And Chloe already knows more about
car repair than anyone I know, including my own dad. I think it’s a good decision.”

Max shrugs.

“Plus, I can’t imagine a trade school being very expensive,” Max says. “So that helps, too.”

“You know what?” David asks.

Max feels like everyone leans forward, drawn in by what he’s about to say.

“I like this idea,” David says. “I really do.”

“Now just hold on, here,” Joyce says, though she’s drowned out by Chloe and Max exclaiming an incredulous “what?!” at the same time.

“Now just hold on!” Joyce says, raising her voice. “David, you’re okay with this?”

“Well, why not?” David asks as if he react more strongly than anyone else at Chloe’s initial admission. “Chloe’s still going to school, just not the kind we were expecting. And I think it’s a good thing that she wants to do something with her hands. Millennials these days are too soft and coddled to ever want to do something like that.”

Max would roll her eyes at that comment if she wasn’t so utterly floored to hear David support Chloe wholeheartedly. That sort of thing simply doesn’t happen, ever, in this household. Chloe, of course, looks even more surprised than Max is, as she stares at David with wide eyes.

“Well, somebody say something,” David says, adjusting his belt.

“I must say, I’m not used to you two being on the same side,” Joyce says. “Though I’m not complaining. We’ll have to discuss this further at another time, but if David is okay with it, I’m sure I can come around.”

“Mom, I know this is a lot for you to take in,” Chloe says. “But this’ll be good for me. Seriously.”

Joyce sighs and smiles, resting her cheek against her upturned palm.

“You’re probably right,” Joyce says. “I just always saw college in your future, no matter how bad it got at school. I’ll need some time to process this.”

“No kidding,” Max says. “I can’t believe Chloe didn’t even tell me about this.”

Joyce laughs and pats Max on the shoulder.

“That still really surprises me,” Joyce says.

“I knew she would try to talk me out of it,” Chloe says. “And if anyone could do it, it would be Max.”

“I wouldn’t have tried to talk you out of it,” Max says. “I think you’d make a great mechanic. I’m sure you’d even look good in those coveralls they wear.”

Chloe laughs.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Max,” Chloe says.
Joyce “volunteers” the two girls to wash the dishes, since they didn’t help with the cooking, and Max finds herself side-by-side with Chloe. The two of them are far more interested in flinging soap suds at one another than actually cleaning anything until Max accidentally gets a mouthful of soap, at which point they stop. It’s dark out, the familiar neighborhood outside lit up only by the buzzing streetlights and whatever soft light glows from people’s windows.

“Hey, sorry for not telling you about all that shit,” Chloe say softly. “I know you would’ve supported me, I was just scared. Saying all of that out loud makes it seem so real.”

“I wish you would have told me, but I understand,” Max says. “How long have you been thinking about this?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about not going to college since high school began,” Chloe says, a faint smile on her face. “But I’ve been thinking about this whole trade school thing for the past few weeks. Since the club stopped taking up so much time, actually. Turns out that gave me a lot of free time to think about my life. Weird, right?”

“Mega weird,” Max says. “Are you sure you’re Chloe Price? Like, the Chloe Price?”

“Shut up, you,” Chloe says, bumping shoulders with Max. “I’m serious about all of this, though. I know I don’t want to hitch my ride to four fucking more years of school. Did you know four is basically death in Japan?”

“What?” Max asks, brows furrowed.

“It’s pronounced like – y’know, whatever, not the point,” Chloe says. “The point is that despite the entire institution of school, I don’t want to just go out into the world after high school and turn into some loser burn-out like Frank. It’s kind of nice to work towards something.”

“I’m glad,” Max says. “I don’t think I could’ve supported you on an artist’s salary.”

Chloe just laughs.

“Hey, I bet I could’ve made a lot of money selling drugs out of my truck,” Chloe say.

Chloe shakes her head and stares down at the dishes in front of her. They’ve really not made as much progress as they should have given how much time has already passed, though that’s not exactly their concern right now.

“I wouldn’t have even gotten to this point without you, Max,” Chloe says. “You know that, right?”

Max shrugs weakly, suddenly finding it difficult to meet Chloe’s gaze. Her eyes are as plain and open and earnest as Max has ever seen, and it’s overwhelming.

“I haven’t done anything special,” Max says. “I’m just being your friend.”

“Yeah, but that’s just it,” Chloe says. “It would’ve been so easy to not be my friend.”

Max opens her mouth to protest, but Chloe waves her off.

“Sorry, I just want to say this,” Chloe says. “When you moved to Seattle, you could’ve just stopped talking to me. No, I know it happens; it would’ve been so easy. You just stop responding to my texts and my emails and let me fade into the past. We were in different states, after all. It would’ve been easy. But you didn’t. You sent me letters and postcards and pictures of everything you came across, and I know that film isn’t cheap.”
“Chloe…” Max says, reaching out to rest her hand atop Chloe’s and squeeze.

“All the dumb shit I did, you were so patient with me,” Chloe says. “When I started smoking, when I started drinking, when I stopped going to class…you were always there to be supportive and tell me I was being a fucking dumbass.”

Max can’t help but grin.

“Yeah, fat lot of good that did,” Max says. “You kept on smoking and drinking and not going to class.”

“I was always going to be self-destructive, Max,” Chloe says. “You didn’t always have to keep giving a shit about me. Even after I kept ignoring what you were saying and I went on some rampage of noble revenge against the rich baby club, even after I got our own club fucking axed, you’re still here. I don’t know how you do it. Seriously.”

“Well, I thought that would be pretty obvious. It’s because I…” Max says, a million words flying across her mind, but none burn quite so much as the one she wants to say the most (she’s said it before, of course, but never at a time like this). “I care about you, Chloe. A lot. It’s pretty unconditional, so you’re stuck with me.”

Chloe opens her mouth, but closes it again and simply smiles.

“Yeah, I can think of worse things,” Chloe says.

They stand there, simply taking in one another, their two heads framed by the window that looks out onto the darkened neighborhood. The glow of the kitchen light is soft, and comfortable, and Max swears she could spend an eternity locked in this moment.

They finish the dishes, of course, and end up on the roof of the house, looking out across Arcadia Bay. The town never changes, and the view never does, either. The streetlights twinkle like the stars up above, stretching out all the way to the lonely ocean. The wind is cold, and biting, and Chloe wraps Max up in the comforter from her bed.

“Chloe, I have a plan, too,” Max says.

“Yeah?” Chloe asks. “Got big things rattling around that noggin of yours?”

Max laughs, and pulls the comforter more tightly around herself.

“Big things,” Max echoes. “I’m going to enter the competition for the Winter Ball.”

Chloe nods, before furrowing her brow and whipping her head around to look at Max.

“Max, that competition is for clubs,” Chloe says. “As in the thing I fucked over?”

“I know,” Max says.

Chloe just shakes her head and laughs.

“Alright, I’m in,” Chloe says.

“Really?” Max asks. “Aren’t you curious as to what I’m doing?”

“I’m sure it’ll all reveal itself,” Chloe says, putting her arm around Max’s shoulders.
“Oh, it will,” Max says.

Chapter End Notes

Pretty much the only thing I've taken so far from Before the Storm is that Chloe knows a lot about cars. So, thanks, Deck Nine!
“Okay, I know I’m not bosom buddies with Kate like you are, but are you sure she’s going to be cool with this?” Chloe asks.

“Please don’t call Kate my ‘bosom buddy,’” Max says. “And I think that I can convince her. She’s more ride-or-die than you might think.”

“True that, I suppose she’s ride-or-die for Jesus,” Chloe says. “Doesn’t get much more intense than that.”

Max laughs and shakes her head.

“Sure, that’s one way to put it,” Max says. “C’mon, let’s ask her.”

Max turns to knock on Kate’s door, only to find it open, with Kate herself standing in the doorway.

“Ask her what?” Kate asks.

Max and Chloe look at one another, before looking back at Kate.

“We have a huge favor to ask of you,” Max says.

“Hella huge, dude,” Chloe says.

“Are you guys sure about this?” Kate asks.

“I’ve never been more sure,” Max says.

“This seems risky,” Kate says. “Even for you guys.”

Chloe laughs at claps Kate on the back.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment,” Chloe says. “This is all Mad Max’s plan, actually.”

“Really?” Kate asks. “I’m a little surprised by that. I know you said you wanted your club back, Max, but still…”

“It is a risky plan, which is we need all hands on deck,” Max says.

The three friends are standing in the hallway outside of Dana’s room. Kate and Chloe both nod, and Max knocks on her door – to no response. They share a look amongst themselves, and Max knocks again, and they wait. Once more, there’s nothing; no sounds of stirring inside of the room, no signs of movement.

“She’s out.”
The three of them turn around to see Juliet standing behind them, an amused look on her face.

“Nice to see the gang together, though sans Rachel,” Juliet says.

“Yeah, we’ve been sans-Rachel for a while,” Chloe mutters.

Kate looks at her sympathetically and gently pats her back.

“Dana is at the pool,” Juliet says. “It’s swim season, after all.”

“What a freak,” Chloe says. “Is she aware it’s the coldest winter in, like, a thousand years?”

“The pool’s heated,” Max says.

“Still a freak,” Chloe says.

Max just laughs and shakes her head, before turning back to Juliet.

“Thanks, Juliet,” Max says.

“No problem,” Juliet says. “Why do you guys need to see Dana so badly?”

Chloe and Max look at one another for a long moment, which doesn’t go unnoticed.

“What’s going on here? Some kind of freaky best friend communication?” Juliet asks.

Kate just sagely nods. It’s true – there’s a silent conversation going on between Max and Chloe, about bringing Juliet into the fold. Max hadn’t planned on it, originally, but they do need all the help they can get.

“Well, Max has a plan…” Chloe says.

The fearsome foursome of Max, Chloe, Kate, and now Juliet make their way across the quad. The wind is cold and biting, and the sun is being filtered through the thick layer of gray clouds, reducing its light to a stark, dull white.

“You guys are crazy,” Juliet says. “You know that, right?”

“I’m crazy,” Chloe says. “Max is determined. And Kate is just too good of a friend.”

“Do you think Wells will let you actually do this?” Juliet asks. “This plan of yours?”

“I don’t see why not,” Max says. “It’s not like he has anything against Kate, specifically.”

“Well – it’s bold, I’ll give you that,” Juliet says.

The four of them make their way to the gym, making their way through the unpleasant girls’ locker room in order to make their way to the pool. Max can’t even think of the last time she’s been in here. The pool lights are on, as is a lone strip of overhead fluorescent lighting. The only sound that reverberates throughout the large space is of Dana cleanly slicing through the water as she swims laps.

“Hey, Dana,” Juliet calls out. “Take a break, Katie Ledecky. People are here to see you.”

Dana picks up her pace, the water behind her churning as she makes her way to the edge of the pool where the four friends are crouched around. She pulls herself smoothly out, water cascading down
her body. The competition one-piece swimsuit she has on does little to obscure the athletic lines of her body, and Max notices Kate’s cheeks go a tad pink.

“Wow, I didn’t expect to see all of you guys here,” Dana says. “And Kate! Uh – hi.”

Everyone turns to look at Kate, who clearly did not expect to be singled out.

“Hi,” Kate squeaks.

Max clears her throat, bringing the attention away from Kate, who looks like she’s going to explode.

“Dana, we could really use your help,” Max says.

“Wow,” Dana says, slowly letting her gaze roam from person to person. “All of you guys?”

“Yeah, Mad Max has a plan,” Chloe says. “We are just her faithful servants in this grand game.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Juliet asks under her breath. Chloe just laughs.

“You’re an important piece of the puzzle, though,” Max says. “That’s why we’re here.”

Dana sighs and puts her weight on one arm.

“I don’t know,” Dana says. “I’ve been so busy lately, with swim season starting up and the crazy workload of the end of the semester – I just don’t know.”

Max shoots Chloe a look. They never expected this to go completely smoothly, but Dana’s reluctance is a tad surprising.

“We really need you, Dana,” Kate says. “It’s about the Tobanga Club. And Vortex. This is a chance for us to show everyone that Blackwell isn’t just under Nathan and Victoria’s thumb.”

“Plus, this is a good way for all of us to just come together,” Max says. “Senior year is already flying by.”

Dana runs a hand through her soaked hair, droplets of water sparkling as they fall from her.

“You guys really don’t want to hear ‘no’ for an answer, huh?” Dana asks.

“Not really,” Chloe says. “We’re on the warpath.”

Dana just nods and stares out at the pool, still rippling from where she carved a path through the water.

“Alright, I’m in,” Dana says. “I’m still not entirely sure what you guys are planning, but I’ll help.”

Max breaks out into a big smile.

“Thanks, Dana, you won’t regret this,” Max says. “I’d hug you, but…”

Dana cracks a grin.

“I can imagine the hug, Max,” Dana says. “Let’s do this thing.”

The five of them end up at a table in the cafeteria, huddled around their cups of tea and coffee. The place is deserted, being in the odd hours of the afternoon, making it a perfect place for them to
continue planning.

“Can we just go over this insanity again?” Dana asks.

“Well, it’s fairly simple,” Max says. “We enter the Winter Ball competition using one of Kate’s clubs.”

“I get that’s simple,” Juliet says. “I mean, no offense, but we have to convince the entire school that Kate would plan the most fun party? That’ll be tough.”

“Hey, I can plan a fun party,” Kate says. “I mean, I may not like loud music, or inappropriate dancing, or drinking, but…”

“Kate, it’s fine,” Chloe says. “It’s not you, it’s just that people don’t ever want to look beyond the Vortex Club where parties are involved.”

“That’s why we need your help,” Max says, looking from Dana to Juliet. “We need party planning help. We need Winter Ball planning help.”

Dana and Juliet exchange a glance.

“I love you guys, but the Winter Ball has been planned by the Vortex Club for at least a decade,” Dana says. “I hate to say it, but I don’t see us having much of a chance. One of the big reasons they always win is because they’re the club with the deepest pockets, and can always promise crazy shit.”

“We had, like, zero money for the Tobanga Club, and we were still pretty popular,” Max says.

“Well, I hate to say this, too, but that’s because Rachel was organizing everything,” Dana says. “People are always going to do what Rachel’s doing.”

“Okay, well, we’ll have to come up with something really cool on our own,” Max says. “Something that doesn’t cost a whole lot of money.”

“That’s the challenge,” Dana says, shrugging. “That’s why I think it’s a long-shot for us.”

Max can’t help but get frustrated. She knows that everything that Dana’s saying makes logical sense – competing with the Vortex Club is hard, and the Tobanga Club barely lasted a month going up against them. Still, Dana’s comments have put something of a damper on Max’s enthusiasm, and Max isn’t flying quite as high as she was just a few minutes ago.

“What did they do last year, exactly?” Max asks.

Chloe exchanges a look with Juliet and Dana.

“It was actually pretty fucking insane,” Chloe says. “Rachel forced me to go, and it got pretty wild.”

“How? What happened?” Kate asks.

“Last year there was a girl in the Vortex Club whose dad owned an oceanside resort in the next town over,” Juliet says. “So, they rented out a ballroom for a huge discount and bussed people out there.”

“Holy shit,” Max says. “You can go off school grounds for this?”

“Yup,” Juliet says. “Apparently, they always used to hold the winter ball in the gymnasium or something, but the Vortex Club started to attract members with deeper and deeper pockets, so they petitioned the school to allow off-campus events. Basically every year, they flaunt their wealth and
connections.”

Max slumps in her seat.

“Well, that’s going to be hard to compete against,” Max says.

“Not impossible, though,” Kate says. “We’ll have to go quiet and more intimate, not bigger and louder.”

Max smiles. Leave it to Kate to always have a good perspective on things.

“Hey, I have connections too, you know,” Chloe says. “We could totally stuff the entire student body into Two Whales.”

“Ugh, why did you have to bring that up?” Juliet groans. “I could go for some waffles right about now.”

Max looks over at Chloe, who just shrugs.

“It’s not like I’m going to get any homework done today,” Max says. “Should we move our operation to Two Whales?”

Everyone around the table nods.

“Tip my mom well, guys!” Chloe says as she slides her jacket on. “Especially you, Dana, and you, Juliet. I know both of y’all are hella rich.”

“I’ll tip a lot, too,” Kate chimes in.

Chloe just grins.

“Thanks, Kate,” Chloe says, playfully mussing up Kate’s hair.

Joyce greets the five friends warmly as they enter the diner, and directs them over to Max and Chloe’s usual booth. They all pile in – and Max notes the way that Juliet maneuvers Kate and Dana so that they’re sitting squished next to each other. Juliet can certainly be sly, when she wants to be.

“How nice to see you all spending time together,” Joyce says as she saunters over to their table. “What’s the occasion, ladies?”

The five friends all exchange looks.

“We’re planning something,” Max says. “Something big.”

“It’s for the Winter Ball on campus, Ms. Price,” Kate says. “There’s a contest to design and plan for the dance, and we’re looking to enter.”

“Kate, you know you can call me Joyce,” she chides playfully. “And how exciting! I remember when I was back in high school…”

“…five hundred years ago, when we colonized the New World…” Chloe adds in. “…it actually wasn’t called ‘high school’ back then, but…”

Max giggles as Joyce smacks Chloe on the back of the head, and continues talking. Chloe whines but doesn’t say anything more.
"As I was saying, I remember how excited everyone was for our winter-time dance back in high school," Joyce says. "All the boys stumbling over themselves to ask the girls out, the awful dresses we wore, everything."

Max can’t help but smile fondly at Joyce’s recollections of her past. Though Joyce has been in her life forever, Max still doesn’t know that much about her younger years. This is certainly something that Max wants to commit to memory.

“It was snowing at the time, too, and the whole thing was just magical,” Joyce says. “Most of us ended up bringing jackets to the dance so we could play out in the snow when we got bored of dancing with the guys. Which didn’t take long.”

Everyone can’t help but laugh at that.

“That sounds wonderful,” Dana says.

“It was,” Joyce says. “One of my fondest memories from high school. So, what’ll you girls be having?”

Max is deep in thought as everyone says their orders, Joyce going around the table one-by-one. Once she gets to Max, it takes a few times prompting her until she realizes that she’s been zoning out. She orders waffles, of course.

“What’s on your mind, Max Richter?” Chloe asks.

“Nothing,” Max says. “Something. I don’t know. Stuff is swirling around up there.”

Chloe just grins.

“Well, if you’re ready, feel free to dump that stuff out of your head,” Chloe says.

Their food arrives quickly, though, and the five friends spend more time eating than they do planning for the ball. Max thanks whoever it is out there that decided that breakfast at dinner should be a thing, since it’s a great thing. Dana in particular is tearing into her food – Max sometimes forgets how big of an athlete she is, and how hard she trains. And how much she has to eat because of it.

“I was going to steal some bacon off your plate, but I’m afraid that you’ll bite my fingers off,” Juliet says.

“I totally would,” Dana says. “Stealing is wrong, Juliet.”

“Stealing is great,” Chloe says. “Money is fake, dudes.”

Everyone groans and rolls their eyes.

“I wish money weren’t a thing,” Dana says. “It would make this party way easier to plan.”

“Oh yeah, the party,” Chloe says. “This bomb pancake sandwich distracted me. Any ideas, people? We didn’t bring y’all here just to give hella tip money to my mom.”

“Chloe!” Joyce chides from behind the counter.

“You’re welcome!” Chloe shouts back.

“But yeah, the ball,” Juliet says. “What’ve we got?”
Everyone turns to Max, who’s busy stuffing her face with waffles. She forces herself to chew and swallow.

“Uh, yeah, I guess I do have something,” Max says. “I think we should lean into the whole ‘coldest winter in however many millions of years’ thing. I say we get a snow machine.”

“That sounds pretty fun, actually,” Chloe says. “Man, could you imagine if it ever actually snowed in Arcadia Bay? Shit would be crazy.”

Juliet laughs.

“As if,” Juliet says. “We’re only in Oregon, after all.”

“I think snow in Arcadia Bay is one of the signs of the apocalypse,” Kate says, a small smile on her face.

“Biblical, dude,” Chloe says.

“Okay, so, snow machine,” Dana says. “That’s definitely a good start.”

“Yeah, agreed,” Juliet says. “How do we really sell this?”

“Snow in Oregon isn’t good enough?” Max asks.

“This is the Vortex Club we’re going up against,” Juliet says. “And, insider info would have you believe that they’re going to pitch throwing the party at one of the Prescotts’ lavish estates.”

“Like the one that I TP’d?” Chloe asks, cackling.

Max slugs her shoulder, which certainly gets her to shut up.

“Yes, potentially,” Juliet says.

“Come to think of it, I wouldn’t be surprised if they somehow target you in their pitch for the ball, Max. Especially if they are planning on throwing the party at the Prescotts’.” Dana says apologetically. “I know how they work.”

“I think we all do, sister,” Chloe says.

Max sighs.

“I don’t know if it’s how ‘they’ work so much as how Nathan works,” Max says. “He told me to watch my back, and nothing’s happened yet – but I know he’s up to something. All the more reason to win this thing fair and square, right?”

“Right,” Chloe says, arms folded across her chest.

The booth is silent for a moment.

“So, we have one good idea,” Dana says. “Let’s come up with a couple more. How about…”

The girls stay at Two Whales late into the night, discussing their plans for the Winter Ball. They get a lot of work done, coming up with a somewhat coherent theme of a “winter wonderland, and activities for that vision. They still need to make a poster for their pitch, but that can come later, once they have their ideas down. Joyce stops by occasionally for coffee refills and a few choice ideas,
which Max is incredibly thankful for. She has a hard time ever imagining living somewhere without a place like Two Whales (Seattle didn’t have a Two Whales, and she hated it there).

“Man, it’s getting late,” Chloe says, stretching and accidentally ending up with an arm around Kate’s shoulders. “Might be good to call it a night soon.”

“Wait, one more thing before we leave,” Dana says. “Kate, are you okay with your role in this? And are we sure that this’ll even work?”

“I’m definitely okay with this,” Kate says. “It’ll be my name and my club on the poster, but unofficially it’ll be a comeback for the Tobanga Club.”

“I kind of wish we could have our names on this whole project,” Chloe says. “But whatever, this is cool, too.”

“You could get in trouble for this, Kate,” Juliet says, before looking thoughtfully off into space. “I think? I’m not sure how intense the ban on the Tobanga Club is.”

“Intense enough that we’re doing this Game of Thrones political subterfuge bullshit,” Chloe says.

“Pretty much,” Max says.

“This is kind of exciting, actually,” Kate says, a small smile gracing her lips. “And if I get in trouble, I get in trouble.”

“Okay, what the fuck,” Chloe says. “Are you the real Kate? Are you being possessed or something? Blink twice if we need to exorcise you.”

Kate laughs, and very deliberately blinks only once at Chloe. Chloe breathes an exaggerated sigh of relief.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this, Kate?” Max asks. She can’t help but make sure.

Kate nods firmly.

“I am,” Kate says. “I always felt like the Tobanga Club was my club, too. I want to do what I can to bring it back.”

“Hell yes, girl,” Chloe says. “Wait, language. Fucking whatever, I’m stoked. This is going to be great.”

“I know,” Kate says. “This is going to be the most popular my bible study club has ever been.”

They all laugh.

They manage to catch the bus back to campus before it gets too late for the route to run anymore. The cold is surprisingly harsh out of the heated refuge of Two Whales and the bus, and Max folds her arms across her chest in an attempt to preserve as much body heat as possible. Chloe rubs her back, hoping to warm her up.

As they make their way through the campus, they hear the sound of hushed but furious voices drifting in from the parking lot. They all share a look amongst themselves, and decide to go investigate.

They immediately take cover, though, as they realize that it’s Nathan Prescott and his father, Sean.
Chloe even has to pull Kate’s head back behind the nearest car so that they won’t be seen. The argument between father and son is difficult to hear, but Max strains her ears to pick up whatever stray words that she can. Let no one say she isn’t nosy when she needs to be.

“…and, of course, you’ve ignored the list of universities I’ve selected for you,” Sean says.

“Of course I have!” Nathan growls. “None of them are art schools.”

“Obviously not,” Sean snaps right back. “I’ve supported this little hobby of yours for years now – which isn’t cheap, mind you – and I think it’s time for you to come to grips with the fact that you aren’t going to be an artist.”

“What are you talking about?” Nathan asks.

“There’s a reason I want you to go to a renowned business school, Nathan,” Sean says. “You’re to take over the family business when I’m older.”

Sean places his hands on Nathan’s shoulders like he’s giving an inspiring, heartfelt speech. Nathan looks like a cockroach stuck in a trap.

“You can still dabble in your little photography hobby, of course,” Sean says. “On the side. You were meant for greater things.”

“It’s not a hobby,” Nathan shouts, shoving his father’s hands off of him. “And I don’t want your greater things.”

“You waste so much of your time on frivolous things,” Sean says. “Your photography, your club – I just don’t understand you.”

Max can’t help but wince. Though she doesn’t know much about him, Sean doesn’t seem like the kind of person that understands anyone else.

“The club is important, too,” Nathan says.

“No,” Sean says. “It’s not. And I’ve been far too lenient on how much money I allow you to spend on that club.”

“You promised I could use my allowance on whatever I wanted,” Nathan says. “And the Winter Ball is coming up. I need money for that!”

“You certainly do not need money for a silly dance!” Sean says. “What kind of man are you, spending all your time with that girl, Victoria, planning dances and taking pictures.”

Nathan just growls in frustration.

“Something is going to have to give, Nathan,” Sean says. “Changes will need to be made. You will change, and, failing that, the school will change.”

“What are you saying?” Nathan asks. “The school will change?”

“I’ll see you next weekend,” Sean says. “We will discuss this further.”

Before Nathan can respond, Sean climbs into his sleek, black luxury sedan and drives away. Nathan is left standing there, in the middle of the parking lot, barely illuminated by the crackling, yellow streetlight beside him.
“Should we help him?” Kate whispers.

Max’s immediate, knee-jerk reaction is to say no, but a few silent moments pass and then she isn’t so sure. Nathan is a jerk and a bully; that much certainly isn’t in question. At the same time, though, the conversation that just unfolded was brutal. Max couldn’t even imagine what it would be like to have a parent be so adamantly unsupportive.

“Seriously, guys?” Chloe asks. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. Nathan’s caused all of us enough misery, let him wallow in his own.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Max says. “I feel bad, but he has Victoria and whoever else in the Vortex club if he needs someone to talk to.”

“If you say so,” Kate says.

All of them begin to leave except for Kate, who stands there in the parking lot, looking at the forlorn figure of Nathan, who also seems unwilling to leave.

“Kate, come on,” Chloe says, grabbing Kate’s hand and dragging her away.

The five friends end up in Dana’s room, a new buzz coursing through them from what they just witnessed.

“Well, I guess being shitty runs in the Prescott family,” Chloe says.

“That was pretty harsh,” Juliet says. “Even for Sean.”

“What do you guys think he meant by ‘the school will change?’” Max asks. “That sounded ominous.”


Juliet just rolls her eyes.

“How much control does Sean really have over the school?” Kate asks.

“Too much, probably,” Juliet says. “He openly gives truckloads of money to the school. I’m pretty sure at this point, he could have every building on campus named after him. Plus, there are plenty of rumors that there are some under-the-table ‘donations’ that go directly to Wells to keep him in his pocket.”

“No way,” Max says.

“The Prescotts basically own half the real estate in this town anyway,” Juliet says. “Makes sense that he basically owns the school, too.”

Chloe groans and slumps over backwards.

“Guys, can we not talk about the disgusting parasites that are the Prescotts?” Chloe asks. “They suck. We all know that.”

Dana nods and looks around the room.

“It is getting kind of late,” Dana says. “Might be time to call it a night.”
Nobody voices any protests, and they all slowly gather their things and file out of Dana's room. Kate is the slowest to leave, and Dana reaches out and gently grabs her upper arm before she can move past the threshold of the doorway.

“Kate, can I talk to you?” Dana asks.

Kate blushed pink and nods. Max is already halfway to her room, and the urge to be annoying and nosy almost overtook her — but she decides against it, realizing that the two need their privacy for whatever must be discussed. A slight smile graces Max’s lips. She’s hoping that those two are figuring things out.
Max and the new core of the Tobanga Club – Chloe, Kate, Juliet, and Dana – meet up regularly to plan for the Winter Ball. Chloe, through her weed dealer, has found out how to procure a snow machine (Max doesn’t even want to know the details of that interaction). Dana and Juliet are figuring out low-cost decorations. Kate is working on the poster to show off their vision for the dance. All in all, things are going well.

At the same time, everything else seems to ramp up. As they move towards the end of the semester, the thought of final exams loom over them all, ever-present and, frankly, terrifying. It won’t be long now until early acceptance letters get sent out, and it won’t be long until regular college applications are due. As the weather grows colder, everyone seems to grow just that much more frazzled. Still, Max holds onto the idea of the Tobanga Club making a return, if only for a moment.

Even after everything that’s happened, though, Max feels a bit strange to be doing all of this without Rachel. Though her intentions weren’t great, she was a founding member of the club. To not have her input at all seems odd. On the other hand, though, Max figures that Rachel has already caused enough harm. Besides, their planning sessions are going so well already. Why mess with a good thing?

A couple of days later, Max is walking through the quad to her first class in the morning when she sees a commotion brewing around the main bulletin board. At the very front of the crowd is Victoria, who’s furiously talking and gesticulating about something. Max pulls out her earbuds, the left and then the right, and moves closer to investigate.

“…can’t do this!” Victoria says. “After all the work we put in? The contests entries are due in just a week!”

Max furrows her brow and slips her way through the crowd to see what’s causing such an issue. Her eyes widen as they fall upon the poster for the Winter Ball, upon which a declarative “x” has been drawn over in red marker, along with, “cancelled, per Principal Wells.”

“What?” Max blurts out.

Victoria wheels around and fixes her gaze upon Max, eyes narrowed. Max tries not to shrink beneath her furious gaze.

“Ugh, I should’ve known you’d be hovering around,” Victoria says. “This is probably your doing, isn’t it? Your little club gets shut down and you have to ruin it for everyone?”

“What are you talking about? I’m just as surprised as you are,” Max says.

“Right, Max,” Victoria says. “I have no reason to believe you.”

“It hardly sounds like you have a good reason to not believe me, either,” Max says. “You think I
have enough sway with Wells to convince him to do this? I don’t think he likes me very much right now, to be honest. It wasn’t me.”

If her hands weren’t shaking so much from nerves, Max might laugh at Victoria’s stunned face. Max knows this is the probably the most she’s ever stood up to Victoria. It’s a strange feeling.

“Whatever,” Victoria grumbles.

“Why would Wells do this?” Max asks.

“Fuck if I know,” Victoria says, before rubbing her forehead, a look of annoyance plastered on her face. “I can’t believe this. It’s my senior year and I can’t even plan my own winter ball.”

“After all the work we put in, too,” Taylor adds in.

“Don’t need the reminder, Taylor,” Victoria snaps.

“Sorry,” Taylor says, staring down at her feet.

“We did put in so much work, though,” Victoria says. “This totally isn’t fair. I mean, who does Wells think he is?”

If there’s one thing that Max is almost certain about, it’s that Wells didn’t do this unprompted. There’s more to this, there must be.

“I think we all know why I called this emergency meeting,” Max says.

“Man, so dramatic,” Chloe says. “Makes us sound like spies or some shit. Love it.”

Max rolls her eyes. The new Tobanga Club leaders have all gathered, once again, in Two Whales. Four cups of coffee sit, steaming, in front of them (and a cup of tea for Kate).

“I mean, what are we going to do?” Chloe asks. “Wells hella dicked us.”

“This has definitely never happened before,” Juliet says. “This is so bizarre.”

“What can we do now?” Kate asks. “What are our options?”

“I say we throw our own party, on our own terms,” Chloe says. “We don’t need the school.”

“But we already sunk so much time into planning this thing,” Max says.

“I was kind of looking forward to it, to be honest,” Kate says. “I really liked our ideas.”

“The Winter Ball is a big senior event, too,” Juliet says. “People from other grades can join in too, of course, but it’s also one of the ways we can make our last year here memorable.”

“Yup, the Winter Ball is its own beast,” Dana says. “People care about it, for better or for worse. Plus, it’d be a way for us – and the Tobanga Club – to leave a lasting impact on the school.”

“Hey, aren’t you all about fighting the system, Chloe?” Juliet asks. “Don’t you want to do something about this?”

“Hey, don’t use my own rebellious nature against me,” Chloe says. “Sometimes you fight the man. Sometimes you blow the man off to go start your own fucking party.”
“Max,” Kate says, turning to look at her. “What do you want to do?”

Suddenly all eyes are on her, and Max sighs and leans forward, staring down into her black, sludgy coffee. She’s not used to taking the lead on anything, but with Rachel mostly keeping to herself as of late, she’s been the de facto head of the (secret) resurgence of the Tobanga Club.

“I don’t want to make any big decisions yet,” Max says. “I want to know why Wells shut down the Winter Ball.”

“It’s crazy that he did,” Dana says. “I know you and Kate are transfers, so you wouldn’t know, but this school goes all-out for the Winter Ball. Always has.”

“I just don’t get it,” Juliet says. “Someone must have put pressure on Wells to do this. But who? And why? I mean, sure, people might go a little overboard with it, but it’s not like it’s hurting anybody.”

Everyone continues discussing the surprising news, throwing out theories and trying to work through it, as Max falls silent, deep in thought. There’s an idea forming in the back of her mind, one that she wants to immediately dismiss for being too insane, but it just won’t go away.

“Guys,” Max says. “What if it’s Nathan’s dad?”

“Nathan’s dad? Why would he give a shit?” Chloe asks. “Wouldn’t he be busy, like, stealing money from charities or giving animals back to adoption centers?”

“What about that conversation he had with Nathan?” Max asks. “He said that either Nathan would need to change, or the school would.”

“Max, c’mon,” Juliet says. “I’m the one usually putting crazy connections together for the school’s paper, and even I wouldn’t make that link. Sean Prescott has a lot of power, but not that much power. And why would he throw his weight around like this?”

“I don’t know,” Max says. “If all the rumors about the money are true…”

“Yeah, the rumors that I told you about?” Juliet asks. “Trust me, it has to be something else.”

“But what?” Max asks. “Do we really think Sean isn’t capable of doing this?”

“I just don’t know,” Juliet says. “Hey, maybe it’s because of all the drama the clubs have been causing this year.”

“I can believe that,” Dana says. “No offense, guys, but the campus turned into a warzone when you and Vortex were at it.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Chloe says, grinning widely.

“Was it that bad?” Max asks.

Dana and Juliet look at one another.

“It’s all people were talking about for a while there,” Juliet says. “Especially since everyone saw Rachel as the leader of the Tobanga Club. Having her oppose Vortex like that? Hard to get a juicier story than that.”

“And you guys escalated things pretty quickly,” Dana says. “You guys shutting down that one Vortex Club party, then they return the favor, then the toilet paper thing…it got out of hand.”
“I never thought we’d cause so much trouble,” Max says. “I mean, Rachel warned us that the Vortex Club would retaliate, but still…”

“It’s all in the past, now,” Dana says. “We should focus on the present. And Wells abusing his power.”

“Do we really think it’s about the clubs?” Max asks. “Maybe he figured out we were trying to make a come-back, and decided to shut it down to avoid any more drama.”

“Maybe, but he’s not that plugged in to the social scene,” Juliet says. “I mean, I don’t think any other students know about what we’re doing, let alone Wells.”

“I think he’s just nervous that something is going to happen,” Dana says. “You know how he is. The first sight of trouble and he comes stomping over, looking to snuff it all out.”

“Yeah, Wells always wants to be the big authoritarian, thinking of new ways to piss off the student body,” Chloe says. “He never changes.”

“He did let us start the club in the first place,” Max says.

“He’s not dumb enough to stop students from starting their own club,” Chloe says. “Not when Rachel is asking.”

The conversation continues on, but Max once again retreats into her own thoughts. Despite what everyone is saying, and despite that what they’re saying makes logical sense, Max can’t shake the feeling that Sean Prescott is up to something. She even has an idea of how to figure that out, but it’s not a solution she’s exactly thrilled about.

Once their back in the dorms, and after Chloe has driven back home, Max slips out of her room into the hallway. Her heart is pounding, even though she knows that nothing she’s doing is wrong or even out of the ordinary. She’s just visiting someone’s room on the floor she lives on. Nothing wrong with that.

Max stops in front of Victoria’s room, her closed fist hovering in front of the door. Her relationship with Victoria is in a strange place right now, to say the very least. It feels as if they’re strung up by an unsteady truce, a ceasefire of all the worst hostilities. For as much as Victoria seems to hate her, Max knows that she’s even more concerned about Nathan. And that’s certainly something that Max can sympathize with.

Max swallows audibly and knocks on Victoria’s door.

“Is that you, Courtney?” Victoria asks, her voice muffled by her still-closed door. “I said you didn’t have to do that assignment for me, it got cancelled…”

The door swings open, and Victoria’s face falls as she sees that it’s Max there to greet her.


“You should be nicer to Courtney,” Max blurts out before she even has any time to think.”

“Are you here to lecture me?” Victoria asks. “And I am being nice to Courtney, if you’ll notice. I said she didn’t have to do the assignment.”

“Never mind,” Max says. “I wanted to talk to you about something. Can I come in?”
“Christ, Max, I invite you over one time and you think you have free reign of the place?” Victoria asks.

Max just stays silent and stares Victoria down, who eventually throws her arms up in defeat and caves.

“Fine, come in,” Victoria says. “You’re lucky I wasn’t doing anything important anyway.”

Max smiles at her and walks inside, closing the door behind her. The two of them sit down on the couch, with Victoria making sure she’s as far away from Max as possible. Max sits normally.

“So?” Victoria prompts. “What is it?”

“It’s about Nathan,” Max says.

Victoria groans and buries her face in her hand.

“Oh, god,” Victoria says. “What did he do this time?”


“Great, just get yourself all involved with the Prescott family, why don’t you,” Victoria says. “What about him?”

Max stops herself from just blurting out every question and accusation she has about him, and actually tries to form her thoughts into coherent, meaningful sentences.

“He and Nathan don’t have the best relationship, do they?” Max asks.

“Going right for it, aren’t you?” Victoria asks. “Why do you want to know?”

“I’m not going to do anything that knowledge,” Max says. “I’m just curious.”

“You’re nosy,” Victoria says. “Nathan is still my friend, Max. I’m not going to just spill all his secrets because you ask nicely.”


Victoria just shakes her head in disbelief.

“I don’t know how you manage to wind up at the very epicenter of every single bit of drama that goes on at this school, but you find a way,” Victoria says. “Fine, if you heard that then you know plenty about their relationship. It’s not great. It’s probably a big reason he’s been so high-strung this semester. Or, you know, even more high-strung than normal.”

“His dad wants him to go to business school,” Max says. “What a waste that would be.”

“Fucking tell me about it,” Victoria says. “I hate people like Sean, who think they can tell everybody exactly what to do. It’s sick.”

Max considers bringing up the fact that Victoria does the exact same thing with Courtney and Taylor, but decides against it.

“Right, telling everybody about to do…this is going to sound crazy, but do you think Sean had
something to do with the Winter Ball?” Max asks, rushing through the sentence just to get it out into the world.

“The Winter Ball?” Victoria echoes. “What are you saying?”

“Do you think he got Wells to cancel it?” Max asks.

Victoria stares blankly at her for a moment, before beginning to laugh.

“Max, you can’t be serious,” Victoria says. “Look, I know everyone says that Nathan’s dad has some crazy amount of control over the city, but he’s not all-powerful.”

“I know, I know,” Max says. “It’s just something he said that’s been sticking with me. How he wanted to change the school, for Nathan’s sake, or something like that. It’s pretty clear he’s not a fan of the Vortex Club.”

“He never has been, but he’s always been more than happy to let Nathan use his money to fund things for the club,” Victoria says.

Max sighs. She knows how insane she must sound, but she just can’t let it go.

“Look, could you – I don’t know – just ask Nathan about it or something?” Max asks. “Bring it up – casually?”

Victoria laughs humorlessly at the suggestion.

“You want me to ask him?Seriously?” Victoria asks. “What, just go up to him and say – hey, Nathan – could you tell me if your dad has the ability to bend Principal Wells to his will?”

“C’mon, please?” Max asks. “Look, I’m asking you for help. You know I wouldn’t even do this if it wasn’t important. And don’t you want to know why the Winter Ball got cancelled?”

“Ugh, you are so fucking annoying,” Victoria says. “Fine, I’ll ask you and let you know what he says. He’s going to think I’m crazy.”

“You’re friends with him, not me,” Max says. “You’re kind of my only hope right now.”

“Fine, nerd, you sold me already,” Victoria says. “Now please get out of here. I hate the idea that people might think we’re friends.”

“What a horrible thought,” Max says sardonically as she stands up.

“Attitude?” Victoria says, shaking her head. “Doesn’t suit you.”

“Doesn’t suit you, either,” Max says. “You don’t have to hide beneath this veneer of poison, you know.”

“I don’t need advice from you,” Victoria says curtly. “Bye.”

Max can’t help but smile. Victoria is just…Victoria, through and through.

“See you around!” Max says, feigning far more cheeriness than she’s feeling, just to needle at Victoria just a little more.

Victoria makes a final disgusted noise and shuts her door.
“Max, I need your help!”

Max looks up from her textbook to see Chloe hovering just above her, an expression that “worried” just doesn’t quite cover.

“What’s wrong?” Max asks. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, dude, everything’s fine,” Chloe says sardonically. “I just like acting like I’m all freaked out to get my rocks off.”

“Okay, dial back the attitude, you,” Max says.

“Sorry,” Chloe says, sitting down opposite Max. “I’m just freaking out about all my life choices and my future plans and regretting every decision I’ve ever made. No biggie.”

“We should get out of here,” Max says, standing up. “The school cafeteria is not the best place for this.”

“Agreed,” Chloe says. “Let’s go somewhere without other people. Other people are the worst.”

“They sure are, Chloe,” Max says, knowing that’s what she wants to hear right now. “They sure are.”

Max isn’t entirely sure where to go with Chloe, so they end up in the back of her truck, leaning against the rear window. It’s cold out, of course, and they sit as close together as they possibly can, given the heavy jackets they have on.

“So, just slow down,” Max says. “What exactly is bothering you?”

“Everything!” Chloe says. “I think it just struck me that I’m not going to college. Like, seriously 100% not going to college.”

“Were you ever planning on going?” Max asks. “I mean – I’m not trying to judge, or anything. Just genuinely curious.”

Chloe sighs and leans her head back against the truck’s cab with a loud thump.

“I – no, not really,” Chloe says. “I was serious when I said that Dad – William – was my motivation to go to college. He was always so excited by everything I did in school, even those dumb science competitions I won.”

“Do you regret not trying harder in school?” Max asks. “Wow, am I really asking you that?”

Chloe laughs despite herself.

“Yes? I mean, I don’t know. Maybe?” Chloe says. “I feel like things would be so much easier if I was just a mediocre-to-good student and just did what I was supposed to. I let so many things just fall to shit.”

“I can imagine letting things ‘fall to shit’ felt pretty good for a while,” Max says.

“Oh, it still does,” Chloe says. “It’s like taking a hit of the best, strongest drug you can think of.”

“That’s concerning,” Max says.
“Okay, maybe I’m using some flowery language,” Chloe says. “My point is that it’s easy to not care about anything.”

“Yeah, I remember our conversations from back then,” Max says. “You very aggressively did not give a shit about anything.”


“But you’re giving a shit now,” Max says. “You’re forging your own path. You’re going to be a mechanic – who from this school can say that? Just you. Just Chloe Price.”

“I know, but fuck, dude,” Chloe says. “All this tuition money my poor mom spends and I dick around and become a grease monkey? Jesus.”

“You can’t beat yourself up like this, Chloe,” Max says, reaching out to lace her fingers through Chloe’s. “You always do this and it always makes me worry. And now you’re freaking out about school! This is a whole new dimension that I don’t know how to deal with!”

“Hilarious, you are,” Chloe says. “A real comedian. You trying to plan a stand-up routine?”

“You know me – always looking for avenues to get up in front of a crowd and talk,” Max says.

“Hey, you’ve been getting better at that, you know,” Chloe says. “You’re not such a little baby anymore”

Max frowns.

“I know what you’re trying to say, but I still feel like I’m being insulted,” Max says.

“See! You wouldn’t have even stood up for yourself right there before,” Chloe says. “I think everything that’s happened this semester so far, even the shitty stuff, has been good for you.”


“I mean, that’s not really your fault,” Chloe says. “But I know what you mean. I miss hanging out with her.”

“I do too, even after everything that’s happened,” Max says. “There’s no one else really like Rachel out there.”

“Ha! Don’t let her hear you say that,” Chloe says.

“Let her hear you say what?”

Max and Chloe whip their heads around to see the source of the new voice that’s entered their conversation. Max is absolutely shocked to see that it’s Rachel, her face partially obscured by the heavy scarf she’s wearing, leaning against the bed of Chloe’s truck. Chloe as well looks absolutely stunned.

“Rachel?” Chloe asks.

“Speak of the devil, right?” Rachel says, laughing weakly. “Uh, hey, guys. It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, it has,” Chloe says. “So – what’s up?”

Rachel sighs and folds her arms across her chest. She leans back against the truck and stares blankly
out across the parking lot.

“Oh, you know,” Rachel says. “This and that. Hanging out with different people.”

“Yeah,” Chloe says. “We noticed.”

Rachel falls silent for a long moment, and Chloe and Max exchange a look. A cold wind blows through the parking lot.

“Rachel, what are you –” Max starts.

“I wanted to apologize, actually,” Rachel says, cutting her off.

“Really?” Chloe asks.

“Things have been weird for a while, and I don’t like it,” Rachel says. “I don’t like not hanging out with you two.”

“Well, like I was just saying, it’s been weird not having you around,” Max says. “Though you’ve done some things that were pretty…not cool.”

“I know,” Rachel says.

More silence.

“Is that it?” Max asks.

Rachel groans and runs a hand through her hair. She remains standing with her back against the truck, facing away from Max and Chloe.

“Look, Max, I’m sorry I let my grudge with the Vortex Club get in the way of our club,” Rachel says. “Your club. The Tobanga Club was – I mean, still is – a really cool idea. I just didn’t appreciate it that enough. I just saw it as an opportunity.”

Max nods, deep in thought. On one hand, Rachel really did a lot of unfortunate things in her desire to get back at the Vortex Club. But, on the other hand, Rachel really embraced Max with open arms when she first moved back to Arcadia Bay, and, along with Chloe, eased the transition into Blackwell.

“Look, I’m still not happy that you got me in trouble with Wells and the Prescotts. And you almost got me in trouble with the police, which is insane,” Max says.

“I know,” Rachel says, voice quiet. “I shouldn’t have used you like that.”

“Yeah, you shouldn’t have,” Max says. “I learned some things about you I almost wish I hadn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Rachel says once again.

Max lets that statement hang in the air for a moment. Rachel is still staring out across the parking lot. Max sighs.

“I accept your apology,” Max says. “I can really only hope that you just let you grudge over the Vortex Club go. I know that some shitty things happened, but you just have to…let go of it all. Or try to, at least.”

“That’s not going to be easy,” Rachel says. “But I guess it doesn’t hurt to try. Thanks, Max. I don’t
“I’ve learned forgiveness from our very own Saint Marsh,” Max says, smiling faintly.

The three friends are silent for a moment, before Chloe lets out a very audible sigh of relief.

“Holy fuck, that was tense,” Chloe says. “God fucking damn, I’m glad that all worked out. Welcome back to the fold, Amber. Climb on in. I’m watching you, though.”

Rachel grins as Chloe grabs her hand and helps her into the back of the truck. She sits opposite Max and Chloe, resting her back against the tailgate.

“I guess I owe you an apology too, Chloe,” Rachel says. “All the shit I did to Max, I did to you, too. And I never told you about what happened with me and the Vortex Club.”

“Yeah, you idiot,” Chloe says. “I could’ve helped you.”


“Fuck if I know,” Chloe says. You owed ‘em money, right? I would’ve figured something out. I could’ve stolen David’s shitty car and sold it for hella cash.”

Rachel just grins and rolls her eyes.

“So, I’ve heard rumors that you guys have been busy lately,” Rachel says. “Something about a comeback?”

“Rumors?” Chloe asks.

“Who’ve you heard that from?” Max asks.

“Juliet,” Rachel says.

“God damn it,” Chloe says.

“Who else?” Max groans.

Rachel can’t help but laugh.

“You guys seriously didn’t think you could keep that under wraps, right?” Rachel asks.

“I mean, kind of?” Max says.

“I was pretty hopeful, at least,” Chloe says.

“Yeah, no chance of that,” Rachel says.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter now,” Chloe says. “Since the whole thing has been cancelled anyway.”

“I saw that too,” Rachel says. “I can hardly believe it. That’s never happened before.”

“Oh! That reminds me,” Max says. “I have to go talk to Victoria.”

Max hops out of the back of the truck, leaving behind a very bewildered Chloe and Rachel.

“Victoria?” Chloe asks. “Max, did you say you had to talk to Victoria?”
Max pulls out her phone and dials Victoria, pacing idly around the parking lot as she waits for the call to go through. It takes more than a few rings, but Victoria eventually picks up.

“Max? What do you want?” Victoria asks.

“Have you talked to Nathan yet?” Max asks.

“I have, actually,” Victoria says. “I was going to call you, but I see you don’t have the patience to wait for that.”

Max almost laughs at that. Victoria can’t help but find ways to needle at Max.

“So?” Max asks. “Was I right?”

“Ugh, please don’t make me actually say that out loud,” Victoria says. “Look, I could tell you over the phone, but where’s the fun in that? Meet me in my room.”

Max is silent for a moment, not realizing that Victoria has finished speaking.

“Oh, like, now?” Max asks.

Somehow, Max can hear Victoria rolling her eyes through the phone.

“Yes, now,” Victoria says. “You’re the one who’s all gung-ho about this. I don’t have all day.”

“I’ll be right there,” Max says.

“Right,” Victoria says, and the line goes dead.

“You’re seriously meeting up with Victoria?” Rachel asks. “What happened when I was gone? Have we all lost it?”

“She’s not so bad,” Max says, before reconsidering her words (especially given the looks Rachel and Chloe are giving her. “Okay, so she’s bad, but she hasn’t actually done anything to mess with me lately.”

“That’s a real low bar you got there, Maxaroni,” Chloe says. “This is still Victoria we’re talking about here.”

“I know, I know,” Max says. “I want to get to the bottom of this, though. I just have this weird feeling about the winter ball. Besides, don’t you want our club to actually win the competition, Chloe?”

Chloe throws her hands up in the air.
“Fuck, dude, we’re ride-or-die until the end,” Chloe says. “I’m just worried…”

“Chloe, you were worried the last time I went to talk to Victoria, and that turned out fine,” Max says. “Just take it easy. I got this.”

Chloe just stares at her for a moment, seemingly at a loss for words. That brief silence is immediately pierced by Rachel’s sudden peal of laughter.

“Oh man, Max is telling you to calm down,” Rachel says. “This is amazing. I wish I had my camera to document this momentous occasion.”

“Rachel, I’m being serious!” Chloe says.

“There’s another sentence that usually goes in one direction and not the other,” Rachel says, a grin still on her face.

Chloe groans and rolls her eyes.

“Look, do what you gotta do, Max,” Rachel says. “I mean, I wouldn’t talk to Victoria even if it would make all my dreams come true, but still…”

“I’m going to talk to Victoria,” Max says, cutting her off. “It’s gonna happen. I’ll be in the dorms.”

With that, Max walks off, leaving her two friends behind.

Once again, Max finds herself standing in front of Victoria’s door, fist hovering just inches from it, waiting for some spark within her to actually knock on it. There are so many good reasons as to why she shouldn’t talk to Victoria, and one tiny thread that Max can’t help but want to unravel that’s forcing her down this pathway. Max shakes her head, takes a deep breath, and knocks.

Victoria throws her door open and invites Max inside. Max, for a moment, marvels how she’s been in Victoria’s room three times now in however many weeks, when before it was just a strange door from which the sound of overblown speakers forced to play glossy, on-trend, safe-for-the-suburbs rap music and underage drinking emanated. Now, its en vogue, magazine-chic décor is almost becoming familiar to Max. Almost.

“So?” Max asks as she sits down.

“So, you’re not going to believe this shit,” Victoria says. “Or you are, actually. Are you a psychic, or something? Or do you have some kind of weird power that nobody knows about?”

“…What?” Max asks.

“Never mind,” Victoria says. “So, I did talk to Nathan. Apparently, Sean Fucking Prescott controls this entire school.”

“I thought that was a pretty well-known rumor?” Max suggests.

“Well, obviously, it was a rumor,” Victoria says. “And it was fine when all he did was lean on Wells a little to overlook some of the Vortex Club’s excesses. I thought that was the extent of what he could do!”

Max just nods and lets Victoria continue her rant.

“But you were right, somehow,” Victoria says. “He’s the one who cancelled the Winter Ball. Which
is, let me remind you – fucking insane.”

The desire to point out the irony is burning at Max’s throat. Of course, Victoria is okay with Sean’s apparent power when it benefits her, but the moment he does something she doesn’t like? Max is more concerned about the actual Winter Ball, though, rather than this golden opportunity to annoy Victoria.

“But how?” Max asks. “Just because he donates so much to the school?”

“Sort of,” Victoria says, sighing and sitting down dramatically next to Max. “The school wants to upgrade its athletics department – that means renovations for the field, the pool, everything. More money for the coaches. So, according to Nathan, his dad just hung that over Wells’ gross, shiny head and convinced him to cut back on ‘frivolities.’”

“Like the Winter Ball,” Max says.

“Yup,” Victoria says, popping the ‘p.’ “Like the Winter Ball.”

“Well…” Max says, throwing her hands up in the air. “I guess that’s that?”

“That’s fucking that,” Victoria says. “I can’t even believe this. I know you’re still new here, and you don’t know about things that happen at this school, but the Winter Ball is a big deal. I…”

“I know, Victoria,” Max says. “The Winter Ball is one of the big events to send off the senior year, and you’ve been here for four years and it sucks that it’s being taken away from you now. Because you care a lot about it.”

Victoria looks stunned, her mouth agape. Max is almost proud of herself for managing to stun Victoria into silence, though that would feel a bit inappropriate in this particular situation.

“Uh, yeah, actually, you’re, like totally right,” Victoria says, her voice a bit quieter.

Victoria exhales sharply.

“You’re weird, you know that?” Victoria asks.

Max is so surprised by that blunt statement that she can’t do anything but laugh.

“I’ll take it,” Max says.

Victoria just shakes her head. And, while it could also be the lighting in the room, the cold, wintery light suffused throughout the space, but Max swears that the slightest smile finds its way to Victoria’s lips.

“So, now what?” Max asks.

“What do you mean?” Victoria asks.

“I mean what are we going to do about this?” Max asks. “Are we just not going to have a Winter Ball, then?”

“Uh, have you been paying attention to anything I’ve been saying?” Victoria asks. “There’s no more Winter Ball. Nathan’s fucking insane dad made sure of that.”

“I can’t believe I have to be the one to remind everyone of this, but we don’t have to do what the school tells us to do,” Max says.
“What are you suggesting?” Victoria says, leaning forward.

Max leans forward and stares down at her hands, trying to formulate her thoughts into meaningful sentences.

“Look, I thought I wanted to bring my Tobanga Club back to – I don’t know – clear my name, or make it so that the club would have a better reputation going forward,” Max says. “Or just to stick it to Nathan. I don’t know. But now I can see that there are bigger things at play here. It’s not about me trying to prove something, it’s about all of us coming together. For once.”

“You want to work together?” Victoria asks.

“Well, why not?” Max asks. “What are you going to do otherwise?”

“We could throw our own party,” Victoria says. “It’s not like the Vortex Club is wholly incapable of that.”

“Yeah, but would that be the same?” Max asks. “The whole school would’ve seen your handiwork with the Winter Ball. Now it’d just be the same invite-only crowd.”

Victoria stares down at the carpet for a moment, in thought, her fingers steepled.

“I can see where you’re coming from,” Victoria says. “But it’s going to take more than a nice speech to convince me of anything.”

Max sighs. She knows she shouldn’t have expected too much from Victoria, but she was hoping for something a little more than this.

“Victoria…” Max says.

“Just leave it, Max. For now,” Victoria says. “I’m still pissed about Sean. I’ll see you later, Max.”

Max opens her mouth once more, but figures that this isn’t the time to talk her way out of the situation. She just nods, once, and gets up slowly, a sigh escaping her lips.

“Come to me with a plan,” Victoria says, at Max is about to leave, doorknob in hand. “A real plan, not just nice, flowery words. And then we can get somewhere.”

Max smiles, and pauses for a moment, the gears in her head greased up and churning.

“I’ll do you one better,” Max says. “You can come plan with me and my friends, and we’ll figure this thing out together.”

Victoria furrows her brow and looks quizzically at Max, as if Max has just grown antlers and is prancing about the room rather than simply suggesting they just talk, but with more people involved.

“Excuse me?” Victoria asks. “What ‘friends’ are we talking about here?”

“I have friends, Victoria,” Max says, folding her arms across her chest. “Chloe, of course. Kate. Probably Dana and Juliet, as well. Maybe Rachel.”

Max is, of course, almost certainly not going to invite Rachel along, but she feels weird about leaving her out entirely.

“Ugh, the nerd squad,” Victoria says, voice dripping with derision.
“Victoria, literally three of the five people I named are or have been in the Vortex Club,” Max says.

“Whatsoever,” Victoria says. “They hang out with you. I think your nerd aura has transferred to them.”

“I’m taking that as an extremely flattering compliment,” Max says.

Victoria narrows her eyes, looking very much like a cat facing down a particularly troublesome mouse. It makes Max want to burst out laughing.

“You’re the worst,” Victoria says. “Do I really have to do this?”

“I mean, no,” Max says. “But I think we’re all pretty interested in doing something. And I think you are, too.”

“Fuck, you’re serious about this, aren’t you?” Victoria asks.

“I mean, aren’t you?” Max counters. “I remember what you said to Taylor. Apparently, you’ve put a lot of work into the Winter Ball already, just like us. We should bounce ideas off each other, rather than bickering and fighting and trying to tear each other down.”

“Spare me the moralizing, Max,” Victoria says. “It’s boring.”

“You’re not saying no, though,” Max says.

“Ugh, you just don’t give up,” Victoria says. “No, I’m not. Fuck! Fine, let’s do this. I can’t imagine not doing anything, even though this is, like, going to be a ‘fake’ Winter Ball.”

“I mean, it’s not like the previous Winter Balls really relied on the school that much,” Max says. “Did you guys seriously go to a resort hotel last year?”

“We did,” Victoria says. “That was fun. Too bad you couldn’t make it. No date to bring?”

“Uh, I wasn’t here last year,” Max says, brow furrowed. “You knew that, right?”

“Oh, I didn’t,” Victoria says. “I figured you were just someone I could ignore up until now.”

“For four years?” Max asks.

“Don’t judge me,” Victoria says. “There are a lot of people at this school.”

“Our graduating class is, like, forty people,” Max says.

“There are a lot of people at this school I don’t need to know about,” Victoria says. “Better?”

“Absolutely not,” Max says.

“Oh my god, fucking whatever,” Victoria says. “Can we just meet your nerd friends or something?”

Max can’t help but grin.

“Oh, good, you’re still in one piece!” Chloe says as Max walks back into the hallway, with Victoria in tow. “Wait, she’s still there. Max! Look out behind you! Victoria is stalking after you! Just run and I’ll fend her off!”

Max laughs good-naturedly as Victoria scowls behind her.
“It’s all good, Chloester,” Max says. “We’re going to be working together on this whole ‘Winter Ball’ issue.”

“What,” Chloe says flatly.

As Chloe rants, Max tries her hardest to calm her down. Victoria is standing just down the hallway, looking bored as she taps away at her phone.

“Just hear me out!” Max says.

“This is Victoria we’re talking about,” Chloe says. “She’s the enemy. Do you forget all the times she’s made you feel like trash? All of the times she’s made me feel like trash?”

“I know, but we can’t keep approaching this school like it’s some kind of battleground,” Max says. “Victoria’s not perfect, sure, but she’s just some dumb high schooler, like the two of us. Not the enemy.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Victoria says, not even looking up for her phone.

“Now not, Victoria,” Chloe and Max say, nearly in unison.

“Whatsoever,” Victoria says.

“It just seems wrong,” Chloe says. “This was supposed to be the Tobanga Club’s big moment.”

“It still can be,” Max says. “Look, Victoria, through Nathan, has basically confirmed that it was Nathan’s dad who cancelled the Winter Ball. This isn’t about one club being bigger and better than another club…”

 “…The Vortex Club will always be the bigger and better club,” Victoria says.

“Victoria!” Max and Chloe both chide at once.

“Just saying,” Victoria says, sighing dramatically.

“This isn’t about any of that,” Max says. “This is about sticking it to Sean Prescott. He’s basically the closest embodiment of ‘The Man’ we’re ever going to find. And this is about sticking it to Wells and the school administration and whoever else you can think of.”

“Fuck, Max, you’re speaking my language,” Chloe says. “I hate that you know how to push my buttons.”

For whatever reasons (Max knows exactly what reasons, but she’s unwilling to fully admit them to herself), hearing Chloe talking about ‘pushing buttons’ is enough to get her to blush.

“So, are we doing this?” Max says. “Team-up with Victoria?”

Chloe sighs dramatically.

“Fuck, fine,” Chloe says. “Enough weird shit has already happened this semester, we might as well play nice with the queen bitch of the Vortex Club.”

“Do we have to bring her here?” Chloe snaps. “Of all places?”
“This is where we’ve been meeting up,” Max says as the three of them approach the Two Whales diner. “Besides, this is a public place. There’s a chance she could’ve been here before.”

“Ugh, don’t tell me horrible things like that,” Chloe says.

“Get over yourself, would you? Besides, I wouldn’t be caught dead at a place like this,” Victoria says.

“Can I hit her?” Chloe asks. “Please?”

Max laughs.

“I’m not going to say no,” Max says.

“Hey, wait!” Victoria says.

Chloe grins devilishly at Victoria and smacks her shoulder with a closed fist. Victoria whines and rubs at the sore spot.

“I can’t believe you would endorse violence like this, Max,” Victoria says.

“Can you just take it easy?” Max asks as she pushes open the door to the diner. “Please just be cool. We’re all trying to be on the same side here.”

“Well, someone isn’t trying very hard,” Victoria says, as she so obviously glares right at Chloe.

“Someone isn’t making it easy!” Chloe says, glaring right back at her.

Max sighs and throws her hands up in the air. She knew that bringing Victoria on wouldn’t be easy, but this is still frustrating. Though she’s unsurprised by how snippy Chloe is being – it’s pretty clear that the two of them have been trading insults since they came to Blackwell.

“Hello, ladies!” Joyce comes up to greet them, perhaps sensing the simmering tension between her daughter and Victoria. “I see you have a new friend with you.”

“Yes, mother, a ‘friend,’” Chloe says, voice is snippy as can be. “Such a good ‘friend’ of ours. Her person-name is Victoria, but in the old tongue they call her Fraus, or Apaté, goddess of treachery and deception.”

“Where did you pull that reference from?” Max asks.

“Yes, good heavens, Chloe,” Joyce says, hands on her hips.

“Hey, I know things,” Chloe says. “I’m allowed to know things.”

“My name is Victoria,” she says, holding her hand out for Joyce to shake. “This diner is quite… charming.”

“It is, thank you,” Joyce says, purposely choosing to ignore Victoria’s judgmental tone. “And it’s nice to meet you, Victoria. I’m so surprised to see Chloe making so many new friends in her senior year.”

“Aw, mom, you really thought I’d be a loser loner forever?” Chloe asks.

“You know what I mean, Chloe,” Joyce says, smacking Chloe’s shoulder. “Why don’t you girls go ahead and sit down, I’ll come and take your orders in a moment.”
“If you don’t mind waiting for a bit, we do have the rest of the group joining us,” Max says.

“Of course, dear,” Joyce says, before returning to her usual post behind the counter.

Max, with Chloe and Victoria in tow, sits down at their usual booth. Max, figuring that there won’t be room enough for everyone, pulls a chair from another table and situates herself at the head of the booth.

It doesn’t take long for the rest of the gang to arrive. Everyone is surprised to see Victoria there, and they aren’t shy to show it – save for Kate, who just politely smiles at her and proceeds to sit as far away from her as possible. Dana and Juliet look at her with suspicion clear on their faces.

“Oh, come on, I’m not a leper,” Victoria says. “I’m here because I want to help, believe it or not.”

“I choose not,” Dana says. “What do you say, Dana?”

“Yeah, this is strange,” Juliet says. “Weren’t you just feuding with the Tobanga Club?”

“Are you still feuding with the basics of fashion?” Victoria asks. “That parka is so 2010.”

“That makes it more mature than you are,” Juliet fires right back at her. “Why are you so grumpy? Ms. Burch turn you down again?”

Victoria’s face flushes red and she leans forward, like she’s about to launch herself over the table at Juliet. Max’s eyes widen.

“Guys, calm down! This isn’t a roast. Nobody gets points for coming up with the most quips,” Max says. “Victoria really is here to help. Honest.”

“I’d totally win a quip-battle,” Chloe murmurs to Kate, who can’t help but giggle, though she quickly stifles it.

“We’re going to work together,” Max says. “Because now isn’t about us trying to take each other down. Now we have to show Sean Prescott that he can’t just take away the Winter Ball without us doing something about it.”

“What?” Dana asks flatly.

“Sean Prescott?” Juliet asks.

“Fucking prick,” Chloe mutters.

“Nathan confirmed that it was his dad who convinced Wells to shut down the Winter Ball,” Victoria says. “Mostly as a way to punish him.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Juliet asks. “He’d throw around his weight like that just to prove a point to his son?”

“Basically,” Victoria says. “He’s pretty intense, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Wow,” Juliet says. “Guess you’re hunch was right, Max.”

“Yeah, unfortunately,” Max says.

“So, wait, what are we going to do about this?” Dana asks.
“We’re going to throw our own party,” Max says. “With the whole school invited. Without the permission of the administration.”

Max watches as everyone looks to one another. It’s kind of funny, the unspoken conversations that are happening as people’s gazes meet. Max is surprised, though, when Kate claps her hands together, drawing everyone’s attention.

“I guess we better start planning,” Kate says.

“Thank you, Kate,” Max says.

“I see everyone is here. Are we all ready to order?” Joyce asks. “Oh, I love your coat, Juliet. Very sharp.”

“Why, thank you,” Juliet says, as she gives Victoria a look.

Joyce goes around the table as everyone enthusiastically orders their favorite meal. Max can’t help but feel a surge of pride go through her – it’s a little late, given that they’re all in their senior year, but Max is still happy that she’s managed to make Two Whales regulars out of friends. Well, save for Victoria, of course.

“And Victoria, what about you?” Joyce asks.

“Oh, I’m not that hungry, actually,” Victoria says. “I’ll just have coffee, thanks.”

“She’ll have the waffles,” Max butts in. “Sorry, everyone needs to try the waffles here at least once.”

“Max…” Victoria says sharply.

“Waffles it is,” Joyce says. “I’ll be out with your orders in just a moment, ladies.”

Joyce walks off. Victoria glares at Max, who just smiles cheekily right back at her.

“Wait, I think we’re losing focus here,” Victoria says. “Chloe, please explain how you’re planning on obtaining a snow machine from your weed guy.”

“Uh, it’s pretty simple,” Chloe says. “My new weed guy supplements his drug money by renting out equipment to children’s birthday parties. Makes perfect sense.”

“That is such a horrible combination,” Victoria says.

“He makes hella bank though,” Chloe says, shrugging.

Their food has been long-since finished off by now, and most of them are on their second cups of coffee (save for Kate, who’s still nursing her first cup of tea). The planning session is going much more smoothly now than Max had been expecting. Even the insults Chloe and Victoria are firing at one another are taking on an almost good-natured tone. Almost.

“We still need a venue, guys,” Max says. “And no, Victoria, we aren’t going to fly everyone out to Seattle.”

“There go my hopes for the party,” Victoria says.

“Oh my god,” Juliet mutters.
“Unfortunately, there aren’t a whole lot of good places to party in Arcadia Bay,” Dana says. “Unless we get everyone fake IDs or something.”

“Hey, now there’s an idea,” Chloe says, perking up. “You know, I know a guy who’ll...”

“What, do you have a – I don’t know – a tattoo artist/fake ID friend you can call up?” Victoria asks.

“It’s actually my weed dealer #2/fake ID friend, thank you very much,” Chloe says.

“Okay, we’re losing the plot again,” Max says. “Venues? Anyone?”

“Well, that’s kind of the problem with breaking away from the school’s administration on this,” Juliet says. “They would’ve let us use the pool or the auditorium or something.”

“Plus, we don’t have that much money,” Dana says. “I mean, we can pull together a decent amount of funding for this, but it’s not like we have the entire Vortex Club behind us.”

Max leans back and rubs her eyes. The coffee, which was boosting her energy by a lot, is not just giving her a major headache.

“Hey, why don’t we sleep on it,” Kate says. “We’re just going to be talking ourselves in circles of we stay here. We’ll have another meeting soon.”

“Yeah, I agree with Saint Marsh,” Chloe says, putting an arm around her shoulders. “We need to give it some time.”

“Alright,” Max says. “I want to get this figured out, though. At least before we have to start really worrying about studying for finals.”

“Don’t worry, Max,” Chloe says. “You have the four smartest, prettiest, coolest girls on campus working on it. And also Victoria.”

“Hey!” Victoria whines in protest.

Chloe ends up staying behind to help her mom close up the diner (Max really didn’t realize how long they stayed), so she ends up getting a ride back to campus with Juliet and Kate. Victoria, unsurprisingly, chooses to forge her own way back, in the solitude of her overly luxurious foreign-built sedan, as does Dana, more surprisingly.

The ride is relatively silent at first, only the wind whooshing past the slight frame of the Mini Cooper and the faint sound of Juliet’s heavy metal music, cranked way down, providing a soundtrack. But, Max is nosy, after all, and to sate that curiosity, she must pierce through the comfortable silence.

“Hey, Kate, could I ask you what you and Dana talked about the other night?” Max asks. “I know it’s none of my business, but you know how I get...”

Juliet laughs at Max, though it’s clearly good-natured.

“You’re just as bad as I am, Max,” Juliet says. “I’m glad you’re so self-aware about it, though.”

“I – of course I don’t mind sharing, Max,” Kate says. “I mean, sure, it’s not during one of our tea dates, but this’ll certainly do.”

Kate smiles faintly and leans her head against the window as she watches the sights of the town slowly pass them by.
“Dana explained that a lot of what she was doing – flirting with other girls, avoiding me – was because she couldn’t handle the way she felt about me. The way she does feel about me,” Kate says. “And I know there’s a million things wrong with that, but it still feels kind of nice to know.”

“That’s great, Kate,” Max says. “And – now what? Where do you want to go with this? I know you were hesitant about starting a relationship in the first place for so many reasons.”

“I like Dana, Max,” Kate says. “And I guess I realized that we’re in high school. Not everything is going to be 100% perfect, or the way I planned. And that’s okay. I think she was going to ask me out to the Winter Ball. Now, since that’s impossible, I might ask her out to…whatever it is we’re going to call this.”

“Dana finally sort of got her shit together with this,” Juliet says. “I’m pretty impressed.”

“What about you, Max?” Kate asks. “Who are you going to ask?”

Max thinks about Chloe, and smiles, and says nothing.
Their planning stalls, though, as they all get more and more inundated with schoolwork. Plus, all of the photographers in the group, Max included, are getting more and more worried about the photography contest, which is due by the end of the year. Responsibility strikes again, and they can’t meet as often as they’d like to plan for the new and improved, non-Blackwell-approved Winter Ball. The few times they do manage to meet, though, Taylor and Courtney join them, at Victoria’s insistence. It’s awkward, at first, and never really gets that much better, but Max is thankful that everyone seems to be at least trying to get along.

Otherwise, Max and Chloe are spending basically all the time they can together, even though most of that time is spent studying or working on college applications (for Max). It’s as if they’ve both realized that senior year won’t last forever, and that they have to make the most of the time they do have. Max begins to lose track of how many late nights end up with Chloe sleeping in her bed, or Max in Chloe’s.

Thanksgiving is going to be upon them before they know it, and by that point they’re all thankful for the break. They get the Thursday and Friday off, giving them a four-day weekend. Max can hardly wait.

One day, as she’s and Chloe are studying in her dorm room, Chloe’s phone starts ringing. They both look at it, confused, since usually no one ever actually calls her, only texts. Chloe studies the caller ID for a moment before her eyes widen and she quickly answers the call.

“I gotta take this!” Chloe says. “Be right back!”

Chloe rushes out of the room, leaving Max a bit perplexed. She just shakes her head and returns to studying, though, realizing she won’t always completely understand what Chloe’s up to all of the time.

Max manages to brush up on an entire chapter’s worth of material when Chloe returns to her dorm room.

“Who was it?” Max asks.

“What? Oh, I mean, it was — uh — it was my weed guy. The second one,” Chloe says. “No biggie. Mama just needs her fix.”

Max scrunches her nose up.

“Ugh, please don’t refer to yourself as ‘mama,’” Max says.

“What, mama don’t like?” Chloe asks.
“Definitely don’t refer to me as ‘mama!’” Max says.

Chloe starts chanting the word, though, and Max has to throw a pillow at her to get her to shut up.

“Hey dude, you ready?” Chloe asks, poking her head into Max’s room. “Need any help?”

“I’m good to go!” Max says. “And since you’re offering, could you carry my bag down to your truck?”

“You’re lucky you’re so cute, Caulfield,” Chloe grumbles as she picks up the small duffel bag.

Chloe makes sure to unceremoniously dump Max’s bag in the back of her truck before heading to the driver’s seat.

“Hey!” Max exclaims.

“It’s fine,” Chloe says. “It’s just clothes, right?”

“I mean…yeah,” Max says. “But still!”

They reach Chloe’s house in no time (especially with the way that Chloe drives). It’s Wednesday – the evening before Thanksgiving – and instead of heading home, Max is spending the holiday with Chloe and her family. She feels giddy to be doing so, like how she used to feel when she’d spend time at Chloe’s house when they were little kids. They’ve spent plenty of holidays together before, when they were younger, and Max is happy to continue that tradition.

Max gets her stuff settled in Chloe’s room, and they head back downstairs to join Joyce and David for dinner.

“How’s the whole college application process going, Max?” David asks gruffly, midway through the meal.

“It’s going alright,” Max says. “I mean, it’s stressful, but there are a lot of great photography programs out there. It’s kind of exciting.”

David grunts.

“And you’re set on that? Pursuing your photography?” David asks.

Max genuinely can’t tell if he’s setting himself up to say something disparaging about studying the arts, or if he’s actually curious about her future plans. She gives him the benefit of the doubt.

“I am,” Max says. “Photography is really what I’m best at.”

“Besides being a therapist to all of her friends!” Chloe butts in.

“Good,” David says, ignoring Chloe. “Though I’m sure many of your classmates are content with slacking off, your senior year of high school is an important time to consider what you want to do with the rest of your life.”

Chloe rolls her eyes, but David doesn’t notice.

“You need to be asking yourself questions like, ‘what kind of person do I want to be?’” David says. “And, ‘what do I want the most in the world?’”
Max can’t help but glance over at Chloe, beneath the soft lighting of the dining room, with that classic smirk on her face and her hair an angry, bright shade of blue.

“I’ve been thinking about that a lot,” Max says.

After dinner, Max and Chloe end up on the roof again, of course. The wind that blows in from the ocean is harsh and biting, but they’re wrapped up in sweaters and beneath a big, heavy blanket. Max doesn’t think she’s ever felt warmer than she does right now, pressed up against Chloe, under the cover of the night.

“It’s been a weird fucking semester,” Chloe says. “And it’s not even over yet.”

Max smiles.

“Weirder than the semester you met Rachel and acted in The Tempest?” Max asks.

“Well…” Chloe says, deep in thought. “Yeah, I think we’ve managed to top that one.”

“I’ll take it,” Max says.

They fall into silence once more, though Max’s mind is anything but. This feels like a moment, a big one, and Max needs to let loose the words that are in her head. It’s been happening more and more, since she’s been spending so much time with Chloe and because the Winter Ball is fast-approaching, but the need Max feels to reorient her relationship with her best friend is becoming overwhelming.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Max asks.

“Yeah, anything,” Chloe says.

“What happened between you and Rachel? Back then?” Max asks. “I know you guys were together, or…sort of. You were…something?”

Chloe lets out a single, humorless bark of laughter, a slight smile gracing her lips. Max remembers that time well enough, remembers the excited texts Chloe would send her about Rachel. Max was so thankful of Rachel for being there for Chloe, since that was when David really began to insert himself into the Price household – certainly a difficult time for Chloe. Still, though, Rachel’s relationship with Chloe always came off as somewhat ambiguous, at least over text.

“We were never really together,” Chloe says. “I really like Rachel and all, but I don’t think anyone has a chance of really being ‘together’ with her. You just can’t tie someone like Rachel down.”

Max swallows audibly and nods, her hands wringing together in nervous shapes. She’s wading into dangerous waters now, as she delves into more and more personal topics. The light at the end of the tunnel is certainly there, but it’s dim and hard to make out through the fog of her anxious mind.

“Did you want to be…together with her?” Max asks.

Chloe stares down at the shingles on the roof, idly digging into one with her nail. Max knows her so well, and can’t even begin to imagine what she’s thinking right now. She’s probably wondering where all of these questions are coming from.

“I don’t know,” Chloe says. “16-year-old-me did, I guess, but what did she know? Jack shit.”

Max just nods, silent. That’s the answer Max had been expecting, though it doesn’t exactly calm her nerves for what she’s about to do next. It might be, though, that the relationship between the younger
Chloe and Rachel will forever remain a mystery to Max, and to any other outsiders looking in.

“Where is this coming from, Max?” Chloe asks.

There’s the question Max had been waiting for, but it still slams into her like a runaway train and all of the sentences she’d been half-planning in her head disappear into the night sky. Max knows exactly where these questions are coming from, knows exactly why she’s so curious about Rachel and Chloe during the five years of separation, but she can’t quite find the right way to verbalize that to Chloe.

“Oh, it’s…it’s nothing,” Max says.

Chloe looks at her, amused.

“Oh,” Chloe says, the disbelief in her voice apparent.

“Sorry, no, it’s not nothing,” Max says. “I just – I don’t know.”

Max’s mind is racing so fast now that her mouth is stumbling just trying to keep up. She can see it – oh, she can see it, that shining light in the distance, but there are so many obstacles in the way.

“I – hey, I’m going to start this whole sentence over,” Max says. “I’m going to ask you something that’s maybe completely insane.”

“Completely insane is kind of my thing,” Chloe says, clearly confused now, but going along with Max’s anxious speech wonderfully.

Max takes a deep breath, and decides to just force out the that has burrowed its way deep into her mind before it takes up residence there forever.

“Do you want to go to the Winter Ball with me?” Max asks, speaking so quickly that each word simply tumbles out, one right after another. “Or, I mean, our version of the Winter Ball?”

Chloe stares blankly at her, which doesn’t exactly help Max’s anxiety. The way she’s feeling right now, though, nothing could help her anxiety – except for the one answer she’s really looking for.

“Uh, yeah, we’re kind of planning the thing together,” Chloe says. “It’d be weird of we didn’t go.”

Max can feel frustration growing in her chest, which she knows is just an offshoot of the anxiety and panic that’s washing over her in waves.

“No, I mean, do you want to go together?” Max asks. “Like, together together?”

There’s another moment of silence that certainly lasts no longer than a second, but to Max’s anxious mind, it feels like an eternity.

“Oh,” Chloe says. “Oh! Oh man!”

And then Chloe starts laughing, an awkward, uncomfortable sound, and Max prays for death. She peers down at the yard below them, wondering if diving off the roof, head-first, would allow her to knock herself into a coma and everyone would feel so bad for her they wouldn’t even bring up this disastrous attempt at asking her best friend out. Who does that? Who asks out their best friend?

“I don’t know why I’m laughing,” Chloe says. “I’m the worst. I’m an asshole. Okay. I guess I just thought I’d be the one to nut-up and ask you and – oh god! ‘Nut-up?’ I’m running this moment. I’m so sorry.”
Chloe clears her throat and looks seriously at Max.

“Max, I would genuinely be honored to go with you,” Chloe says. “As your date. Not as your ‘friend-date,’ or some wimpy shit like that. As your actual fucking date.”

Chloe exhales loudly when she’s done speaking, as if a crushing, Giles Corey-esque weight has been lifted off her back.

“Holy shit!” Max blurts out.

They stare at each other for a moment, and Chloe starts laughing again.

“Sorry! That was a weird way to respond to that,” Max says. “I’m just really happy that you feel the same way.”

Chloe is still laughing, but Max now finds the sound beautifully comforting, rather than anxiety-inducing.

“Wow, we suck at this,” Chloe says. “Did you really think I’d say no?”

“I don’t know!” Max says. “We’ve been friends for so long that taking that next step seemed impossible.”

“Man, I thought I was dropping enough hints,” Chloe says. “How many times did I finagle my way into sharing a bed with you this semester? Or jokingly flirt with you?”

“I thought that was just, like, friend stuff!” Max says.

“I’m a queer girl, Max. Everything I do is also a coded message,” Chloe says.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Max says, though the grin on her face is so big that she doesn’t ever want it to go away.

“I guess you are too, though,” Chloe says. “Man, we’re just both just disasters, aren’t we?”

“Hey, at least I managed to gather the nerve to ask you out,” Max says.

“Oh my god, you’re going to hold that over me forever, aren’t you?” Chloe asks.

“Of course,” Max says. “You’d do the same in my position.

“Yeah, that’s true,” Chloe says. “Hey, how long have you been planning on, y’know, doing this?”

“What, acting like an idiot in front of you?” Max asks.

“No, asking me out, you fucking doofus,” Chloe says.

Max takes a deep breath and stares down at her feet.

“For a while, I guess,” Max says. “I mean, I’ve loved you forever, as a friend or whatever. As something more. I’ve said that before. But, I guess actually seeing you this semester after spending so much time apart, and all the things we’ve been doing together – I think it just became clear how important you are to me.”

Chloe’s smile is so bright that Max almost can’t bear to look.
“So, I don’t think there was a single moment where I thought, ‘hey, I have to ask Chloe out,’” Max says. “Just a slow realization since I’ve been back.”


“What?” Max asks.

Chloe opens her mouth for a moment, before closing it and just smiling at Max.

“Nothing,” Chloe says.

“That’s no fair,” Max says. “I have to build up the nerve to ask you out and now you won’t tell me what’s on your mind?”

Chloe laughs and bumps shoulders with Max.

“Man, you’ve turned into a little hard-ass, haven’t you?” Chloe asks.

“Just tell me what you were going to say,” Max whines.

Chloe laughs, a beautiful, pealing sound, and a grin finds its way across Max’s face.

“You really do like me, huh?” Chloe asks. “You like like me.”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Max says.


“Why is that what you’re teasing me about?” Max asks.

Chloe just shrugs.

“Because teasing you is fun, obviously,” Chloe says.

“You’re lucky I like you so much,” Max says.

“Ha! You admit it!” Chloe says triumphantly, her voice carrying across the quiet neighborhood.

Max just smiles and laughs, enjoying the feeling of Chloe laughing at her side and of her warmth, cutting through the November chill.

The following morning is abuzz with activity. Joyce had started prepping the Thanksgiving feast before anyone else had woken up, and by the time Max pads into the kitchen, wiping sleep from her eyes, the smell of pumpkin pie stops her right in her tracks. Chloe bumps right into her back, clearly not expecting her to stop.

“Wow, Joyce, that smells amazing,” Max says, voice still hoarse from tiredness.

“Thank you, dear,” Joyce says. “It’s my mother’s old recipe.”

“Price family secret,” Chloe says as she drapes herself over Max’s shoulders.

Chloe leans most of her weight into Max, who groans and sleepily tries to shove her off.

“Okay, I really want to start helping out, but I think we need coffee before we can do anything productive,” Max says, resigned to shuffle awkwardly with Chloe on her back.
Joyce spares them a glance and chuckles good-naturedly.

“Behave, you two,” Joyce says. “I don’t want any of Chloe’s antics to ruin the food.”

“When have my antics ever affected anything you’ve ever done?” Chloe asks.

“I do hope that’s a rhetorical question,” Joyce says.

Once they have some coffee in them, Chloe and Max get to work helping Joyce prep the Thanksgiving meal. Max loves this time of year, has always loved it, and being able to spend the holidays with her best friend (now her best friend that she’s asked out) is incredible.

“How are your folks doing, Max?” Joyce asks. “I bet they’re missing you, especially this time of year.”

And there it is. The only thing that’s dampened her successful asking-out of Chloe is that she won’t be able to see her parents for Thanksgiving for the first time in ever, basically. She knows that it’s a sign she’s growing up – but it’s still a strange feeling.

“They’re doing alright,” Max says. “They’ve both been really busy at work, though I guess that’s a good thing.”

“That’s right,” Joyce says. “Being busy is just a way of saying you have job security.”

Max falls into silent thought for a moment as she tears bread up into pieces for the stuffing.

“It’s weird not seeing them this time of year, though,” Max says. “I do miss them. I hope they miss me too!”

Joyce laughs good-naturedly at that, though she’s interrupted by the sound of Chloe dropping the spoon she was using on the kitchen tile. It clatters loudly, drawing attention to her.

“Heavens, what are you doing over there?” Joyce asks.

“Nothing, nothing!” Chloe says. “Resume talking about the parentals. Pretend like me and the cranberries aren’t even here.”

Joyce gives her a look, but otherwise lets her daughter be.

“Anyway, I’m sure that your parents miss you,” Joyce says. “You seem so grown up now, being off on your own at school and celebrating holidays away from home! Makes me wonder if Chloe here is ever going to leave.”

“Hey, I’m always a flight risk,” Chloe says. “Remember when Rachel and I both ran away from home?”

Joyce chuckles as Max fondly remembers the breathless, excited texts she got from Chloe during that time.

“Yes, I remember you got as far as one town over in that rickety truck of yours before you got cold feet and drove back,” Joyce says. “Much to Rachel’s frustration.”

Chloe just stares down into her boiling pot of cranberries.

“Just wasn’t the right time,” Chloe says. “We totally could’ve done it.”
“Regardless, you did succeed in giving me and David heart attacks,” Joyce says.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Chloe says. “I was trying to only give David a heart attack.”

“Don’t say things like that,” Joyce says with a sigh.

Chloe just grins cheekily at her and returns to stirring the sugary concoction in front of her.

“Did I hear my name?” David asks gruffly.

Max has never seen early-morning David before, and she’s pretty disappointed it didn’t stay that way. David’s dressed in an old, ratty t-shirt and a pair of thick, flannel pajama pants. His hair is mussed up, and even his moustache seems a little unkempt. He forces his way into the already crowded kitchen, nearly knocking Chloe into her pot of cranberry sauce in his quest for coffee.

“Smells delicious, ladies,” David says. “I’m looking forward to eating it already.”

Mug in hand, David returns to the living room, from which the sounds of the television soon emanate. Max furrows her brow and sidles up next to Chloe.

“Does he not help with the cooking?” Max asks, her voice a low whisper.

Chloe scoffs and shakes her head.

“He’s not cool like your dad,” Chloe whispers back. “David is shit at cooking. He’s like the reverse-Alain Ducasse.”

“Who?” Max asks.

“Never mind, my knowledge of the culinary world is clearly lost on you,” Chloe says. “Point is, he’s more than happy to sit back and let the women do the cooking…except for the turkey, which he’ll gladly carve since it’s the ‘man’s job.’”

“So lame,” Max says.

Joyce audibly clears her throat.

“What are you two ladies whispering about?” Joyce asks. “You better be talking about how you’re going to start the mashed potatoes next.”

Max and Chloe both look at one another, before Chloe sighs dramatically.

“Yes, mother,” Chloe says.

With the sides mostly finished up and the turkey needing some time to cook in the oven, Max and Chloe rush upstairs to catch what they can of the annual National Dog Show (since David is still hogging the downstairs TV to watch pre-game analysis of the big football game later on). Chloe pulls a blanket off her bed and they bundle up together atop a beanbag chair, the crappy CRT TV flickering in front of them.

Suddenly, the rest of the world drops away, and it’s just her and Chloe and that flickering, old TV screen. Max’s heart does funny things in her chest, and she wonders if Chloe is feeling as pleasantly out-of-sorts as she is.

In the rush of once again being so close to Chloe, and still riding the high that she agreed to go to the
dance as her date, Max slowly slides her hand over and interlaces her fingers with Chloe’s. If Chloe is surprised, she doesn’t show it, with Max intently studying her face. Instead, a grin spreads across her face, even though her eyes remain on the TV. The grin proves to be infectious, and Max finds herself smiling like an idiot as she watches the dog show, her fingers tightly interlaced with Chloe’s.

The rest of the world comes rushing back, though, as the sound of a car pulling up into the driveway comes slicing through their little bubble. Chloe bolts upright, leaving Max confused as to why she’s reacting so strongly, and to who would show up at the Price residence on Thanksgiving Day. There’s a knock at the door moments later, and Chloe looks down at Max, a huge smile plastered on her face.

“What’s up with you?” Max asks. “You look like you just found an old stash of weed you forgot about.”

“Max, I know that this sounds impossible, but I’m feeling even better than that,” Chloe says. “I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” Max echoes.

“Yeah, it’s going to knock that doe right off your t-shirt,” Chloe says. “Come on, follow me.”

Chloe rushes out of her room and down the stairs, and Max is pretty sure she’s never seen her so excited to be leaving the sanctuary of her room.

“Chloe, wait up!” Max says.

Max confused and mildly exhilarated by Chloe’s palpable excitement, extricates herself from the bundled-up blanket that surrounds her and slowly heads downstairs. The door is open, allowing bursts of cold air into the house, as well as the sound of excited, happy voices. Max sees Chloe bouncing on her heels out of pure anticipation, and beyond her are Joyce and David – speaking to Max’s parents.

Max stops in her tracks in the doorway, her eyes wide. Her parents told her that since Max was spending Thanksgiving in Arcadia Bay, they’d go visit their relatives in the Midwest. But, here they are. Max finds that her brain has been emptied of words, so she simply gapes at her parents instead.

Her dad notices her standing there, looking utterly lost, and the smile on his face grows even brighter.

“Maxine! There you are,” he greets. “Long time, huh kiddo?”

“Max, never Maxine,” she says automatically. “What are you guys doing here?”

Her dad engulfs her in a big bear hug, with her mom following suit.

“Well, as you know, we were going to go visit your aunt and uncle this Thanksgiving,” her mom says. “But we got a call from a certain friend of yours…”

Max’s mom looks meaningfully over at Chloe, who just grins as she stares at her feet.

“You did this?” Max asks.

“Imagine our surprise when Chloe calls us out of the blue and tells us just how crazy your semester has been going,” Max’s dad says. “You know, you didn’t quite convey everything over text.”
Max chuckles nervously and rubs the back of her neck.

“Yeah, I guess I kind of downplayed the whole toilet paper incident,” Max says.

“Normally, I’d say we’d have to discuss that further,” her mom says. “But Chloe has made it very clear to us that everyone involved learned their lesson. And it’s Thanksgiving, after all. It’s so good to see you, Max.”

“It’s really good to see you guys, too,” Max says. “I can hardly believe it. And Chloe is usually so bad at keeping secrets from me!”

“Hey! It’s not my fault you have such a sweet, innocent face I want to bare all my secrets to,” Chloe says. “Really, that’s your parents fault. I blame them.”

Everyone gathered laughs, except for David, who just looks a bit perplexed.

“And, of course, it’s hard to beat Joyce’s cooking,” Max’s mom says. “We’ve missed it out in Seattle, honestly.”

“You’re too kind,” Joyce says. “Why don’t we all get inside and let you two get settled? Plus, I think Max is freezing her butt off out here.”

Max folds her arms in front of her chest and pouts.

“Aww, come here,” Chloe says, hugging her from behind and rubbing her arms.

Max’s parents exchange a meaningful look, but otherwise don’t say anything.

They all gather in the living room, the wonderful aroma of the Thanksgiving feast so teasingly wafting in from the kitchen. Max takes a moment to just take in how surreal it is to see her parents once again in this very house, chatting with Chloe and Joyce like no time has passed at all. Max has always marveled at the ability of parents to simply interact with other parents, just because their children happen to be friends. She and Chloe have been so close for so long, however, that her parents really do treat Joyce like extended family.

“So, Chloe,” Max’s mom says, shifting the conversation. “I don’t think we’ve actually seen you in five whole years.”

“That’s right,” Max’s dad confirms. “Max was always so protective of those video chats she had with you, so we never got a chance to see you.”

Chloe looks down at herself. She’s dressed fairly conservatively, at least for her – she has on a band tee free of any offensive slogans or images, and a pair of jeans that are, incredibly, not ripped up at all. Her tattoos are on nearly full-display, though, and there’s no hiding that blue hair of hers even with her favorite beanie on.

“Uh, yeah, I guess so,” Chloe says, rubbing the back of her neck. “Surprise. I’ve changed. A lot.”

“Change can be a good thing,” Max’s mom says.

“Yeah, I like those tattoos of yours,” Max’s dad says. “You know, I was thinking that I would…”

“No, dear, I’m still going to veto that tattoo idea of yours. It’s tacky.”

Max bursts out laughing. Her parents are absurd. David, on the other hand, looks terrified that a man
would be inspired by Chloe’s tattoos enough to get one of his own.

“But it would be your name and Max’s name over a heart on my shoulder,” her dad says. “It’s classic!”

Chloe laughs good-naturedly and slaps him on the back.

“I like the enthusiasm,” Chloe says. “But maybe start out a little smaller.”

Max’s dad grumbles something about all of the women in his life being against him. Max just grins at him and pats his arm.

“And I love your hair, Chloe,” Max’s mom says. “Do you dye it yourself?”

“I do, yeah,” Chloe says. “I have a tube of the stuff up in the bathroom. I just kind of slather it on whenever it starts to wear off.”

“Well, it looks great. So bold,” Max’s mom. “Honey, do you think I could pull that off?”

David continues to look utterly confused by these two strange people who just showed up and clearly love Chloe, warts and all.

“I don’t know,” Max’s dad says. “Though my opinion might be swayed if you let me get that tattoo…”

Chloe laughs uproariously.

“Purple would look good, Mom,” Max says. “Very dignified.”

“Purple! Now there’s an idea,” her mom says. “I’ll have to keep that in mind…”

Chloe wipes tears of mirth from her eyes, her smile still big and bright. She rests a lanky arm around Max’s mom’s shoulders.

“Dude, your parents are the best,” Chloe says, glancing over at Max. “Can I move into your old room in Seattle?”

“Well, that would never happen,” Joyce says. “You’d miss my cooking too much.”

“Damn, foiled again,” Chloe says. “Speaking of cooking…”

Joyce sighs, but smiles good-naturedly at Chloe.

“Yes, dear, the turkey should be almost ready,” Joyce says. “David, could you go and check on it, please?”

David, who has to this moment been a spectator in the conversation, looks surprised to see someone say his name. He grunts in affirmation and walks over to the kitchen.

“You know, I suppose we don’t know David too well yet, either,” Max’s mom says.

“That’s true,” Max’s dad says, nodding. “Maybe I should go help him out.”

He takes his leave, heading over to the kitchen as well.

“Again, we’re so sorry that we missed the wedding,” Max’s mom says, turning to Joyce. “You know
“how it is, though.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Joyce says. “It was a small, quiet ceremony anyhow. You certainly didn’t miss much.”

“Well, I’m glad we get to see you now,” Max’s mom says. “It’s been way too long. And I think I’ve forgotten how much I like this little town.”

“It has its charms, for sure,” Joyce says. “Though I don’t think Chloe would agree.”

“It’s not so bad,” Chloe says, grinning. “Especially now that Max is back.”

Max’s mom and Joyce now share a look, but say nothing.

“Hey, the turkey’s ready!” David gruffly shouts. “Let’s start eating.”

“Let the games begin!” Max’s dad announces.

Max looks around the dinner table, somewhat in disbelief. Her parents are back in Arcadia Bay, and that simple reality really strikes her. She never thought this moment would come – she never thought that she’d be back in Arcadia Bay after those five long years in Seattle, and she never thought her parents would find the time (and the money) to make it back as well. It makes her feel good. It makes her feel like maybe things are going to be okay.

The meal is completely silent at first, save for the sounds of satisfied chewing. There’s absolutely no denying that Joyce is an incredible cook, and even the dishes that Max and Chloe took point on turned out well. Max already knows she’s going to eat to the point she can barely breathe, and it will be totally worth it.

As everyone starts finishing up their first helpings, Max’s mom clears her throat, drawing everyone’s attention.

“So, I know my daughter will probably roll her eyes at this,” she says. “But I’d like to go around the table and have everyone say what they’re thankful for this year.”

“That’s a great idea, Mom,” Max says.

Her mom smiles at her.

“Thank you, Max,” her mom says. “I’ll start us off – and I’m sure I’m going to steal what my husband was planning on saying. I’m so thankful for you, Max, for working so hard at what you love and pursuing your dreams to be an artist – a photographer. You’ve grown up to be such a mature, responsible young woman, and I’m glad that, someday soon, you’ll be gracing the world with your beautiful art.”


Her dad jokingly smacks his palm against the table, a grin on his face.

“Dear, you took the words right out of my mouth,” he says. “Well, since I don’t want to inflate Max’s head too much by heaping more lavish praise on her, I’m going to say that I’m thankful for this chance to come together as a family. Max is going off to college next year, and I know she’s been looking at schools everywhere around the country – even as far away as the east coast. So, as an old, sentimental man, I cherish these opportunities to come together as a family.”
“Well said, honey,” Max’s mom says.

They turn to Chloe next, who’s does her best “deer-in-the-headlights” impression.

“Oh, shit,” Chloe blurts out. “Sorry! Not exactly Thanksgiving language. Man, Kate would be pissed.”

Chloe laughs nervously and adjusts her beanie.

“Okay. What I’m thankful for,” Chloe says. “I mean, I could just say I’m thankful for Max, because it’s true and hella obvious. Not that it’s a bad thing or anything – argh. Sorry, bad at this.”

Chloe looks over at Max, a pleading look in her eyes. Max simply smiles and pats her hand. Chloe inhales audibly and exhales, ready to start again.

“I guess I’m thankful for all the friends I’ve made this year,” Chloe says. “I spent a lot of time just being pissed off at everyone back when the only person I really gave a shit about was Rachel. But thanks to Max, I feel like I’ve made a lot of new friends this year. I’ve become friends with people I never thought I’d even like, let alone become close to. There’s Kate, of course, Dana, Juliet…I mean, I could sit here listing people, but whatever.”

Chloe once again readjusts her beanie, being careful to not make eye contact with anyone at the table.

“This is the first year since…all that bad shit happened to me that I feel like I’m really, really getting better,” Chloe says. “So, I gotta say my thanks for that.”

The room is absolutely silent. Chloe is still adamantly staring down at the table, unwilling to meet anyone’s eyes.

“Chloe?” Max says softly.

“Too much?” Chloe asks, chuckling humorlessly.

“Thanks for sharing, Chloe,” Max says, reaching over to squeeze her hand. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Yeah,” Chloe say softly. “Me too.”

The room falls back into silence, until Max’s dad loudly clears his throat.

“Yeah, great idea, honey,” he says, looking over at his wife and wiping an imaginary tear from his eye. “I was really looking forward to being emotionally devastated this Thanksgiving.”

“But they’re good emotions, right?” Max’s mom asks.

“Of course,” he says. “I know things have been tough for you, Chloe, so I’m glad things are looking up.”

Chloe smiles at him and nods. Everything is silent once more.

“Well, I suppose it’s my turn,” Joyce says. “I’m not quite sure how to follow that up, but here goes. I’m thankful for my daughter, of course. I know we’ve hit some rough patches, and you haven’t always been the happiest these past few years – but you’ve shown a lot of toughness and resilience, and I always knew you’d bounce back. Though you haven’t taken the path through life that I would’ve expected, what parent could ever really predict that? I’m just glad that you’re happier now,
and that you have a direction for your life that you’re proud to go in.”


“Of course,” Joyce says.

Following that, all eyes are on David, who looks supremely uncomfortable, though it’s clear he’s trying to appear as resolute and calm as possible. It’s clear that he’s uneasy with such open displays of emotion, and Max can practically see the gears in his head grinding as he tries to think of something to say that will appropriately follow up what’s already been said.

“Well, I suppose I can say what I’m thankful for,” David says.

He shifts forward in his chair, back ramrod-straight, his brow slightly furrowed. It looks like he’s about to be shipped off into battle, rather than simply having to share his feelings with everyone else.

“I’m thankful for my family,” David says. “Joyce and Chloe, though I suppose after today, I can include Max and her parents in that. I was…lost after returning home from combat, and Joyce and Chloe – yes, you, Chloe – helped me find at least some parts of myself again.”

David takes a deep breath and scoots even closer to the edge of his chair, as if he’s about to leap off and run into battle at a moment’s notice.

“I know I’m not perfect,” David says. “But I’m thankful to be a part of this family. I’ve learned a lot from all of you.”

David sighs loudly and finally leans back in his seat, looking a bit like he’s just run a marathon.

“Could we get back to eating?” David asks. “I know saying our thanks is in the spirit of the holiday, but I’d really like to enjoy more of Joyce’s wonderful food.”

The room is silent for a moment, until Chloe starts laughing. Everyone joins in, any remaining tension in the room broken for good.

“For once, I agree with you,” Chloe says. “I’m ready for seconds. And thirds.”

“Maybe fourths,” Max chimes in.

“Oh god, I can’t breathe,” Chloe groans, leaning back in her seat as far as she can. “I’m so full my food is going to explode right out of me, chestburster-style. Except through my stomach.”

“Gross, Chloe,” Max says.

“It’s true,” Chloe says. “After this food has killed me, you better write me a touching eulogy.”

“Chloe, I told you not to eat that last serving of stuffing,” Joyce chides.

“But your stuffing is so good, Mom,” Chloe says. “If you didn’t make it taste so good, I wouldn’t eat so much.”

“Oh, don’t blame me for this,” Joyce says. “Will you even have room to eat pie?”

“Pie?” Chloe says, immediately perking up. “You know what? I suddenly feel as starved as a hippie on a hunger strike. Let’s eat some pie.”
Everyone around the table laughs.

“I could actually go for some pie right now,” Max says, looking over at Joyce hopefully.

Joyce smiles fondly at her.

“Well, I suppose it’s time,” Joyce says. “They’ve been warming up in the oven, so they should be
perfect to eat right now.”

“Yes,” Chloe says, holding both fists in the air. “I’m hella ready, dudes. I’ll eat this pie if it’s the last
thing I do.”

“Alright, calm down, you,” Max says, patting Chloe’s stomach.

“Ooh, not there,” Chloe groans. “I wasn’t kidding when I said I was ready to burst.”

Everyone laughs once more.

Joyce’s skills at baking are perhaps even better than her cooking skills, and everyone gorges
themselves on her expertly-made pumpkin pie. It tastes like the very essence of Thanksgiving, and,
even after a year already so full of ups and downs, Max can only think of a few moments better than
this one.

The meal winds down, though, and slowly people excuse themselves from the table. Max recruits a
begrudging but ultimately willing Chloe to go wash the dishes, as Max’s dad and David retreat to the
living room to watch the big football game. Max’s mom and Joyce remain at the dinner table to talk
and catch up.

“So, I think that went well,” Chloe says. “The step-ding-dong was…actually pretty decent, today.”

“He was,” Max says. “Chloe, this is the best Thanksgiving I think I’ve ever had.”

Chloe nods, and grins at her.

“Yeah, I think so too,” Chloe says. “Max, it’s been so great seeing your parents again. I don’t think I
realized just how much I missed them until today, basically.”

“I still can’t believe you managed to set that up without me finding out,” Max says. “I’m glad you
did. I missed my parents a lot, too. I mean, it’s not like it’s been that long since I’ve seen them last,
but now I’m glad I didn’t have to spend Thanksgiving without them.”

“Yeah, one last huzzah in Arcadia Bay, right?” Chloe asks. “C’mon, let’s get these dishes done.
Maybe if I work extra hard, I’ll burn off enough calories that I’ll feel good about eating another slice
of pie.”

Max laughs.

“Sounds like a plan to me, Price,” Max says.

Eventually, everyone gravitates to the living room, where Max’s dad and David are idly watching
the football game. It’s an exciting match-up, but everyone is just too full and too sleepy to really get
into it.

Chloe plops down on the armchair in the living room and holds her arms out, inviting Max to sit on
her lap. Max chuckles and does so, allowing Chloe to loosely wrap her arms around her waist.

“Comfy?” Chloe asks softly.

“Very,” Max says.

“Well, good,” Chloe says. “I’ll just deal with your bony ass digging into my legs, then.”

“Hey!” Max says.


Max grins and leans back against her.

“Good save,” Max says.

“I know,” Chloe says.

Max tries in earnest to watch the game at first, but the food weighing down her stomach eventually drags her off to sleep. Her breath grows deeper as she leans further back against Chloe, her cheek finding its way to rest against her shoulder. Max feels Chloe’s arms wrap more tightly against her as she drifts off to sleep.

Max blinks blearily, staring up at the ceiling as she tries to remember where she is. Warm breath and the sound of snoring tickles her ear, and she carefully turns around to see that Chloe is fast asleep behind her, her arms now wrapped more loosely around her. It’s dark out now, the only light in the house coming from the kitchen, glowing softly against the night that’s already come. Max can hear the sound of voices coming from the kitchen, but she can’t quite make out who it is. With the steadying sound of Chloe’s breath against her ear, Max easily slips back into sleep.

Max wakes up next to the sound of birds chirping and the sun shining through the American flag in Chloe’s room. Max knows exactly where she is – how many times has she woken up in this exact same space, with the exact same sun shining through the window? Max turns to her side to see that Chloe is already awake, propped up against the backboard, a blunt hanging loosely from her lips.

Chloe glances down at Max, a guilty expression overtaking her face.

“Shit, sorry, I didn’t wake you up, did I?” Chloe asks.

“No, you’re fine,” Max says, her voice still thick from sleep. “How’d we get up here?”

“Your dad carried you up,” Chloe says, grinning. “It was pretty fucking cute. I offered to, but he insisted.”

“My dad is ridiculous,” Max says, grinning.

“Yup, he’s awesome,” Chloe says. “Hey, do you mind if I throw on some music?”

“Go for it,” Max says.

Chloe slowly pushes herself up off the bed and walks over to her stereo. She shuffles through the various mix CDs that Max sent her over the years, before settling on one and sliding it into her stereo.
Max immediately recognizes the song that starts playing, and she looks over at Chloe, surprised.

“You kept this mixtape?” Max asks.

“Max, I kept everything you ever sent me,” Chloe says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Here, check it.”

Chloe rummages through her closet, before grabbing a worn, cardboard box from the top shelf. She tosses it onto the bed in front of Max, whose jaw literally drops open when she sees its contents (she thought that only happened in cheesy movies and gas-station novels).

“Chloe, this is everything.” Max says. “Like, everything.”

She briefly rummages through the box, finding letters and postcards she can’t even remember sending in the first place. Chloe even has all the polaroids that Max sent stored neatly and carefully in a small photo album – which Max begins to flip through as Chloe flops down on the bed next to her. Max can feel her heart swell with emotions that she can hardly begin to even contain, let alone categorize and understand.

“Look at all of this,” Max says. “Wow, you even kept this picture my parents made me send to you?”

Chloe leans in, her breath tickling the side of Max’s neck, before she starts laughing. The picture is of Max, posing awkwardly in her then-new bedroom in Seattle.


Max laughs and bumps shoulders with her. She continues to idly flip through the album, coming across old memories she hadn’t thought of in the longest time. There’s her trip to the Space Needle with her parents. Her first hockey game. Her hike around Mount Olympus. Every moment that Max shared with Chloe in their five years of separation – which was a lot, Max certainly wasn’t shy in sharing her new life in Seattle with her best friend – is carefully and lovingly preserved.

“I seriously can’t believe you kept all of this,” Max says, still going through the box of memories. “You even kept all of the dumb novelty postcards I sent.”

“Duh,” Chloe says. “Some of those were hella funny. You went on a huge postcard kick for a while there.”

Max chuckles.

“I did,” Max says. “I would go out of my way to look for new gift card shops and convenience stores so I could always find the perfect stupid postcard for you.”

“You little nerd,” Chloe says fondly.

Chloe sighs and leans backwards on the bed, so that she’s staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m really thankful for you,” Chloe says. “You know that, right?”

“Chloe, of course,” Max says.

Max carefully lies down next to Chloe, though she too stares up at the ceiling.

“I’m serious,” Chloe says. “I don’t even want to think about what kind of person I would’ve turned
into without you. I mean, I sort of did turn into that person, for a while.”

“Well, you won’t ever have to worry about that,” Max says. “I’m here for the long run.”

“I know, but I’m just trying to say that – that you are…” Chloe says, running out of steam. “Fuck, what am I saying? You’re just really, really important to me, Max. Maybe more than you’ll ever know. And I’m so thankful that you’re a part of my life.”

Chloe turns so that she’s facing Max, who does the same.

“I’m thankful, too,” Max says. “You’re always talking about how I saved you, but honestly, you kind of saved me too. I felt so lost in Seattle, like I was just drifting from one day to the next. The friends I made were great, don’t get me wrong, but it just wasn’t the same. They weren’t you. And this is the lamest thing you’re ever going to hear me say, even amongst all of the super lame things that I say, but I missed you every day for five years when I was in Seattle. How lame is that.”

Chloe smiles so brilliantly it almost hurts to look at, and Max swears she can see moisture pushing out the corners of Chloe’s bright eyes.

“That was hella lame, dude,” Chloe says. “But not as lame as this: I’m so glad that you exist.”

“Thanks,” Max says, smiling. “You too.”

Chloe groans loudly and once again rolls onto her back.

“Fucking holidays, man,” Chloe says. “Have me feeling all sentimental and shit. I can’t handle it.”

Max giggles.

“I think I like sentimental, emotionally open Chloe Price,” Max says.

“Don’t expect to see too much of her,” Chloe says. “I think she’ll only come out to play around holidays and birthday parties.”

“Good enough for me,” Max says. “But you’re more of an open book than you think.”


Max laughs.


“Don’t you sass emotionally-open Chloe,” she says. “Then she might say something about how much she likes that she’s rubbing off on you.”

“Aww, that’s cute, too,” Max says.

“Ugh, tell me about it,” Chloe says.

Max and Chloe are content with not doing anything that entire Friday. It, in fact, takes them more than a few hours to even leave Chloe’s bedroom in the morning, instead opting to listen to music and reminisce. Though they’re still full from the Thanksgiving feast the day prior, that can’t last forever, and when they do finally venture out of the sanctuary of the bedroom, it’s in search of food (leftovers, naturally).
They heat up heaping piles of turkey, stuffing, pie, and whatever else they can find that’s been sequestered into a haphazard assortment of Tupperware and plastic-wrap-covered bowls. They take their hard-earned meals back up to Chloe’s room, perfectly happy with not venturing outside at all.

Even after as much they slept yesterday, once the afternoon rolls around they find themselves sleepy once more, and they nap tangled up in the messy sheets and comforter of Chloe’s bed.

Max wakes up to find a strip of sunset-orange light across her face. She stretches languidly, the whole day a blur of eating and sleeping. Chloe has woken up before her once again, and she sits at the edge of the bed, tapping lazily at her phone until she notices that Max has woken up. She grins and flops back down next to her.


“Like I spent the whole day napping,” Max says, rubbing her eyes. “How long have you been up?”

“Not too long,” Chloe shrugs. “I’ve been thinking, though.”

“Always dangerous,” Max says, a lazy grin on her face.

“Fuck off, you,” Chloe says. “You shouldn’t be allowed to quip when you’re still groggy.”

“Too bad,” Max says. “What’ve you been thinking about?”

Chloe takes a deep breath.

“It’s about the venue for our party,” Chloe says. “And I know that we said we wouldn’t worry about the Ball over Thanksgiving break, but I just couldn’t help myself.”

“What do you have in mind?” Max asks.

“I’m kind of thinking that we could throw the party at American Rust,” Chloe says, speaking just quickly enough that her words clip together.

Max furrows her brow.

“American Rust?” Max asks. “Chloe, are you sure? That’s your place.”

Chloe chuckles.

“It’s not really my place,” Chloe says. “I mean, its not like other high schoolers haven’t used it as a party spot every now and again.”

“But still,” Max says. “That’s your sanctuary. That’s your escape!”

“I know, but fuck, Max,” Chloe says. “I’m not the pissed-off sixteen-whatever-the-fuck-year-old I used to be. I don’t really need to run away anymore.”

“Yeah, but still…” Max says.

“I have you back,” Chloe says. “I’m still not thrilled about my home life, but I won’t be here forever, and the step-derelict actually hasn’t been terrible since I told him about my plans for my future. And – hey, look, I know you’re into all that artsy, symbolic shit – because I was thinking it’d be good for me to really open up my sanctuary and invite people into it.

“That’s…very mature of you,” Max says.
“I think it’s time,” Chloe says. “I finally don’t feel like the pissed-off loner any more, and this will help me really solidify that. To myself, at least.”

“That’s great, Chloe. Really,” Max says. “But I just don’t know. I think you should run it by Rachel, at least.”

Chloe grins and holds up her phone.

“That’s what I was just doing,” Chloe says. “Rachel’s cool with it. Nothing stopping us now, Maximo.”

Max can’t help but grin in return.

“Alright,” Max says. “If you’re sure – I mean, absolutely sure – let’s do this. It’ll take a lot of planning, and we should probably at least clean up some of the hypodermic needles…”

“It’s not the perfect venue, I know,” Chloe says. “But it doesn’t have to be at the very heart of the junkyard – the forest around it is pretty nice. And the boat and the school bus would be pretty dope places to get down. I don’t know, it has a lot of potential.”

Max smiles, looking right at Chloe.

“Yup,” Max says. “Yes it does.”

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Chapter End Notes

Pricefield, Forever.

So, the reason this chapter is extra-long is because I'm putting this fic on a TEMPORARY hiatus. I want to work on a completely original, non-fanfic piece for NaNoWriMo, and with work and all the other real-life stuff I have, I can't keep working on this fic for the time being. I know the pitchforks are already coming out, but the moment that November is over, I'm going to pick this fic back up and bring it all the way to the end - the Winter Ball. I'll see you guys on the other side!
Chapter Notes

Hello friends!

I’ve successfully completed NaNoWriMo, which I’m super, super (perhaps even hella) happy about, and pretty much right as I put the finishing touches on that, I began work on this chapter. I really love working on this story, you guys, and I’ve been indescribably happy that you guys seem to enjoy it. I never imagined that the nugget of an idea that I had for this fic would turn into the sprawling thing that it is now, but I’m so glad that it has. I love being able to write new (yet less traumatic) adventures for all of these wonderful characters, and I love you, dear reader, for sticking with this story so far.

We’re hurtling towards the end, I must say, but I still have plenty of chapters left in me for this fic. I hope you enjoy this latest one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Oh my god, seriously?” Victoria asks. “We’re going to have the party here?”

The new core of the Winter Ball planning committee: Victoria, along with Taylor and Courtney, combined with Max’s usual group: Chloe, Rachel, Juliet, Dana and Kate, have gathered at American Rust to try to envision how they’ll throw an all-inclusive party within its tetanus-stricken confines. Victoria, unsurprisingly, wasn’t sold on the plan when Max first told her about it, and certainly still isn’t sold now. They’re standing amongst the trash in the junkyard, with Chloe standing atop a washing machine, looking every bit the ruler of this realm as she truly is. Rachel, on the other hand, has been a few steps behind the group their entire trek out here, and seems determined to stand a few paces away from everyone else and look forlornly into the cloudy sky.

Taylor rubs her arms as she hugs them tighter to her chest, her padded down jacket apparently not doing enough to stave off this year’s unnaturally bracing winter chill.

“It’s freezing here,” Taylor says, her hands swishing against the sleek fabric of her jacket as she rubs her arms. “And the party isn’t for another two weeks. It’s not going to get any warmer.”

Chloe smiles sheepishly and self-consciously adjusts her beanie. She’s swapped out her usual for a heavier, cable-knit toque; Max thinks it makes her look quite dashing.

“I guess I didn’t really think of that,” Chloe says, looking unfazed by the cold in her shearling-collar, heavy leather bomber jacket, her hands securely stashed away in its pockets. “I guess I’m just not a delicate spring flower like you guys are.”

Max knows that she’s being flippant, but that doesn’t prevent Victoria’s expression from darkening.

“Well, that’s problem number one,” Max says, wanting to nip any potential Victoria-Chloe conflict in the bud. “What do we do to solve it?”

Max is trying her hardest to keep her voice from quavering from the cold. Chloe jumps down from
the washing machine, extricates one of her hands from her pockets and puts her arm around Max’s shoulder, drawing her into her body heat. Max looks up at her, appreciative.

“Bonfires are a thing,” Juliet says. “It’s not like we’re doing this under school supervision.”

“I’d rather keep fire away from our budding junior pyromaniac over here, thank you very much,” Victoria says, looking very pointedly over at Rachel.

“That was one time,” Rachel says. “I mean – nobody can prove that was me.”

Victoria rolls her eyes, being the practiced eye-roller that she is.

“Everyone knows that was you,” Victoria says.

“This isn’t a big deal,” Rachel says. “That incident was years ago, regardless.”

“I’m just saying that none of us have started actual forest fires before,” Victoria says.

“And none of us have ever tried to sleep with our photography teachers for a better grade, but who’s keeping score, right?” Rachel asks, to which Victoria gasps at. “Don’t dish out if you can’t take any in return.”

“Guys!” Max says, finally stepping in between the two of them. “Take it easy. If you don’t like Juliet’s suggestion, Victoria, you can propose something better. And Rachel, I know Victoria started it…”

Victoria begins to voice her displeasure at being called out, but Max simply powers through.

“I know Victoria started it, but that doesn’t matter,” Max says. “We’re all on the same side here. So that means we’ll have to actually make the effort to work together.”

Max looks at Victoria, then at Rachel, and then lets her eyes scan the rest of the group. Her heart is punching at her ribcage, like it wants to break right through the bone. She still hates having everyone’s attention on her, but there was absolutely no way she was going to let any of that slide. If this crazy plan is going to work, everyone needs to play nice with one another.

Victoria and Rachel glare at each other for a moment longer, before they both take a step backwards.

“Fine, I can bury the hatchet,” Victoria says, surprising everyone by speaking first. “Let’s see if Rachel’s willing to, why don’t we?”

A stormy look passes over Rachel’s face for just a moment, and she stares off into the distance.

“Fine, let’s just figure this thing out,” Rachel says, refusing to meet Victoria’s gaze.

Everyone seems to let out an audible sigh of relief – Max’s being the loudest of them all.

“Anyway, if we’re not going to go with Juliet’s idea, then what?” Dana asks, fending off the awkward silence that threatens to descend upon them. “You know, we don’t have to throw the party here. We may not have as much money this year as we did last, but I’m sure we could figure something out.”

“No, I think it should be here,” Chloe says. “I mean, it’s cool, right?”

Chloe takes a step forward, staring out at the junkyard.
“I mean, it’s everything in one. We have the booze-cruise and party bus all ready to go,” Chloe says, gesturing towards the rusted-out school bus and the once-seaworthy boat that act as landmarks amongst the rubbish. “There are spots to camp out in the forest if people really want to rough it. This is the perfect place. I’m telling you. We can string up paper lanterns and put up whatever other hipster decorations we can think of, and it’ll look like a million bucks.”

“I’d avoid the train tracks, though,” Chloe says. “Shit’s dangerous.”

Max smiles at Chloe’s enthusiasm, as the rest of the group looks amongst themselves. Murmurs bubble up, and eventually, Taylor steps forward.

“My parents actually have some heat lamps out on our patio that aren’t bolted down or anything,” Taylor says. “If we could figure some way to bring those out here, I’m sure we could use them.”

“How’re we going to power everything, b-t-dubs?” Courtney asks. “It’s not like there are power outlets galore out here.”

Max feels bad, but she has to bite her lip to avoid chuckling at Courtney literally saying “b-t-dubs” out loud – her point, though, is a good one.

“I used to steal gas from my step-dictator’s gross-ass muscle car so I could run one of the cars around here with good batteries, which I’d hook a power inverter to,” Chloe says, shrugging. “That trick burns through gas pretty quickly, and I don’t know how many people want to be huffing exhaust fumes during the party.”

They group falls into silence as everyone tries to think of a suitable solution.

“I think my parents have a generator at home,” Victoria says. “If we really are so dead-fucking-set on having the Winter Ball in this literal pile of trash. We got it from the Prescotts – they’re big on the whole disaster preparedness thing. I’m sure my parents will let me borrow it if I ask.”

“It’s from the Prescotts?” Chloe asks. “You should check to see if it’s a bomb, first.”

Victoria fixes her with an absolutely withering look, but doesn’t say anything. Chloe just grins back at her.

“It’s not big, but there’s also, like, a shed or something back here that we could use,” Juliet says, pointing to Rachel and Chloe’s little concrete hideaway. “We could use that, too, if we want to get people out of the cold.”

Max’s gaze immediately finds Rachel, who works the masseter muscles in her jaw, her gaze steely. Chloe must notice Rachel’s mood as well, because she moves to stand beside her, bumping shoulders with her.

“Hey, we don’t have to…” Chloe starts.

“No, it’s fine,” Rachel says. “We’re opening up everything else to the whole world. Why not our spot, too?”

Rachel throws her hands up in the air and stalks away, heading into the small, concrete structure that she and Chloe spent so many nights in together. Chloe runs her hand through her hair, pulling her beanie off in the process.

“Rachel, c’mon,” Chloe says, kneading the thick, woolen fabric of her beanie.
Chloe begins to follow after her, but is stopped by Max gently grabbing her upper arm.

“Let me talk to her,” Max says. “You keep showing people around the junkyard.”

Chloe nods, patting Max’s back.

“You got it, boss,” Chloe says. “Good luck in there, but don’t worry. Rachel’s bark is worse than her bite.”

Chloe pauses, considering something.

“Well, usually,” she says.

Max smiles wryly.

“Thanks for the advice,” Max says.

Max takes a deep breath, steadies herself, and follows after Rachel. She can’t imagine this going too poorly – they are friends, after all. Aren’t they? A gust of wind blows right through Max’s meager outerwear, and she folds her arms tightly across her chest. It’s the kind of cold that makes everything seem grayer; a desaturating kind of cold. The worn concrete of Rachel and Chloe’s hideaway seems to blend right in to the rest of American Rust.

Max steps through the open doorway, and everything seems to immediately fall silent. Though the shed isn’t exactly sealed off from the outside, Max feels as if she’s stepped into an entirely different world, one where she’s just a visitor, not a resident. Rachel is staring, arms folded across her chest, at the graffiti written on the wall.

Chloe was here.

Rachel was here.

“Hey,” Max says, keeping her voice as soft and gentle as can be. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Everything is fine,” Rachel says, flatly. Max can tell that her voice is strained, that she’s trying as hard as can be to keep her tone as level and calm as possible.

Max knows that Rachel isn’t going to just up and explain her feelings, not right now, and she’s already compiling a long, long list in her head as to why Rachel’s upset. She picks one entry off the list and just takes a shot in the dark.

“I know Chloe seems pretty set on it, but we don’t have to have the ball here,” Max says. “I know this place is important to you guys.”

Max doesn’t mention that Rachel had, apparently, already okayed this plan over text.

“No, that’s – whatever,” Rachel says.

“Is it working with the queen bees of the Vortex Club?” Max asks. “I know there’s still some bad blood there…”

Rachel groans and rubs the bridge of her nose.

“Max, it’s – it’s a lot of things, and I don’t know how much I want to talk to you about them,” Rachel says.
“Rachel, please,” Max says. “This semester has been so crazy, and I just want this one thing to work out for all of us. Could you please tell me what’s bothering you?”

Rachel turns around and leans against the wall, pointedly not meeting Max’s gaze. For once, she actually looks her height – Rachel has always had the ability to look larger-than-life, and Max always had the sense that she had to look upwards when speaking to her. Now, though, the simple fact that they’re almost the exact same height seems painfully obvious, especially since Rachel is standing with her arms folded tight, like she’s trying to wrap herself inwards.

“I guess I’m just trying to find my place in all of this,” Rachel says. “It’s not really about American Rust at all.”

“What do you mean?” Max asks.

“I’m used to being Rachel Amber, center of the universe,” Rachel says. “I don’t care if that sounds awful or self-serving or whatever. It’s what I turned myself into. I was a part of the drama geeks. I was in with the Vortex Club crowd. I was cool with the stoners and the skaters. The artsy weirdos. The nerds. I was the face of the Tobanga Club, the hot new group on campus.”

Rachel scoffs, mostly at herself.

“Now I just feel like I’m on the periphery,” Rachel says. “I haven’t tried out for the play this year. The Vortex Club still hates me, probably for good reason. I’m not exactly a core member of the Tobanga Club either, anymore. You and Chloe haven’t been spending as much time with me lately, thought I don’t exactly blame you guys for that. I still feel like I’m figuring out my friendship with you, too.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being on the periphery,” Max says. “That’s kind of where I spend all my time.”

“Not anymore, Max,” Rachel says. “You’re kind of the most notorious person on campus right now. It’ll only get more obvious if you pull this Winter Ball shit off.”

“Rachel, I don’t want to make it seem like I’m sidelining you or something,” Max says. “You’re important to me and Chloe. I want you to be a part of what we’re doing.”

“Yeah, okay,” Rachel says, still staring down at the ground. They’re together in this enclosed space, but Max feels as if they’re miles apart.

“What do you mean you’re still figuring out our friendship?” Max asks.

“C’mon, Max,” Rachel says. “Where do you think we are? After all of the drama this semester?”

Max just shrugs, unsure of what to say.

“And you kind of had to be friends with me, right?” Rachel asks. “To begin with?”

“Had to be?” Max echoes.

“Of course,” Rachel says. “Because of Chloe. You guys were the original best friends, but by the time you came back, she and I were a package deal.”

“I didn’t become friends with you out of obligation to Chloe,” Max says. “I mean, yeah, obviously Chloe was all-in on the idea of us becoming friends. But, I like you for you. You’re smart, funny…”
“Max, I’m not bringing this up to twist your arm into stroking my ego,” Rachel says, cutting Max off with a wave of her hand. “I’m not even saying any of what I’m bringing up is bad, necessarily. I’m just saying that I feel a little out of place now, and I know that’s at least partially of my own doing.”

“Well, look,” Max says. “You’ve done some things I haven’t be super happy about, and I think we both know that.”

Rachel sighs, and looks away, but doesn’t give any indication that she disagrees.

“But you, me, and Chloe – we’re a team,” Max says. “We’re all in this together. I don’t really care who came first, or who was where when, or any of that. In fact, the happiest I was in Seattle was when Chloe texted me and told me she made a new friend.”

A grin just barely tugs at the corner of Rachel’s lips, Mona Lisa in its composition, and for the first time during this whole conversation, she purposely meets Max’s gaze with her own.

“Is that right?” Rachel asks.

“Oh, of course,” Max says. “You know, she really got close to Steph…”

“You jerk,” Rachel says, shoving Max. Max can’t help but laugh.

“I know, I know,” Max says. “Seriously, though. Your place is with us, as our friend. I know things are weird right now, and I’m still not completely comfortable with working with Victoria and her friends. But, she cares a lot about the Winter Ball and having a really great senior year. I think we can at least agree with that.”

Rachel huffs dramatically, her breath escaping her lips as a visible cloud.

“I suppose I can forgive you for consorting with the enemy, Maxine,” Rachel says. “I’m hoping this is a temporary alliance.”

“You know it’s ‘Max.’ C’mon,” Max says. “And what, you’ve never wanted to be best friends with Victoria Chase?”

“Oh god, please,” Rachel says. “I tried that when I was a full-time member of the Vortex Club. It was a nightmare back then, even when she pretended to like me.”

“Well, now I can hate you, right in the open,” Victoria says, poking her head through the doorway. Max actually jumps. “Your presence is requested on the boat, Caulfield. Apparently someone has some big plans. I guess you can come too, Rachel.”

Victoria, with a flip of her blonde bangs, turns on her heel and walks back outside. Max glances back at Rachel, and the two of them can’t help but laugh.

“‘Your presence is requested on the boat,’” Max echoes.

“‘Yes, Maxine, the boat,’” Rachel says, overexaggerated emulating Victoria’s fussy, precise manner of speaking. “‘It’s not like Daddy’s yacht, but I suppose it’s more your style.’”

“I can still hear you!” Victoria yells.

Rachel and Max just laugh even harder.

“Why did you need us on the boat?” Max asks.
The entire group has gathered on the rickety, rusted-out deck of the boat that somehow, long ago, found its way to American Rust. Chloe is standing on a wide piece of plywood, precariously balancing on the boat’s bulwarks.

“Guys, I just had the most amazing idea,” Chloe says. “No, not an idea. A fucking vision. It just came to me in a flash.”

Chloe, bouncing on her heels, jumps from the piece of wood down onto the deck with a resounding, metallic thump.

“I was standing right here,” Chloe says. “And I thought to myself – Chloe, you effervescent, inimitable punk-rock queen, do you know what could make this Winter Ball even better?”

“And people say I’m the dramatic one,” Rachel says. “Can we move this along?”

Chloe glares at Rachel.

“I thought – what this little shindig needs is a live fucking band!” Chloe says, stomping her foot on the deck for emphasis. “Performing, for all of our oh-so needy eyes and ears, from this very boat. We could use it as a stage! I’m sure Rachel and Dana have enough clout with the theater department to finagle us some stage lights and speakers and whatever.”

Max can’t help but smile. It doesn’t happen often, but when Chloe gets into something, she really gets into it. She either doesn’t give a shit, or she’s all in. No middle ground for Chloe Price.

“I love it,” Max says. “But…”

“I love it,” Max says. “But…”

“Max, you know I hate buts,” Chloe says. “I mean, not like that. I love butts, but I hate buts. You feel me?”

“I kind of hate that I do,” Max says. “But, and I’m just saying, but what band could we get to perform here? And on such short notice?”

Chloe pauses mid-bounce, the gears in her head clearly grinding away, and ultimately, her face falls. The whole group falls silent as they all look amongst themselves.

“I might be able to help with that, actually…” Juliet says.

“Fucking what?” Chloe yells. “Are you serious?”

“Chloe, whoa girl,” Max says, holding onto her arm. “I’m excited too, but if you’re not careful you’ll kick a hole right through the deck.”

“How am I the only one freaking out right now?” Chloe asks. “Did everyone know that Juliet was part of a band but me? No, scratch that shit. Part of an all-girl rock band? Seriously? Where have I been this whole time?”

“Not socializing with the entire school for the past three years?” Dana answers, unhelpfully.

Chloe fixes Dana with a withering stare.

“Okay, Dana, whatever,” Chloe says. “Don’t just say true things like that to me. C’mon.”

“I didn’t know either, Chloe,” Kate says.
“Yeah, neither did I,” Max says. “Though that’s really cool, Juliet.”

Juliet just grins, clearly happy with the attention that she’s receiving.

“Okay, I don’t actually need to know who knew about the band and who didn’t,” Chloe says. “Seriously, though, Juliet – that is the raddest shit ever. God damn. You’re in a band. So cool.”

“Hey, don’t get too effusive with your praise,” Juliet says. “You haven’t heard us play yet.”

Everyone looks amongst themselves. Dana grins and slings an arm around Juliet’s shoulders.

“Well, J’s band is playing a gig this weekend,” Dana says. “Why don’t we all go and check them out?”

Nods begin to propagate throughout the group like ripples.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Max says. “Where’s the gig?”

“You know that old dive bar just a few blocks down from Two Whales?” Dana asks. “They’re playing there. And yes, we can get in underage.”

“Oh, that place is awesome,” Chloe says. “I saw a guy almost get stabbed there. It was great.”

Kate squeaks, looking generally terrified of that anecdote.

“I mean, that was years ago,” Chloe says, rubbing the back of her neck. “I’m sure the establishment is way more reputable now and totally kicks out violent patrons.”

“I say we go,” Max says. “Some live entertainment would do wonders for the Ball.”

Victoria, Taylor, and Courtney all exchange glances, as if they’re mentally conferring with one another. Max would think it’s kind of cute, if it wasn’t also a little creepy.

“Okay, we’ll go,” Victoria says, apparently speaking for all three of them.

“Great,” Juliet says. “No pressure, I suppose. I’ll see you all there.”

“What’s wrong with my usual wardrobe?” Max asks.

“Yeah, I’m comfortable with what I normally wear,” Kate says.

“Guys, we’re going to a rock show at a dive bar,” Chloe says. “And I know that I said that it isn’t too disreputable or whatever, but it’s definitely better if you at least try to look like you belong to the usual crowd. Even as much as I like your Catholic schoolgirl get-up, Kate, we need to roughen you up. The both of you.”

“Alright, well, work your magic,” Max says.

“Awesome!” Chloe says. “Thankfully, Rachel is a slob and has left tons of clothes at my house over the years, so here goes.”

Chloe looks the two girls over, tapping her chin as if she’s deep in thought.

“Okay, let’s start with you, Kate,” Chloe says. “I kind of dig the school uniform thing you have going on, we’re just going to mix-and-match a few pieces here…”
“I never pegged you as being such a fashionista, Chloe,” Max teases.

“Hey, part of being a punk is looking the part,” Chloe says. “My leather jacket obsession didn’t come from nowhere.”

“I thought your leather obsession came from your hatred of cows,” Max says.

“That’s a good point,” Chloe says. “Did you know cows are capable of magnetoreception? How can we trust animals that can sense magnetic fields?”

Max and Kate look at one another, confused, and Chloe grumbles a quick, “whatever.”

Chloe starts rummaging through her closet – it’s really amazing that she can find anything in there, given the amount of clutter bursting out of every corner. She manages to pull out a sleek, black leather double-rider jacket from seemingly nowhere, and hands it to Kate.

“Here, just put this on over your cardigan,” Chloe says. “You can keep the rest of your outfit. Black and white is always a solid color combo. Actually, wait, here.”

Chloe tosses her a pair of old, roughed-up combat boots as well. Kate just barely manages to catch the footwear hurled at her, looking a tad overwhelmed.

“Uh, okay!” Kate says brightly, being the good sport that she is.

“Alright, Max,” Chloe says, clucking her tongue. “Max, Max, Max. You’re going to need some help.”

“Hey!” Max says.

“I’m just messing with you,” Chloe says. “Alright, where to start, though.”

Chloe digs through her closet some more as Kate slips into the leather jacket. It fits her surprisingly well, immediately turning her usual demure getup into something edgy and almost subversive. She pulls on the combat boots as well, and the transformation is complete.

“Wow, Kate,” Max says. “Looking good.”

“Yeah?” Kate asks, holding her arms up to show off the jacket. “Do I look like a punk?”

Kate asks that question with such innocence that Max can’t help but smile.


“Yup, you’re killing that look,” Chloe says. “Alright, Max, here you go. This is the most hipster-y shit I could find that will also let you fit in at this venue.”

Chloe hands Max a ripped-up, blue plaid flannel shirt and an old denim jacket that’s covered with pins and is barely holding together.

“This smells like smoke,” Max notes. “Has this actually been in a fire.”

“No, but Rachel has a habit almost as bad as mine,” Chloe says. “Just try that shit on.”

“If you say so,” Max says.
“Max! You look so good!” Dana says, rushing up to embrace her.

Max returns the hug, before pulling back, her hands resting on the other girl’s forearms.

“Do I not always look good?” Max asks.

Dana rolls her eyes, though the smile doesn’t leave her face.

“You know what I mean, girl,” Dana says. “C’mon, let’s get you guys inside. Juliet’s band is performing soon. Oh, and Victoria and her gang are already here, as is Rachel.”

Dana hooks her arm around Max’s as she leads them inside. The bouncer draws big, black “X”s on the back of everyone’s hands, and a little thrill of excitement goes through Max. She hadn’t really thought about it, but she’s never been in a bar like this before, and she’s certainly never seen a band perform in such an intimate venue, let alone a band that features one of her friends.

“So, Courtney is acting a little weird,” Dana says, her voice low, mixing in with the din of conversation and the blaring, tinny jukebox music. “I don’t know what’s up with her.”

“Should I check in with her?” Max asks, fully aware of her reputation as the group psychiatrist/mom.

“Up to you,” Dana says. “You should try and have fun though, yeah? I know everyone’s crazy swamped with classes and planning this ball, so it’s nice to get a chance to get out like this.”

“Oh, definitely,” Max says. “I’ve been studying basically since I woke up. I was kind of losing it. Dana laughs.

“Me too, honestly,” Dana says. “Alright, I have to go and check on Juliet backstage. I’ll catch you on the flip.”

Dana clicks her tongue and shoots finger guns Max’s way. Max grins and waves her off. Chloe slides in next to her, putting her arm around her shoulders and pulling her in close.

“I don’t have to worry about you and Dana, do I?” Chloe asks.

“Chloe, come on,” Max says.

“I know, just teasing,” Chloe says. “It’s just weird seeing you with so many friends!”

“Hey!” Max says. “I had friends in Seattle too, I’ll let you know.”


“You talked to both of them over the phone,” Max says.

“Doesn’t rule out you doing different voices to emulate two people being there,” Chloe says. “I’m just saying.”

“Kate!” Max calls out. “Chloe is bullying me.”

Kate giggles and walks up to them. Max almost doesn’t recognize her at first, given her whole punk get-up.

“Hey, you better be nice to her,” Kate says, trying to affect a tough-girl voice. “If not, you’ll have to deal with me.”
Chloe laughs and musses up Kate’s hair – which she’s wearing down, a true rarity.

“I know better than to mess with you, Marsh,” Chloe says.

Max grabs Chloe’s hand and gives it a squeeze. Chloe jumps at first, a bit surprised, but quickly grins, toothy and wide.

“C’mon, let’s find a good spot to watch from,” Max says.


Chloe points towards the bar and, lo and behold, there sits their photography teacher. And who sidles up next to her but their resident queen of desperation, Victoria Chase.

“Oh no,” Max says.

“This is going to be a train-wreck,” Chloe says. “I have to listen in. Come on.”

Chloe tugs at Max’s hand, who tries her hardest to resist.

“Do you seriously not want to watch Victoria make a fool of herself?” Chloe asks.

“I don’t know, it seems weird,” Max says. “Aren’t we all supposed to be friends now?”

“Max, I make a fool of myself all the time in front of you, and we’re best friends,” Chloe says. “Now come on. When Victoria is done being an idiot, you can slide right in there. Don’t tell me you don’t want to talk to Ms. Burch and her hip little asymmetrical haircut.”

Max makes sure to audibly groan, but doesn’t resist as Chloe drags her over to the bar. Kate, who clearly has a much clearer moral compass than Max, goes to hang out with Rachel.

“So, I’m surprised to see you here,” Victoria says.

“Teachers have a life out of the classroom, you know,” Ms. Burch says teasingly. “I hang out here a lot, actually. My partner works as a bartender here. Hey, honey!”

Ms. Burch waves at a comely, round-faced blonde woman flitting about behind the bar. She waves her bar towel back, a big smile on her face. Max can tell that the gears are spinning in Victoria’s head, and she’s not entirely comfortable with that.

“Oh, that’s great,” Victoria says, the cheeriness in her voice so painfully fake and strained that Max just can’t imagine any universe in which Ms. Burch doesn’t pick up on it. “She seems great.”

Ms. Burch appraises Victoria for a moment, before taking a swift swig of her beer.

“Victoria, you don’t have to do this,” she says.

“Excuse me?” Victoria asks, laughing as if Ms. Burch just told a polite yet amusing joke. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Victoria, please,” Ms. Burch says. “You don’t have to work so hard to impress me. You’re already one of my best students, and flattery, no matter how nice it is, won’t help you win the photography contest.”

“I’m not trying to…” Victoria says, brilliantly but transparently feigning shock and surprise.
“You have a lot of talent,” Ms. Burch says. “And yes, on some level the charm and the flattery will help, both in school and in the real world. But at some point, you have to just let your talent speak for itself. And, again, you have a lot of talent. Do you understand?”

Victoria looks like she’s about to protest even further, and Max silently wills her with every fiber of her being to just give it up. Thankfully, given the way Victoria sighs and seems to deflate, it seems as if she’s not going to pursue that path any further.

“Okay. I understand,” Victoria says, her voice much quieter than before. “I just – I really want to do well in your class. And I want to win that competition.”

Ms. Burch nods, before slapping her palm against the bartop.

“I’ll tell you what, Chase,” Ms. Burch says. “You’re already doing extremely well in my class. And, if you just submit a photo – practically any photo, really – you’re going to be a favorite to win the whole thing. At least in my books. So, just don’t worry about it. Do you work, and let it stand on its own two legs. What do you say?”

“I - yes, Ms. Burch. That’s good advice,” Victoria says.

“I like to think so,” Ms. Burch says, smiling. “Oh, and I changed my mind. You can call me Hanna. We’re hanging out at a bar, aren’t we?”

Victoria manages a genuine-looking grin at that.

“That we are,” Victoria says. “Hanna.”

Ms. Burch smiles at that as well.

“Oh, and here is a prime example of a student who is perhaps too happy to let her work stand on its own legs, Max Caulfield!” Ms. Burch says, turning and making eye contact with the girl in question. “Hanging out with Chloe Price, of course. Get over here, you guys. If I’m going to be hanging out with students at my favorite bar, I might as well go all in.”

Chloe smiles sheepishly down at Max, who just rolls her eyes and hooks her arm around Chloe’s as they go up to the bar. Victoria is staring daggers at the two of them – so much for trying to be sneaky.

“Hey, Ms. Burch,” Max greets. “We weren’t trying to listen in, or anything…”

“Sup, Hanna,” Chloe greets, steamrolling over Max’s attempted apology. “We were just on our way over to talk to you.”

“Is that so?” Ms. Burch asks. “Well, how’s your competition photo coming along?”

“Oh…” Chloe says, drawing out that single syllable for as long as possible. Ms. Burch just smiles sweetly at her.

“And Max! My favorite student who refuses to speak in class,” Ms. Burch says. “What brings you out here?”

“We’re actually here to see our friend Juliet perform,” Max says. “She’s in a band, which we had no idea about.”

they’re called.”

“Oh shit, they’re setting up!” Chloe says. “Sorry to dash, Ms. B, but we have to get right up front. You coming, Chase?”

Victoria sighs dramatically.


The stage that Juliet’s band is performing on is just a slightly raised platform towards the back of the bar. The band is bare-bones, stripped down to the essentials, being comprised of a drummer, vocalist/guitarist, and a bassist – Juliet herself. She has on her usual leather jacket, and certainly looks the part of being a rock star.

“Dude, girl band,” Chloe says. “I’m hella fucking excited. We’re going to have the best Winter Ball of all time.”

“Hello Arcadia Bay!” the lead singer shouts into the mic. The crowd cheers. “We are The Whirlwinds and we are here to blow your minds!”

“This is going to be amazing!” Chloe says, clutching at Max’s arm.

The band is about halfway through their set, and Max is completely lost in the music. She even finds herself dancing (awkwardly), while Chloe absolutely rocks out next to her. The rest of their group is into it, too, and even the regular bar patrons, many of whom probably had no idea a live band would be performing to an already dedicated fanbase, seem to be enjoying themselves.

There’s commotion over by the bar, though – the sound of a bar stool scraping against the floor and the jostling of bodies, followed by shouting. Max tries to ignore it, at first, but the shouting just gets louder, making it clear there’s some sort of argument going on between a man and a woman. Finally, Max tears her attention away from the band to try and see what’s happening. Her face falls when she sees it’s Courtney, having what seems like a superheated argument with a male bartender. Ashley’s partner, the blonde-haired bartender, is trying to break them up, to little success.

“Chloe,” Max whispers, nudging her in the ribs. “Chloe!”

“What is it?” Chloe asks. “I’m trying to watch the show. Juliet’s killing it.”

“Dude, something’s happening with Courtney,” Max says, pointing towards the bar.

“What?” Chloe asks, reluctantly averting her attention from the stage. “Oh, shit.”

Chloe glances towards the band once more, before turning back to Max.

“Let’s get over there,” Chloe says.

“Hey, you guys see what’s going down?” Rachel asks, emerging out of the mass of bodies watching the band.

“All too well,” Max says. “Let’s go.”

Victoria and Taylor, both of whom were further away from the stage to begin with, are already there by the time that Max and Chloe manage to weave their way through the crowd.
“…don’t want any part of you in my life ever again!” Courtney shouts. “Why don’t you get that?”

“What am I supposed to think, you showing up at my bar out of the blue?” the bartender asks. “Come on, is it really so bad, seeing me again? Don’t you miss the good old days?”

“No!” Courtney says. “Just get away from me!”

The band stops playing, their music slowing down before stopping all at once thanks to an accidental cymbal crash and a horribly out-of-tune chord. A tenseness fills the air in the music’s absence.

“Yeah, leave her alone, asshole,” Rachel says, unafraid of getting right up in the man’s face. “Courtney doesn’t need you or your embarrassing attempt at a goatee.”

“Who the hell are you?” he asks. “What, Courtney, you need your girl gang here with you? We should talk one-on-one, away from this rabble.”

“We’re her friends,” Victoria says forcefully. “Yeah, remember me? You need to get over your obsession with Courtney. It’s sad, honestly.”

The bartender, looks undeterred by all of Courtney’s friends gathering around her.

“Hey, this is between me and Courtney,” he reiterates. “All of you little girls should just scamper off.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Chloe says.

“Why don’t you just go and…”

“Take a break,” the other bartender – Ashly’s partner – says. “You need to cool it.”

“What, you’re taking their side?” he asks, as if it’s the most incredulous thing that’s ever happened to him. “You can’t make me leave.”

“I can’t,” she says. “But I can tell the manager what you’re doing.”

“You think he cares?” he asks, scoffing.

“No, but I think he cares if a scandal gets out about one of his bartenders harassing high school girls,” she says. “Get out. I’ll cover the bar.”

He glowers at her, clearly ready and prepared to keep on fighting and arguing, but a loud squeal of feedback from the stage cuts him off before he can even begin.

“Will the asshole please leave the building,” Juliet says into the microphone. “You know who I’m talking about. That’s a high school girl you’re harassing, sir.”

The crowd begins to jeer at the bartender, who backs up, now looking worried.

“Courtney, I just wanted to talk,” he says pathetically, trying to change up his tactics.

“You need to go,” Max says. “Right now.”

He takes one more look at Courtney, scowls, and marches out of the room. The crowd cheers as he finally leaves. Victoria puts an arm around Courtney’s shoulders and squeezes her to her side, as if trying to shield her from the rest of the world.
“Are you okay, ma’am?” the blonde-haired bartender asks.

“I am,” Courtney nods. “Seriously.”

“Okay,” the bartender says, sounding unsure but unwilling to press any further. “I’ll let the bouncer know not to let him back in.”

Courtney nods, but doesn’t say anything more.

On stage, the band mills about, unsure of whether to keep playing or just call it a night early. Juliet manages to catch Courtney’s gaze – she nods, and the band looks amongst themselves before slowly resuming their set. Now surrounded by all of her friends, it doesn’t take long for Courtney to get back into the music once more. Max breathes an audible sigh of relief.

“Juliet, that was hella amazing!” Chloe says, rushing up to hug the smiling bassist.

Juliet hugs her back tightly, before standing back to soak in the bright smiles of all the rest of her friends. The whole gang has gathered out back, by the bar’s back exit, where Juliet’s band is packing up all of their equipment into dirty, beat-up van.

“Thanks, Chloe,” Juliet says. “Thanks everyone for coming!”

Everyone gushes over her band’s performance – even Victoria and co. Juliet clears her throat, though, getting everyone’s attention.

“Courtney, are you okay?” Juliet asks.

“I’m fine,” Courtney says. “I’m serious. I mean, that was crazy and everything. But you girls totally had my back, and I’m really thankful for that.”

“Of course, Courtney,” Max says. “You’re our friend. You’ll always have our back.”

“For once, I agree with the nerd,” Victoria says. “We’ll always be around to stop creepy guys from messing with you.”

Courtney smiles, and Max feels a sudden surge of affection for her. Max knows she shouldn’t be surprised by anything that happens this semester anymore, but she never thought that she’d become such close friends with one of the girls she once referred to as being Victoria’s “crony.” And, normally, Max would feel the great desire to tease out the exact specifics of Courtney’s relationship with the bartender – this time, though, it’s enough to just stick up for a friend (and fellow woman).

“Well, I’m glad you guys were able to have fun,” Juliet says. “Even with all that drama.”

“Your band is really good, Juliet,” Courtney says, her tone earnest, certainly moreso than Max thought she was capable of (Max is, of course, fully aware of her tendency to judge too swiftly and with too much finality). “Honestly, I’m glad we came out here tonight.”

“Seriously good,” Max says. “You even covered Syd Matters!”

“Just for you, Max,” Juliet says, clapping her on the shoulder.

“I loved it,” Max says.

“So, what do you guys think?” Juliet asks. “Are we good enough to perform at Blackwell’s prestigious Winter Ball?”
“Good enough?” Chloe asks. “You might be too good for us. You should be out there touring the country and breaking hearts!”

Juliet’s smile somehow grows even wider, and she wraps Chloe up in another quick hug.

“Yeah, you guys totally killed it,” Max says. “You’ve earned the gig for sure.”

Juliet turns around, catching the attention of her two bandmates.

“Did you hear that guys?” Juliet asks. “We got the gig!”

“Dope!” the lead singer says. “I’ve always wanted to perform in a junkyard!”

“My kind of girl,” Rachel says, grinning.

Chapter End Notes

...right? I don't know where I got the idea of Juliet being in a band from, but I dig it, at least.

Also, I promise the Winter Ball is actually going to happen. I'm serious. Also, I may be looking a bit too far ahead here, but would you guys be interested in a story exploring their spring semester? I might be biting off more than I can chew, but hey, that's kind of what I do.

And, as always, I lurve feedback. Feedback, feedback, feedback
Slowly, everyone parts ways following the excitement of the night. Victoria and company head back to the dorms together. Dana joins Juliet and her band for an afterparty, celebrating yet another successful gig. Rachel heads off on her own, as always, saying something mysterious about “disappearing into the night,” though it’s fairly obvious that she’s just going to return to the dorm. Chloe, with much reluctance, figures it’s time to return home, but not before she drops Kate and Max off at Blackwell.

Kate, feeling uncharacteristically wired and buzzing with energy, asks Max to spend some time with her before they get ready for bed. So, the two friends find themselves in Kate’s room, with the lights on low, flooding the space with a soft, warm light. Alice, in her cage, twitches gently in her sleep. Max smiles fondly at the fluffy little ball of fur, and just barely resists the urge to wake up the sleeping rabbit and pet her. Being that the cold has seeped through the aged brick of the building, the two of them sit on the bed, both of them bundled up in blankets.

“I’m going to go ahead and guess that you successfully asked Chloe out,” Kate says.

Max laughs softly.

“That obvious?” Max asks. “Yeah, I managed to do it over Thanksgiving break. It felt really, really good to do. And scary. Mostly scary, actually.”

“I bet,” Kate says, smiling.

“I’m really happy,” Max says. “Even though it’s not like a whole lot has even changed – we’re still as close as we were before, no more but certainly no less.”

“Well, it’s not like too much time has passed since Thanksgiving,” Kate says. “I’m sure your relationship with Chloe will continue to grow.”

“I hope so,” Max says.

The pair falls silent for a moment, though it’s certainly not an uncomfortably silence. In Kate’s room, it feels as if they’re in a soft cocoon, a little space carved out from the rest of the world.

“How was your break?” Max asks.

Kate purses her lips and stares down at her fingers, and Max hopes she hasn’t wandered into something that Kate doesn’t want to talk about.

“It was fine,” Kate says. “I don’t know. I went back home for break, and I guess I hadn’t realized how much I changed between the beginning of the semester and now.”

“Like, how you’re into Dana now?” Max asks. “And into girls and relationships in general?”

Kate nods.

“It hardly even came up, honestly,” Kate says. “But, I did mention the Winter Ball, and my parents mentioned that it would be okay if I found a nice, Christian boy to go with who would respect my boundaries.”

“Well, that’s not exactly going to happen,” Max says. “What’d you say to that?”
“Nothing,” Kate says, shrugging. “Something noncommittal. It just made me realize, right then and there, that what my parents think of me and who I actually am are two completely different things.”

“I can’t even imagine what that must feel like,” Max says. “Thinking that your own parents wouldn’t understand such a big part of your identity.”

“It’s not something I ever really thought I’d have to deal with,” Kate says. “An issue for other people, definitely. But not me.”

Kate chuckles, picking at nothing on the surface of the bedspread.

“Dumb,” Kate says.

“Do you think you’ll, y’know, come out to them?” Max asks.

Kate smiles serenely, though Max isn’t sure what emotion she’s trying to convey.

“This is going to sound weird, but I never even thought of that,” Kate says. “Or, even with the way I feel about Dana, I never even thought of myself as someone who’d have to come out. But, I mean – I suppose that’s a thing for me, too.”

Kate sighs and stares up at the ceiling.

“I mean, I have to, right?” Kate asks. “It feels like I’m lying to them if I don’t. Even if I’m not, really.”

“No, no way,” Max says. “I know the world makes a big deal out of it, but you don’t have to come out if you don’t want to. If you feel unsafe or just uncomfortable, you shouldn’t feel pressure to.”

“I – huh,” Kate says. “I’ve actually never heard anyone say that before.”

“I think Chloe was the one who told me that originally,” Max says. “It makes sense to me. You owe it to yourself to be safe and feel comfortable more than you owe it to other people to tell them intimate details of your identity.”

Kate just nods, absorbing what Max is saying.

“And it’s not lying,” Max says. “Not really. “At the end of the day, your sexuality is your own. You can go shouting it from the rooftops, like, say, Chloe and Rachel do, or you don’t have to talk about it at all.”

Max takes a deep breath, not having expected to talk so much, but feeling glad that she did.

“That actually makes me feel better,” Kate says. “Thanks, Max.”

“Oh course,” Max says, smiling brightly.

“So, did you come out to your parents?” Kate asks. “Sorry. Just curious.”

“No, not a problem,” Max says. “I actually did. My parents are super, super liberal, though, so they hardly even reacted.”

Kate smiles, looking down at the pattern of her bedspread.

“That sounds nice,” Kate says.
“Yeah, my parents are great,” Max says. “But, I’m sure your parents are awesome, too. In their own way, they really care about you.”

“I know,” Kate says. “Things are just strange right now, that’s all. I honestly don’t even want to think about home right now. I want to get through finals and enjoy the Winter Ball with all of you guys.”

“And Dana, especially,” Max says.

“And Dana,” Kate says, grinning.

A yawn comes to Max, unbidden, and she tries her hardest to stifle it, but Kate can clearly tell that she’s getting tired.

“I know it’s getting late,” Kate says. “I think I’m feeling a little less wired now.”

“Yeah, sleep is good,” Max says, stretching. “Do you want to get tea tomorrow? I want to study and whine about having to study.”

Kate giggles.

“Sounds great, Max,” Kate says. “I’ll see you then.”

Max smiles at her once more before extricating herself from beneath the fluffy, downy blanket. With more than a hair of reluctance, Max exits Kate’s dorm room, stepping out into the familiar, darkened dorm hallway. Almost at that very moment, Victoria steps out of her room, clearly heading towards the bathroom to get ready for bed. Max flinches, involuntarily; even after all this time, Max associates Victoria with mean, uncever verbal jabs. Victoria, though, just smiles faintly at Max and nods her head, the classic, “I want to acknowledge you, but I don’t necessarily want to talk to you” greeting. Max returns the gesture and heads back to her own dorm room, feeling strange. But, in a good way.

“Why did we decide to throw our Winter Ball the Friday of finals week?” Chloe whines.

“Because people are leaving for home that weekend,” Max says. “And because people will one-hundred percent want to let loose after finals are done.”

“Ugh, why do you have to be so smart and logical and stuff?” Chloe asks.

“You love it,” Max says.

“Clearly, you little scamp,” Chloe says, mussing up Max’s hair.

Chloe idly checks the time on her phone.

“So, do you think our ground forces have finished putting up the posters?” Chloe asks, grinning.

Max has certainly never heard Dana, Juliet, and Victoria referred to as ‘ground forces,’ individually or collectively, but given that they’re currently behind enemy lines, putting up posters for a party that definitely should not be happening, Max feels it’s appropriate. They’re the ones really risking getting in trouble, should they get caught.

“Should be wrapping up,” Max says. “We’ll see how they’ve done once they make it back here.”

“I’m weirdly hella nervous,” Chloe says, holding her hands out for Max to see. “Look, I’m so nervous I’m shaking.”
“I’m kind of surprised,” Max says. “You’re usually so, like, blasé? But, in a cool way.”

Chloe just laughs.

“Well, I’m really excited, too,” Chloe says. “Everyone’s favorite glabrous principal is going to be super pissed when he sees all of the posters that we made.”

“True,” Max says. “But, that’ll only add to the notoriety. He’ll do half the advertising for us.”

“Man, you’ve turned into a total rebel,” Chloe says. “I love it.”

Max can’t help but smile.

“And I have Rachel flooding social media with info about the party,” Max says. “Everyone is going to know about our Winter Ball.”

“This is so great!” Chloe says. “I hope Nathan doesn’t snitch to his daddy, though. That little punk.”

“Yeah, hopefully not,” Max says. “I…”

Max is cut off by loud, rhythmic knocking on the door. She looks at Chloe, whose eyes are wide with a mixture of nerves and excitement. It has to be the ‘ground forces,’ returning from their clandestine mission. Max pushes herself off her bed and opens the door.

“We did it!” Dana shouts just as Max opens the door.

The three girls – Dana, Juliet, and Victoria – file into Max’s dorm room, each looking supremely pleased with themselves. For once, Max is actually happy to see that familiar, smug smile on Victoria’s face.

“It went well?” Max asks.

“So well,” Victoria says.

“We put posters up on every available surface,” Juliet says. “People are going to be walking to their finals tomorrow morning and their eyeballs will just be assaulted.”

“Fuck yeah!” Chloe says, pumping her fist in the air. “That’s what I like to hear!”

“And, I have to admit, the posters don’t look half bad,” Victoria says. “Given that Kate and Dana made them in, like, one afternoon.”

“Wow, such high praise!” Chloe says sardonically.

“Thanks, Victoria,” Dana says. “Kate did think that calling it the ‘Rogue Winter Ball’ was a bit much, but given our first posters for the Tobanga Club told everyone to ‘Join or Die…””

“Yeah, we’re way extra,” Chloe says. “We get it.”

“Awesome work, guys,” Max says. “That only leaves one last thing to do.”

“What’s that?” Victoria asks.

“Oh, we just have to transform a junkyard into a viable party spot,” Max says. “No big deal.”

“Now, I think you all know why I had to call this assembly today,” Principal Wells says, in slow and
measured tones.

He lets his words hang over the assembled student body in the gymnasium, as if he wants them all to really ponder what he could be talking about.

“There have been posters put up around campus advertising a ‘rogue Winter Ball,’” Wells says.

The planners of said event all look at one another, almost unable to stifle their giggles.

“These posters have been put up without the express permission of the school administration,” Wells says. “I do not have to remind all of you that this is in violation of the rules we have in place at this institution.”

Max and Chloe look at one another. Chloe can’t help but roll her eyes at Wells’ painfully deliberate and not-so-vaguely threatening monologue.

“Of course, that’s not the only issue with these posters,” Wells says. “As you all know, the school’s annual Winter Ball has been cancelled.”

Wells once again pauses for effect. To Max’s side, Victoria groans and throws her head back – when Wells gives a speech, he has the ability to really drag it out.

“I know this decision has been unpopular amongst certain elements of the student body,” Wells says. “However, this does not affect the finality of that decision. The Winter Ball is, and will remain, cancelled.”

Another long, pregnant pause as Wells surveys the students gathered before him. Max is tempted to take a picture of this insane moment, though, of course, there’s no way she could get away with that.

“Now, Blackwell Academy can’t control what you do in your free time, off campus,” Wells says. “However, to those of you considering going to this alternative ‘Winter Ball,’ I urge you to consider who would put on such an event, and why.”

Wells once again lets his gaze sweep the crowd of students, meaningfully pausing on where Max and Chloe are sitting. Chloe, true to character, stares defiantly back at him, and Max tries her hardest to do the same.

“I’m sure you’re all aware of the – let’s say – the drama that’s been going on this semester,” Wells says. “I truly hope that this ‘Winter Ball’ doesn’t add on to the ongoing drama. And to my seniors, who are preparing to or have already sent off college applications, I urge you to consider your actions for the remainder of your final year very carefully. The choices you make going forward certainly still have an effect on your future, and the way you act off-campus not only reflects on you, but upon the school as a whole.”

Wells nods sagely, as if he’s just made an earth-shatteringly important point.

“That is all,” Wells says. “Dismissed. I hope you all do well on your finals.”

The crowd shifts slightly where they’re seated as conversations bubble up from quiet, scattered murmurs to full-volume discussions. Max looks around at her friends – it’s clear that none of them are worried, but she can’t help but feel a slight twinge of concern over the last part of Well’s speech. She’s already gotten in trouble once, and even though she’s all-in on this plan, she’d like to avoid any more situations like that.
“I got here as fast as I could,” Max says. “Sorry I’m late. My English final was a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

“That’s what happens when you take a class from Mr. Cano,” Victoria says. “We can work without you, you know.”

“Wow, no kidding,” Max says, as she takes in the completely transformed junkyard boat in front of her. “How long have you guys been working on this?”

“Just a couple of hours!” Chloe says, popping her head out of the boat’s bridge. “Though it’s felt like an entire epoch has passed since I’ve had to work with Victoria Chase, AKA the poorly-written antagonist in any coming of age story.”

“Oh my god!” Victoria says, her tone speaking volumes about how many barbs she’s had to endure at the hands of Chloe.

Max just laughs, though.

“Hey, you’ve had us too, man,” a drawled voice comes drifting out from below the deck of the boat. “Justin?” Max asks. “Is that you?”

“Him and all of his stoner compatriots,” Victoria says, rolling her eyes. “I’m sure this is the hardest any of them have worked in months.”

“Hey, we have to support our girl Caulfield,” Justin says. “And, y’know Vic, you wouldn’t be so stressed out if you just…”

“Smoke some weed!” Victoria finishes his sentence. “You’ve suggested that at least a half-dozen times by now. And for your information, I have tried it.”

“Does it make you para…” Chloe begins to say.

“Yes, it makes me paranoid,” Victoria snaps. “Now, can we please get back to work so we can just get this done?”

“Yeah, let’s keep working, peeps,” Max says, clapping her hands together. “What can I help with?”

“Go help Chloe hang up the paper lanterns,” Victoria says. “She’s been saving that for you.”

“Yeah, let’s do this hipster nonsense!” Chloe says.

“So, what are we doing for food and drink?” Max asks.

The Arcadia Bay Winter Ball Planning Collective (so named by Chloe, of course), has convened in what little free time they have at Two Whales, of course.

“Max, c’mon,” Chloe says.

“What?” Max asks.

“Max, seriously,” Chloe says. “Look where we are.”

Chloe spreads her arms wide, a wide grin on her face.
“We can’t ask your mom and the two line cooks they have back there to cater the entire party,” Max says. “Don’t get me wrong, I love the food here more than I love most things in general. But if even half the people show up that we think will show up, that’s going to be a lot of food.”

“I agree with Max,” Victoria says. “Forget this place.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Max says, but Victoria just ignores her.

“My parents use a wonderful local catering service for any social events they throw in Arcadia Bay,” Victoria says. “They’re not cheap, of course, but I can pull a few strings. And, with my parent’s credit card…”

“Hey, are you dissing Two Whales’ food?” Chloe asks.

“I’m not insulting anything,” Victoria says. “I’m just saying that if we need a lot of food for a party, we should use a catering company.”

Chloe and Victoria stare each other down for a moment, before they both turn to Max. She flinches involuntarily as both sets of eyes turn to her. She doesn’t know when she turned into the de facto leader of, well, everything Winter Ball related, but she’s not sure how much she likes it.

Max takes a deep breath.

“Let’s use both,” Max says.

Nobody responds.

“I mean, why not?” Max asks. “It’s probably cheaper to go with Two Whales, but they don’t exactly fulfill catering requests a lot, and I know that neither I nor Chloe want to burden them with some ridiculous order. No matter how much I want everyone at the party to enjoy the best waffles in all of Arcadia Bay.”

“Amen,” Chloe says.

“A catering company is nice, but, again, they’re going to be expensive,” Max says. “As much as I’m sure that we all want to see Victoria pull – whatever it is she’s going to pull, I don’t know if we want to go all in with them.”

Max takes another deep breath.

“So, let’s do both,” Max says.

Victoria and Chloe are silent for a beat longer, and in that moment, Max wants to sink into her seat and just die.

“Alright, fine,” Victoria says, sighing. “I know that my parents don’t want me to completely abuse the credit card.”

“And as long as we get some diner food there, I’m cool with it,” Chloe says. “I just don’t want Victoria footing the bill for this whole operation.”

“Worried about me, Price?” Victoria asks.

Max is walking to her second final when her phone buzzes. She checks it to see that she’s received a picture message from Dana, who is at American Rust. The boat is done – Max thinks it looks
fewable – and Dana and co. are working on transforming the old, rusty school bus into a “party bus.”

Max can hardly believe her eyes. Dana, who’s enlisted the help of the entire cheerleading squad, minus those who have finals at the moment, has managed to give the bus a fresh, sleek, black paint job, with the word “Tobanga” in the process of being painted on the side in big, block letters. There’s another picture of the inside of the bus as well. Given that most of the seats were already gone, Dana and her squad have dragged in various rugs to cover the ground and various “fun” seating options, like beanbag chairs and floor pillows.

Max is smiling so broadly at her phone that she’s sure that other people must think that she’s losing it, but she doesn’t care. The way this plan is coming together is absolutely awe-inspiring, and watching all of her friends, old and new, work to get everything done in the midst of finals feels truly special.

“Oh god, that was awful,” Juliet groans, coming over and loosely slinging her arm around Max’s shoulders.

Max giggles and slides her arm around Juliet’s back.

“That’s test number three, though!” Max says. “That’s it for me!”

“Oh my god, you little devil,” Juliet says. “That’s right. The final for photography is just turning in the photo for the competition.”

“That it is,” Max says. “Due on Friday.”

Max’s stomach turns in knots – she still hasn’t taken a photo she’s really happy with for the competition, and there’s no way she’s going to let Ms. Burch down by not entering at least something. With everything else on her mind, she’s been too distracted to even worry about the photo competition!

“Do you have your photo yet?” Juliet asks, perhaps sensing Max’s internal turmoil.

“I don’t,” Max says. “I mean, I’ve been taking tons of pictures, but none have really stood out.”

“I know what you mean,” Juliet says. “I don’t know. I have this one with my mom that I really like, but – I don’t know.”

“No, that sounds really cool,” Max says. “You should show that to me when you get the chance.”

“I don’t know about that,” Juliet says, laughing. “You’re a way better photographer than I am.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Max says.

“You are, though. You don’t need to be humble about that,” Juliet says. “It’s an awesome skill to have. Seriously.”

Max is at a loss for words at first. Juliet’s directness – though it can be intimidating at times, is also one of her most wonderful traits.

“Well, thank you, Juliet,” Max says.

“Of course,” Juliet says. “Hey, are you heading over to American Rust now?”
“Yup!” Max says. “There’s still plenty of work to be done. We’re still trying to set up a cleaner area where we can serve food and drinks and stuff.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to find a spot devoid of broken needles or rusty metal,” Juliet says. “Good luck with that.”

“We’ll need it!” Max says.

Max heads over to American Rust. Though it’s still cold, the uncharacteristically chilly weather still unrelenting in its grasp over Arcadia Bay (and Oregon as a whole), the sun is out and the clouds have parted enough that the sky is a patchwork of fluffy white and pale blue. Because of that, the sun’s light takes on a unique, strange quality as it filters through the atmosphere, being a white that’s somehow warmer than it is stark.

She takes her time as she makes her way to the area that they’ve been clearing out. With her hands in her pockets, she moseys along, kicking at empty bottles and scuffing her shoes against any rusty objects she comes across. She stares up at the patchwork sky, watching the dark green of the trees sway against the pale background and the few birds that wheel on past. There’s a strange quality to Arcadia Bay, especially this time of year, one that Max has never felt anywhere else. Not even in Seattle, which has a similarly gray, Pacific Northwest sort of winter. Even after the tumultuous semester she’s been having, she’s still so happy to be back.

She finally makes her way to where her friends are working, a distance away from the main, demolished bulk of American Rust, and closer to where there’s a slight clearing along the edge of the trees. Kate, Victoria, Dana, and, surprisingly, Rachel are all clutching onto bulging trash bags, picking up broken glass bottles and, terrifyingly, needles with the utmost care. Max stands at a distance, simply watching them work.

Kate and Dana stick close to one another, of course, with everything that Kate says to Dana making her smile – and vice versa. A grin comes to Max’s face, and she reaches into her bag, pulling out her camera and gripping it tightly in her hands. Dana says something that makes Kate laugh, deeply and genuinely, and Max takes a quick picture of the moment. This is where Max feels most comfortable, as an observer and watcher of the world, even though she’s been pushed more towards the driver’s seat over the course of the semester. Max takes the resulting polaroid and quickly stashes it in her bag.

Rachel and Victoria seem to be talking without simply insulting each other, which Max finds incredible. Given the progress they’ve made, Max figures that they’ve been here for a while – Dana had promised to show up early in the morning, since she’s done with her finals, and Dana doing anything makes it pretty likely that Kate will be there as well. Max didn’t think that Rachel and Victoria would ever show up at the same place at the same time, even if it is to help the Winter Ball around. Max brings her camera up again, and almost as if by cue, Victoria says something that makes Rachel smile. It’s a slight whisper of an expression, so much so that it could almost be dismissed as a trick of the light. Max’s finger hovers over her camera’s shutter.

Chloe’s scream echoes across the campus.

After one last emphatic and utterly triumphant fist-pump, she makes her way towards where Max is sitting beneath a tree, her victorious strut playfully exaggerated and utterly ridiculous. Max can’t help but laugh as Chloe raises both of her fists above her head for the last few steps before Max rises to her feet and sweeps her up in a big hug.
“I did it!” Chloe shouts to the tree above her.

“You did it!” Max says, finding it impossible to not be swept up in Chloe’s excitement.

“I finished my last final!” Chloe says.

“Yeah you did!” Max says.

“I love math!” Chloe says. “But fuck math finals! Fuck ‘em all!”

“Yeah, fuck ‘em!” Max echoes.

Chloe just laughs and squeezes Max even tighter, before spinning her around. Max’s feet lift off the ground for a moment, and she goes from smiling to eyes-wide panic as Chloe loses her balance. They topple over onto the ground, with Max landing on top of Chloe.

It takes a few moments for Max to realize just what happens, but as she looks down, Chloe already has a playfully lascivious grin on her face.

“If you wanted to be on top, you could’ve just asked,” Chloe says.

Max gasps, feigning scandal, and smacks Chloe’s arm.

“Chloe, we haven’t even had relations at all!” Max says.

Chloe just laughs in return and rolls Max off of her.

“I know, I just can’t resist the opportunity to tease,” Chloe says. “Also, ‘relations?’ Really? Could you find a more old-person way to refer to fucking?”

Max smacks Chloe again.

“Hey, I was going for a – okay, I don’t know what I was going for there,” Max says. “Can we go back to being really happy that you’re done with finals?”

“Fuck yes we can!” Chloe shouts.

Chloe cheers again, and this time, Max can’t help but join in.
“I can’t believe this is finally happening,” Chloe says.

“Don’t speak too soon,” Rachel says. “We still have to make it through the night. We might all have spontaneous aneurysms as we sleep and your mom will find us buried beneath the blankets, all dead.”

Max and Chloe are silent for a moment.

“Don’t put those thoughts in my head!” Chloe says.

“A random brain aneurysm?” Max asks. “Oh my god!”

“I’m just saying,” Rachel says, shrugging, as if this is the most casual conversation in the world. “We don’t want to get ahead of ourselves.”

“Okay, fuck, fine,” Chloe says, throwing her hands up in the air. “This is almost finally happening. Happy?”

Rachel smiles at her.

“That’s better,” Rachel says.

Max smiles as well, pulling the blankets she has draped over her shoulders more tightly around her. The three friends are spending the night at Chloe’s house, a sort of celebratory gesture before the big “rogue” Winter Ball the next day. Max enjoys being able to spend time with both Rachel and Chloe without things being too weird anymore, and enjoys the feeling that they’ve come full-circle, in a way.

“Do you guys remember when we had that sleepover towards the beginning of the semester?” Max asks. “When we came up with the idea for the Tobanga Club?”

“How could I not?” Rachel asks.

“Yeah, and who would’ve thought that the Tobanga Club would crash and burn just, like, a month or so later?” Chloe asks. “But what a wonderful, brief existence it had! It burned bright and died young – the best life anyone can ask for.”


“That’s just not realistic, Max,” Chloe says.

“Yeah, Max,” Rachel says. “You can’t be too greedy.”

“Jeeze, alright,” Max says, holding her hands up in surrender,” Max says. “I didn’t know this was such a serious topic for the both of you.”
“Obviously,” Rachel says.

“Completely,” Chloe says.

Max just grins, looking back and forth between her two friends.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” Max says. “I’m glad we can all just hang out, even after what happened this semester.”

“Yeah,” Rachel says, staring down at the bedspread and idly playing with her feather earring.

“Again, guys, I’m really sorry about basically everything I did this semester. I shouldn’t have used you guys like I did, especially not to get my petty revenge against the Vortex Club.”

Chloe and Max look amongst themselves.

“Well, to be fair, all that shit with the Vortex Club was pretty insane,” Chloe says. “I mean, on one hand it’s crazy you, like, straight-up embezzled money from them. But, I also can’t believe they fucked with your permanent record like that.”

“Seriously,” Max says. “How has the college search been going, anyway?”

Rachel sighs and tucks an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

“It’s not great, I have to say,” Rachel says. “I mean, I’ve been working on applications for schools in the Los Angeles areas, but a lot of them are pretty strict about their ethics requirements or whatever. I’ll probably end up going to a community college, honestly. At least for the first couple of years or so.”

“That’s messed up, man,” Chloe says. “You’re like the best student at the entire school. You should be going to, like, Stanford or some other nerd-central college.”

Rachel laughs.

“So should you, if you actually tried at all in school and didn’t want to become a grease monkey,” Rachel says.

“Hey, you won’t be laughing at me when your car breaks down and you’re stranded somewhere, and I’m the only mechanic around,” Chloe says.

“Fair enough,” Rachel says.

“I guess life never really goes the way we expect,” Max says. “Though that’s not a bad thing. Not really. Plus, I think we all learned a lot this semester.”

“Ha! You could say that shit again,” Chloe says.

“I think the most important lesson that I learned is that no matter how gay our lives are, they can always get gayer,” Rachel says sagely. “I mean, Kate and Dana are a thing now. Like, seriously, whoa. Who saw that coming? And you two are finally an item, which took long enough.”

Max looks shyly over at Chloe, who has the world’s biggest shit-eating grin on her face.

“Fuck yeah we are,” Chloe says. “We’ve been properly itemized.”

Max just laughs and places her hand atop Chloe’s.
“Well, I’m happy with that being the year’s big lesson,” Max says. “Here’s to us being friends. Gay friends!”

“Hear, hear!” Chloe says.

As per usual, the three friends all fall asleep on Chloe’s bed, which is just big enough for the three of them. It’s a quiet night in Arcadia Bay, the usual wintry winds quelled, if just for this moment. During the middle of the night, Chloe comes to unexpectedly. She blinks her eyes a couple of times as she stares up at the ceiling, trying to focus her bleary eyes. She pats the bed next to her – where Max was sleeping is now just a crumpled-up pile of sheets. Max’s side of the bed is still warm, but just faintly so, just a faint memory of warmth. Chloe scrunches her nose, worry bubbling up in the pit of her gut. The house is quiet, blanketed by the stillness and darkness of the night.

Chloe pushes herself off the bed, making sure to move as slowly as possible to avoid making too much noise. She’d hate for Rachel to be woken up, too. Having successfully extricated herself from the sheets and blankets, she pads softly across her room, trying to figure out where Max could’ve gone. She’s about to leave her room when she notices that the window by her desk is slightly open, the colder air from outside seeping lazily inside. She looks over her shoulder to check on Rachel, who still seems to be asleep. After she pushes the window open, she holds her breath as she takes one step onto her desk, and another onto the window sill. She pushes herself through the threshold, stepping out onto her roof.

Though it’s not as cold as it has been for the past few nights, her pajamas are not up to the task of keeping her warm, and she folds her arms across her chest. Thankfully, it doesn’t take long to find Max – she’s sitting towards the front of the house, staring out towards the ocean. Chloe silently sits down next to her.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Max says.

“All good, girlfriend,” Chloe says. “Sleep is for the weak, anyway.”

Max laughs softly as Chloe leans back against the shingles, her hands clasped behind her head, seemingly not a care in the world.

“Are you worried about something?” Chloe asks.

“I guess so,” Max says. “I’m really excited about the Winter Ball and everything, but there’s still that undercurrent of worry.”

Max sighs, hugging her knees to her chest.

“I know this is going to sound silly, but I’m worried about everyone having a good time,” Max says. “This feels like such a big deal. Since the ‘actual’ Winter Ball got cancelled, it’s really up to us and our party to send the semester off with a bang.”

“That’s a lot of weight to place on a single party,” Chloe says.


Chloe considers that for a moment, before shaking her head, her blue hair splaying itself around her head in messy tendrils.

“Nah, you don’t care too much about what other people think,” Chloe says. “You just care about
people. That’s a good thing, Max.”

“I guess so,” Max says.

Chloe props herself up on her shoulder so she can look at Max.

“I’m serious,” Chloe says. “I know I’m not exactly the queen of empathy and caring and whatever, which is probably why I notice that you are. You’re always so fucking, I don’t know, cognizant of other people’s needs.”

“Rachel once told me that I need to be more worried about myself,” Max says.

“Well, take care of yourself, for sure,” Chloe says. “But, I think that just, y’know, helping people makes you happy. Just as long as you don’t turn into a people pleaser, you’ll be fine.”

“How will I know when I’ve crossed that line?” Max asks.

Chloe considers this for a moment.

“I think you’ll know,” Chloe says. “I kind of feel like you learned where that line is this semester.”

Max chuckles.

“Yes. Probably,” Max says. “Have I told you lately how glad I am that you’re in my life?”

Chloe smiles and wraps her arms around Max.

“Yes, but I could stand to hear it some more,” Chloe says.

“Well, I’m glad that you’re in my life,” Max says. “You’re so important to me.”

“You’re important to me, too,” Chloe says. “Maybe even more than you’ll ever know.”

“Max, I have this amazing dress I think would look great on you,” Rachel says. “And, since we’re the same size…”

“No dress,” Max says offhandedly.

“It’ll really compliment your figure, though,” Rachel says. “And bring out those eyes of yours.”

“No. Dress,” Max says.

“Do you think I can get away with wearing two leather jackets at once?” Chloe asks, holding up her two favorites in front of the mirror.

“Chloe…” Rachel says.

“Just don’t,” Max says.

“You guys are no fun,” Chloe says with a huff.

“Aren’t you going to get cold in that?” Chloe asks.

“Beauty is pain, darling,” Rachel says.
Max takes out her phone and brings up the forecast for the evening. She shows it to Rachel, who blanches.

“Not that much pain, though,” Rachel says. “A jacket it is!”

Finally, the three friends pile into Chloe’s truck. They head to Blackwell Academy first, needing to pick up a few more people – namely, Kate, Dana, and Juliet. Juliet’s band bringing all of their equipment to the junkyard in their van, including her bass. Chloe had offered Victoria a ride as well, but she mimed gagging at the mere thought of stepping into Chloe’s rusty, barely street-legal truck. The brakes of said truck squeal with a concerning whine as Chloe comes to a stop in the parking lot, where their friends are already there waiting for them.

“Hey guys!” Dana greets, waving a mitten-clad hand at them. “You guys look so cute!”

“Yeah, you too,” Rachel says, greeting Dana by running a hand along the opening of her jacket. “Who is this? Jil Sander?”

“Good eye!” Dana says. “I picked this up…”

Max lets them talk fashion as she and Chloe head over to greet Kate and Juliet, who are stylishly bundled up for the cold.

“Are you guys hella fucking stoked?” Chloe asks.

“I’ve been buzzing with excitement, like, all day,” Juliet says. “I tried to get these two to pre-game with me, to no avail.”

“I’m me, Juliet,” Kate says. “You must’ve known that would fail.”

“Can’t blame a girl for trying,” Juliet says, shrugging. “I’m surprised Dana refused. I think you just might be a good influence on her, Marsh.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to stop her from doing anything she wants to do,” Kate says, a slight blush coming to her cheeks.

Juliet just rolls her eyes.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t even begin to worry about that,” Juliet says. “As much as she likes you, Dana is always going to do what Dana wants.”

“And what Dana wants now is to get to that junkyard,” Dana says, sticking her head into the conversation. “You guys ready?”

“So ready,” Max says.

Kate switches places with Rachel so that she doesn’t have to sit in the bed of the truck, and because Rachel is always one to live life on the edge (however much sitting in the back of a truck is living life dangerously). Chloe rolls both windows down, letting the cold in but more importantly letting her music rattle and shake the quiet neighborhoods around them, the noisy guitars and pounding drums soaring out atop the cold, winter winds. Dana, Juliet, and Rachel all dance along to the music, and for once, Max doesn’t worry about them falling out of the truck (honestly, they aren’t even going that fast), and instead dances too.
“Holy fucking extreme junkyard makeover,” Chloe says. “This place looks amazing!”

“Can’t disagree with you there, Chloester,” Max says, her voice hushed from awe.

The entire place looks completely transformed, like some fairy godmother waved her magic wand everywhere. But there was no magic spell that made this happen, it was their hard work – everyone’s hard work – to transform a junkyard into a viable party spot. Max can hardly recognize it. There’s a mixture of Christmas lights and paper lanterns strung up everywhere, giving the whole place a glowing, almost dreamlike ambience. It looks like the theater kids came through, too, and the cleaned-up boat is sporting a modest stage, complete with lights and what looks like a smoke machine. The sign for the now-defunct crab restaurant marks the area where the food and drinks are set up, featuring a pleasant combination of good ol’ Two Whales diner food and more upscale options from the catering company Victoria suggested. The generators and heat lamps are all set up, which people are naturally congregating around.

The tour-de-force, though, is the school bus. Having been completely repainted, it really does look like an actual party bus, especially with the disco ball inside of it spinning away. But, perhaps most wonderfully, is what Dana and her fellow cheerleaders have painted on the side: “Tobanga + Vortex,” with the tagline of “Blackwell, together at last.” Emotion swells up in Max’s chest, and comes forth in the form of a big smile on her face.

“I can’t believe we actually pulled it off,” Max says, sliding her arm around Chloe’s lower back. “Especially after the semester we’ve had.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, lover,” Chloe says. “People do really want to come together, for real. We all just needed the right push.”

“Sometimes, that’s all we need,” Max says, turning to look at Chloe.

“Yeah, I…” Chloe says, losing her train of thought as her gaze languidly wanders across Max’s freckled face.

Max doesn’t know what’s going on with Chloe until she realizes that, oh, it’s her. Chloe is distracted by her face, in the most positive way possible. Max’s gaze, in perfect harmony, finds its way to Chloe’s soft, pink lips. The paper lanterns and Christmas lights look like bokeh stars in the background and a cold wind blows through American Rust, making Max seek out Chloe’s warmth even more.

“Hey, you two losers are finally here.”

Max and Chloe both flinch and turn to see Victoria standing right in front of them.

“You guys should actually check out the whole party and mingle, not just stand here staring at each other like a couple of poorly written romantic comedy leads,” Victoria says.

“Hey, you stole my burn!” Chloe says. “And everyone knows there no one’s writing any romantic comedies about two women. Wait, that wasn’t funny; that just made me sad.”

Chloe stares off into the distance, looking forlorn, as Victoria rolls her eyes.

“Seriously, though, we did a good job with this,” Victoria says. “I had my doubts, and I still do, honestly. But, just for right now, this is actually kind of fun.”

“Wow, only the highest of praise from Princess Victoria Chase,” Chloe says sardonically. “If I may pull out a nugget of positivity from that statement and expand upon it, I agree. We all worked hella
hard on this, and I think it’s really showing.”

“Oh god, Max really is rubbing off on you,” Victoria says. “Hard work pays off. Spare me the fucking platitudes. I’m going to go get white-girl wasted.”

“Also, how are you self-aware enough to call what you’re going to do ‘white-girl wasted, but also genuinely enough of a mean girl stereotype to make fun of me for ‘platitudes?'” Chloe asks.

“What exactly is your issue with me, Price?” Victoria asks.

Chloe sighs.

“Never mind,” Chloe says.

“Wait, you’re going to get drunk?” Max asks. “I thought we said no alcohol at the party. We don’t want to get in trouble with the actual police.”

“Max, simmer down,” Victoria says. “Besides, didn’t you have booze at your Tobanga Club party?”

“Yeah, and look how well that turned out,” Max asks.

“To be fair, we didn’t get busted for alcohol,” Chloe says. “We just got in trouble for, y’know, pretty much everything else that we did.”

“If it calms your little hipster ass down at all, the alcohol is all mine and I don’t really give a fuck if I get busted for it,” Victoria says. “I didn’t even bring that much. Just don’t worry about it.”

Victoria glances over at the party bus, where more and more people are congregating to dance and drink.

“Now, if you two nerds will excuse me, I have a date with some hard cider and that disco ball,” Victoria says. “I’ll see you later.”

Max watches as Victoria leaves, anxiety rising in her chest. Seemingly sensing this, Chloe pulls her in closer, her arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

“Look, Victoria is going to do whatever she wants,” Chloe says. “She’s right about one thing, though – it won’t do you any good to worry.”

“I want this party to go well, though,” Max says. “It just seems so risky.”

“It is,” Chloe says. “But, on the other hand, plenty of people party down here and nobody ever gives them any trouble. I say we enjoy ourselves, and let the more intense parties do what they’re going to do. I’ll even be on the lookout for people who get too drunk and kick them out. Sound good?”

Max can’t help but smile, knowing that Chloe is trying her best to make her feel better.

“Sounds good,” Max says. “And she did say that she didn’t bring that much. Hopefully she means that by normal-people standards.”

“Come on, Max,” Chloe says. “Everyone knows that Victoria is not a normal person. But I’m sure she didn’t bring that much with her.”

“Okay,” Max says. “I’m not worrying about it. Let’s go check everything out.”

Chloe smiles and hooks her arm around Max’s.
“Let’s do it, girlfriend,” Chloe says. “I think our first stop should be the wonderful crab restaurant signage and the wonderful array of food beneath it.”

“Let’s go!” Max says.

“There you guys are,” Rachel says. “I’d wondered where you had wandered off to.”

“Hey, did you know that Victoria brought alcohol here?” Max asks.

Rachel rolls her eyes.

“Sounds about right,” Rachel says. “What, do you want me to get rid of it? I bet I could set it on fire. That’d be pretty rad, honestly.”

“Rachel, we’ve talked about this many, many times before,” Chloe says, placing her hand on Rachel’s shoulder. “Don’t set anything on fire.”

“Even if I really want to do it?” Rachel asks.

“Especially if you really want to do it,” Chloe says.

“Well, maybe next time,” Rachel says, shrugging. “Anyway, while I do still think Victoria is completely cretin, she does know her catering companies. You guys need to try some of this.”

Max and Chloe eye the lineup of food in front of them. In addition to the amazing, classic diner food from Two Whales, put out on serving plates that Max knows were taken from Chloe’s house, there are almost exceedingly fancy hors d’oeuvres set out on silver platters.

“These are so pretty I almost feel bad about eating these,” Max says, having picked up a particularly delicate expensive-stuff-on-an-expensive-cracker creation.

Chloe scoffs, her mouth already stuffed with high-class finger foods.

“Nah, don’t care,” Chloe says, showering the air in front of her with a fine mist of crumbs. “Don’t let this hoity-toity, bourgeois presentational style mess with your mind, girl. Just chow down like this is a side of greasy, soggy fries from, well, Two Whales.”

“I agree. We can’t let ourselves be oppressed by arbitrary culinary standards,” Rachel says. “Down with the man. Right?”

Max can’t help but laugh.

“Down with the man,” Max echoes, grinning.

Max and Chloe head over to the boat next, where Juliet and her band are setting up for their performance. Dana and Kate are hanging out with them as well, looking unfairly cute – Dana has her arm snaked around Kate’s waist, and Kate herself can’t help but smile from the proximity. Kate is bundled up in a black, wool overcoat that completely matches the rest of her wardrobe, and Dana is in an equally cozy-looking wool coat. They make quite a striking pair, if Max does say so herself.

“Yo, Jules Verne,” Chloe greets. “You ready to melt some fucking faces out here?”

Juliet laughs and nods.
“You know it,” Juliet says, playing a few loud, deep, distorted notes on her bass. “How does that sound?”

“Dope to the max,” Chloe says. “I seriously can’t believe I never knew you were in a band. That’s just the coolest.”

“See what happens when you go out and socialize, Chloe?” Max asks, rubbing her lower back.

“Okay, you are not allowed to lecture me about socializing, Ms. Two-Friends-in-Seattle,” Chloe says.

Max pouts, though there’s enough mirth in her eyes that Chloe knows she isn’t actually offended.

“You guys aren’t performing yet, right?” Max asks.

Juliet shakes her head.

“Nah, we still have like half-an-hour until showtime,” Juliet says. “We just want to make sure everything is set up perfectly before we melt everyone’s faces.”

“Everything you say just makes me more and more excited,” Chloe says.

“Yeah, rock star,” Dana says. “We know you’ll blow ‘em away.”

“That’s the plan,” Juliet says.

The lead singer of the band gets Juliet’s attention, and they move off to a quiet corner of the boat to discuss something performance-related.

“So, I see that you two really have figured everything out,” Max says, looking at Kate and Dana.

The two of them look at one another fondly, with Dana pulling Kate in more tightly to her side.

“The addendum to that being – without coming to me for help every single step of the way?” Chloe adds on.

Max laughs, but still smacks Chloe’s arm. Chloe groans and rubs the sore spot.

“Yeah, I guess I only asked for help every other step of the way,” Kate says, laughing and rubbing the back of her neck.

“And I just kind of stumbled blindly forward, without really thinking at all along the way,” Dana says. “But we finally got our acts together.”

“We did,” Kate says, smiling at Dana.

“We’re a classic couple, really,” Dana says. “It makes sense. The quiet, churchgoing, thinks-she’s-capital-‘S’-Straight girl going out with the hard-partying, jock, obnoxious social club cheerleader.”

“Yup, we all saw it coming,” Chloe says. “Wait, does this mean that Kate has to give up her abstinence club?”

Kate laughs.

“I mean, I guess I can technically still hold meetings,” Kate says. “I was really set on abstinence up until this semester.”
“Ah yes, this fucked up semester of great change,” Chloe says. “I’m glad we’ve all made it out alive.”

“Don’t speak too soon, Chloe,” Dana says. “We might all contract tetanus or something at this party and die.”

“Do people die from tetanus?” Max asks.

“I have no idea, but I’d rather not find out the hard way,” Dana says. “Speaking of dying at this party, have you guys checked out the party bus yet?”

“No, but know I really want to,” Chloe says. “What are people doing in there?”

Dana laughs.

“Man, what aren’t people doing in there?” Dana asks. “Just check it out. I know Victoria is in there going crazy.”

“Shall we?” Chloe asks, holding her arm out for Max.

Max just chuckles and hooks her arm around hers.

“Might as well,” Max says. “Party bus it is.”

Victoria Chase is, in fact, going crazy. She has a bottle of surprisingly cheap vodka, which she’s holding with her fist by the neck. With Taylor and Courtney by her side, she dances and intermittently takes sips of vodka.

“You nerds are finally here,” Victoria says, her voice surprisingly measured given that the bottle of vodka is already half-empty. “Finally decided to join the fun people?”

“Is this fun?” Max asks.

Amazingly, it doesn’t seem quite as bad as Max had thought, especially given Dana’s description. There’s are more than a few serious-looking speakers spread throughout the bus, pumping out dance songs that are more booming, thumping bass than anything else. The disco ball is a nice and surprisingly non-tacky touch, hanging from the ceiling and sending brilliant beams of light all around the bus. People seem to be focused on dancing more than anything else.

“Are you a dancer, or a spectator?” Victoria asks, setting the bottle of vodka aside.

“Oh, more importantly – are you human?” Chloe asks.

Max shoves Chloe, who shouts in protest.

“I dance,” Max says. “I have danced. There was that one Vortex Club party…”

“Yeah, when you were surrounded by literally all of your friends,” Victoria says, rolling her eyes. “Look, Max, those are the only types of people in the world.”

“That seems limiting,” Max says. “How drunk are you?”

Victoria squints at her, before looking at the bottle of vodka and laughs.

“You think I drank all of this?” Victoria asks, shoving the bottle at Max, its contents sloshing around.
“I’ve been passing this around for, like, the whole night so far. Isn’t that right?”

Victoria raises her voice for that last sentence, and everyone around her cheers. Max can see why the Vortex Club is known for their wild parties, especially with Victoria Chase at the helm.

“Do you want any?” Victoria asks.

Max quickly shakes her head no. Victoria grins at her.

“Remember, Max,” Victoria says. “Dance or spectate. Those are your choices.”

Victoria turns on her heel and disappears into the crowd of dancers. Max looks at Chloe, confused and with a slightly helpless look in her eyes. Chloe just grins back at her and shrugs.

“I think Victoria has lost her mind,” Chloe says. “Or she’s trying to bond with you, which is equally crazy. Just do what feels right, I guess.”

“You’re not going to dance?” Max asks.

Chloe laughs and claps her hand on Max’s shoulder.


“You’re going to watch me flail around and try to dance?” Max asks.

“Oh yeah, definitely,” Chloe says, going to stand in an empty corner of the bus. “It’s basically the cutest thing ever.”

Max tries to fix Chloe with a withering gaze, but it hardly seems to faze her. With a deep breath, Max turns back around and gazes at the crowd. It seems so intimidating at first, the mass of moving (and grooving) bodies. But, slowly, Max begins to pick out actual individual people. And what she notices is that some of them – a lot of them, really – aren’t “good” at dancing. They aren’t out there busting perfectly smooth, choreographed moves, and some hardly even look coordinated at all. The difference between people who dance and people who don’t, then, is just trying. (And, of course, not being too afraid of looking like an idiot). Mostly trying, though.

So, Max takes a few steps forward, feels the rhythm of the music, and starts to dance. She’s mostly just flailing her arms around and shuffling from side-to-side, but it doesn’t take long for her to stop feeling like an idiot and start actually having fun. She closes her eyes and really starts to let loose – until she bumps right into someone, of course.

Max begins to apologize profusely when she realizes that it’s Taylor that she’s bumped into.

“Max! Hey,” Taylor greets. “Awesome party. I still can’t believe you guys set this up by yourself.”

“Well, we had a little help,” Max says. “But we couldn’t just let the Winter Ball not happen, you know?”

“Seriously, girl,” Taylor says. “And Victoria will probably never admit this, like ever, but she’s stoked about all this. It would’ve seriously killed her if she couldn’t get to have her Winter Ball.”

“Well, I’m glad we could get this together,” Max says. “She’s been a huge help in setting this all up.”

“And hey, speak of the devil!” Taylor says.

Max turns around to see that Victoria has somehow materialized from the crowd of people around
them and is dancing along next to her.

“Were you bitches gossiping about me?” Victoria asks.

Even after all this time, after working together, Max still doesn’t feel completely comfortable around Victoria, especially when she calls people “bitches” and makes accusations of gossiping. Taylor just laughs, though, and shoves Victoria. Max continues to recognize that her evaluation of Victoria’s relationship with her “lackeys” has been more than a bit off. Especially when Victoria just smiles in response to Taylor playfully shoving her.

“You know it,” Taylor says.

“I see that Max here is a dancer after all,” Victoria says.

“Yeah, she is,” Taylor says. “Where’s your girlfriend, Max?”

Max’s face falls, ever so slightly. She looks around, realizing that Chloe is no longer standing in the corner.

“I don’t know,” Max says. “I should go find her.”

Victoria rolls her eyes.

“You guys aren’t married,” Victoria says. “If you’re having fun here, you should stay here.”

Max vaguely nods, but her attention is clearly elsewhere.

“I’m going to go find her,” Max says. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Victoria once again rolls her eyes, even more dramatically than the last time, but Taylor just smiles and waves her off.

Max steps out of the party bus and is immediately struck by the cold. Between the physical exertion of dancing and the confined space of the bus, Max had forgotten just how cold it is tonight. She folds her arms across her chest and starts walking about the junkyard-turned-party-spot.

It doesn’t take long until Max sees Chloe talking to Rachel, over by their spot – the small, concrete structure towards the edge of the junkyard. They’re far enough away and the lighting is dim enough that Max can’t quite make out their expressions and try to judge what they might be talking about. Max starts walking up to them but stops, wondering if she’s about to step in on something that she shouldn’t. Chloe sees her, though, and smiles as she waves her over. Max smiles in return and goes to join them.

“What are you guys doing over here?” Max asks.

“Oh, you know,” Chloe says. “Rachel is being uncharacteristically sentimental and melancholy and reflective and shit.”

“At a party?” Max asks. “What, are you me?”

Rachel laughs and reaches out to squeeze Max’s wrist.

“We all know there’s only one you out there, Max,” Rachel says. “No, I was just thinking.”

“What about?” Max asks.
“What else?” Rachel asks. “This crazy fucking semester we’ve had.”

“Oh,” Max says. “Yeah.”

“Look, Max, I’m kind of glad that everything’s out in the open now,” Rachel says. “I mean, the way it went down was pretty awful. But, I’m glad you guys know about my history with the Vortex Club, because I was going to just try and keep that under wraps I guess forever, basically, and there’s no way that would’ve worked.”

Rachel sighs.

“So much for my reputation as being the life of the party,” Rachel says, smiling faintly.

“I’m glad to know, too,” Max says. “I mean, I wish that everything you went through with the Vortex Club and whatever never happened, but I’m glad that everything is out in the open between us now. It feels good that way.”

“It does,” Rachel says. “You know, pretty much everyone on campus knows me in some capacity, and it’s been that way since basically the very first day of school. Chloe can attest to that.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty crazy, actually,” Chloe says. “She’s not just being super full of herself! She’s telling the truth!”

Rachel elbows Chloe in the ribs.

“Anyway, I know everyone, and everyone knows me. Blah, blah, blah,” Rachel says. “But you two are the only people in the entire world who really know me.”

Max nods, suddenly feeling the weight of what Rachel is saying. Rachel is always at the center of everything, with all eyes on her, but she’s remarkably closed-off about herself, and rarely, if ever, talks directly about her own feelings. So this, this moment right here, feels important, and the sounds of the party deeper in the junkyard seem to fade away.

“So, I want to thank you two for putting up with me,” Rachel says. “The real me.”

“Aww, Rachel, that was so lame!” Chloe says, wrapping her friend up in a tight hug. “We’ll always put up with you, even when you’re exploiting us!”

Max just laughs as Rachel’s expression grows more and more annoyed (as Chloe’s hug grows tighter and tighter).

“Might as well join in, Max,” Rachel says.

Max can’t disagree with that.

Max just follows Chloe’s lead as she pushes her way towards the very front of the crowd gathering around the boat, where Juliet’s band is preparing to perform. Just then, Max realizes that she’s never actually been to a concert with Chloe before, and what better time to do so than at a party of their very own design? Max takes Chloe’s hand and squeezes it tightly – Chloe smiles at her in response.

“Are you excited?” Max asks, though she doesn’t even really need to. Chloe is positively buzzing.

“I’m hella excited, dude,” Chloe says. “It’s been way too long since I’ve been to a concert.”

“Remember that time you forced your poor truck to drive all the way down to Portland just so we
could see a band you didn’t even like?” Rachel asks.

“Mama needed her fix, man,” Chloe says. “Besides, we only stalled out, like twice. For the old beast, I’d say that’s pretty good.”

Rachel just sighs and shakes her head, though there’s a smile on her face.

There’s a squeal of feedback from the stage, catching everyone’s attention. It looks like the band is all ready to go, and even Max can’t resist the surge of excitement that seems to travel through the entire crowd. Juliet grabs the microphone and stares out at the audience in front of her.

“Hello, Arcadia Bay!” she shouts into the mic.

The crowd cheers.

“Are you ready to fucking rock?” Juliet shouts, and the crowd continues to go crazy.

Juliet takes it all in for a moment, before catching Max’s eye and winking. Max isn’t entirely sure how to feel about that.

“Before we begin, though, I do want to point out that none of this – seriously, none of this – would’ve been possible without a few key individuals,” Juliet says, and Max finds herself shrinking back into the crowd. “You know them, you love them. Victoria, Rachel, Chloe, Dana, Kate…but really, the woman of the hour is our very own Max Caulfield.”

The crowd begins to cheer once again, and Max really doesn’t know how to feel. Wasn’t she “toilet paper girl” just a few weeks ago?

“Now, she’s going to hate me forever for doing this,” Juliet says. “But I want to invite her up on stage to say a few words. What do you say, Max?”

There’s a great turning of heads as it seems as if everyone turns to look at her. Max chooses to look at Chloe, who’s looking at her with such a warm, encouraging smile on her face that she can’t help but feel just a hair calmer. She remembers Victoria’s words, too – you can either dance, or you can spectate. Max takes a deep breath, and begins to walk forward, the crowd parting to either side of her. She can hear Chloe whisper, “go Max!” into her ear, and that genuinely boosts her confidence by a mile. Juliet’s smiling like mad at her as well, and she helps Max up onto the stage.

Max grabs the mic, and for a moment, as she’s looking down at everyone looking at her, she feels as if she’s made the biggest mistake of her life. Once again, she zeroes in on Chloe, who gives her a big, goofy grin and a double thumbs-up. Max smiles.

“Wow, okay, talk about being put on the spot,” Max says. “Can we look into taking Juliet’s mic privileges taken away?”

Thankfully, the crowd laughs at that, as does Juliet.

“Anyway, a speech,” Max says. “Okay, let’s do this. I want to thank each and every one of you for coming out tonight. I know this maybe isn’t the venue you all thought this year’s Winter Ball would be held at, given where it’s been held before, but given the circumstances…”

Max trails off, realizing she’s basically insulting her own party.

“Actually, what I wanted to say is that a lot of hard work was put into transforming this place into what I think is the coolest Winter Ball ever,” Max says. “The administration thought they could take
this away from us, but that just inspired us all to work harder. And for everyone who came out to help us set this place up, from Dana and the cheerleading squad, to Justin and his skater bros, to Logan and the football team – thank you.”

Max clears her throat, finding that she has more to say than she can even keep up with now.

“And I want to extend a special thank you to the members of the Vortex Club who so graciously helped us out with this,” Max says. “I know that most of you probably know me as the girl who started the Tobanga Club and, uh, other incidents…”

Max trails off again, but the crowd apparently finds what she’s saying funny rather than controversial, and laughs once again. That give Max enough of a boost to keep going.

“Anyway, I quickly realized after starting that club that making enemies of my fellow classmates wasn’t such a great idea,” Max says. “I’m not saying the Vortex Club is perfect, far from it, but we weren’t either. The point I’m trying to make is that we, the student body, could be so much better if we come together and work together rather than always being at each other’s throats.”

Max takes a deep breath, surprising herself by how worked up she’s getting.

“Maybe this is lame, and you don’t want a lecture about solidarity and working together or whatever,” Max says. “But we really are stronger together, and I hope that we can remember that going into our spring semester. I know that I want to.”

Max takes another deep breath, trying to settle herself. The crowd is utterly silent, and she can’t help but wonder if she’s made a huge mistake, trying to give a big, emotional speech right before a rock concert, of all things. She glances over at Chloe once again, who, after a few moments, start ferociously clapping. She’s the only one doing so for the first few seconds, but soon Rachel joins in, and then Kate and Dana, and then Victoria and her friends and, suddenly, the entire crowd is giving her applause. Max has no idea how to react, and turns back to Juliet for support.

“Just enjoy it, Max,” Juliet says.

Max looks back out over the crowd, still applauding, and she smiles and gives them a wave. What an end to her semester, and to the whole year – after all the drama and conflict, to see all of Blackwell together like this fills Max with a swell of emotions that she can hardly even describe. And then, of course, there’s Chloe, smiling at her so joyously that Max wants to fling herself into her arms and kiss her…

Now there’s a thought.

The applause finally dies down, and Chloe makes her way to the stage to help Max down. Max smiles at her, big and true, and slides her arm around her lower back as they find their spot in the crowd once again.

The band starts playing, and they’re wonderful, but Max isn’t exactly laser-focused on them. Instead, she enjoys being so close to Chloe, of being connected to her fellow Blackwell classmates, and even enjoys the chill of the night air.

About halfway through the band’s set, though, Juliet looks up, clearly seeing something from her vantage point. Her eyes grow wide and she lets her fingers slide against the strings of her bass guitar in shock, playing a horrifying combination of notes and producing a squeal of feedback that makes the whole audience jump. The lead singer looks about ready to yell at her, until she too sees what Juliet sees. The audience is starting to look around, confused, when Juliet grabs the mic.
“Police!” Juliet shouts. “Everyone, go!”

But, it’s too late. The whoop of sirens rises above the crowd’s fearful voices, and the blue and red lights shine ominously against the trees. Max can feel panic rising in her chest, in line with the panic and confusion of the crowd around her. Following behind the cop car is a large, sleek, black sedan, one that clearly cost more than some people make in a year.

“What do we do?” Max asks, panicked.

Around them, people are starting to run, though it’s clear that nobody is getting far.

“Nothing,” Chloe says, standing in place and folding her arms across her chest. “We’re allowed to be here.”

But there’s enough hesitation in Chloe’s voice that Max can’t help but feel worried.
sunshine for everyone, pt. 2

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!

The same police officer who “arrested” Max earlier on in the semester following the now-infamous toilet paper incident steps out of the police cruiser, and Max doesn’t know if she should feel relieved to see someone who seems to be on her side, or if she should be worried that she might’ve already used up all her favors with him. And then, out of the luxury sedan steps out, who else, but Nathan Prescott and his father, Sean Prescott.

Right then, it feels like the ground opens up beneath them, and Max feels as if her insides are plummeting into the Earth. Around her, Rachel and Chloe are displaying their similarly distraught feelings plainly on their faces. For a small iota of comfort, Max reaches out and takes Chloe’s hand in her own. It’s warm, and comforting, and anchors Max to something that feels real and true. It also helps that all of her friends, from Dana and Kate to Juliet to Victoria and her friends have gathered around them. The rest of the partygoers, the ones who haven’t already run away, all stand further back into the junkyard.

Sean Prescott, completely within character, looks supremely displeased. Max is having a harder time reading Nathan’s expression – it’s stormy, which isn’t terribly unusual to him, but there’s something almost like sorrow to his eyes that surprises her. The police officer just looks tired. Walking beside him, though, is a man that Max doesn’t recognize. He’s an older man with a weathered sort of look to him, like the sea spray has carved his leathery skin. He has on overalls and a thick, flannel shirt, very much looking like someone who works hard for a living.

“How about all of this,” Sean says, his hands on his hips. “Ridiculous.”

The police officer looks at Max with an almost apologetic glint to his eyes.

“What’s going on, officer?” Chloe asks, aiming for the usual nonchalance in his voice, but she’s clearly straining to.

“Noise complaint,” the officer says. “From this gentleman here.”

He jerks his thumb towards the man in the overalls.

“Okay,” Rachel says. “What’s Sean doing here?”

Though they might be digging themselves a deeper hole, Max does feel comforted by how openly defiant Rachel is, even going so far as to not use the vaunted Prescott surname.

“Well, my son here said that there was something going on down here at the junkyard,” Sean says. “We just happened to run into this fine gentleman on the way.”

It’s a lie, of course. Or, at the very least, Sean is so naturally slimy that everything he says carries the weight of untruth with it. The man in the overalls looks genuinely ashamed, like he never planned on getting mixed up with the likes of Sean Prescott.
The group falls silent for a moment.

“So, what’s going to happen?” Chloe asks.

“Look, it’s fine that you’re doing – whatever it is you’re doing here,” the police officer says. “Just keep it down, please.”

“Whatever it is you’re doing here,” Sean echoes. “Yes, I wonder what you’re doing here. This is quite a set-up, especially for a high school party. You’ve completely – ah – redecorated. And you’ve set up a whole stage. Surely you must need some kind of permit for that.”

“Well, possibly.” the officer says rubbing the back of his neck. “Since this isn’t your property, and you seem to have quite a crowd here…”

Sean Prescott takes a few steps forward. She has to fight her instincts, but Max stands her ground, as does all of her friends.

“I wonder if there’s any alcohol here, too,” Sean says. “I know that can be quite common at parties like these.”

Max looks over at Victoria, who has a supremely displeased look on her face. She’s trying to catch Nathan’s gaze, but he’s adamantly staring at the ground in front of him.

“You kids look worried,” Sean says. “I wonder what would happen if these grounds were to be searched.”

He looks meaningfully at the police officer.

“Well, this junkyard is technically private property,” he says. “We’d need a warrant, or permission from the gentleman who owns it.”

“Yes, what do you say?” Sean asks. “These hooligans are here partying and drinking and doing god knows what with your property. Certainly, they’re ruining their chances at a good future.”

The man in the overalls now looks supremely uncomfortable at getting wrapped up in Sean’s obvious agenda. Max almost doesn’t notice, with everything else going on, but Victoria chooses this moment to slip away. She can’t help but feel her spirit falling because of that.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” he says. “You know, if they just keep it down and don’t stay too late…”

“So, are you saying you’re okay with their behavior?” Sean asks. “And to do so on your property?”

It’s clear, at least to Max, that Sean is choosing his words to have the most impact on his son. Because, really, the only person threatening anyone’s future is Sean himself. For once, Max wants Nathan to be his usual, angry self and stand up for himself, rather than letting his father walk all over him. However, it doesn’t seem like that’s going to happen.

“Look, I don’t want to cause any trouble,” the man says, addressing the partygoers directly. “It’s just a little loud for me, and…”

“Well, if you don’t want to teach these kids some respect, then I’ll have to,” Sean says. “Officer, I want you to search the premises. I’m sure we could overlook a little breach in usual protocol, can’t we?”
The police officer sighs. The rumors of the Prescott influence within the police force seem overwhelmingly, and depressingly, true.

“Look, you heard the man,” the police officer says. “He just wants them all to keep it down. I don’t see why that shouldn’t be the end of it.”

“It’s not about that,” Sean says, growing frustrated. “It’s about respect. It’s about teaching a lesson.”

Victoria seems to materialize out of nowhere, her bottle of vodka clutched in her hands. Her expression is that of pure rage, and she flings the bottle at Sean’s feet, who flinches and regards her with clear shock on his face.

“Victoria, what the fuck are you doing?” Rachel blurts out.

“Oh, fuck off, Sean,” Victoria says, and Max can’t tell if it’s the alcohol speaking or if Victoria has really wanted to say this for a long time. “We all know what you’re trying to do here. Right? We all know.”

“Victoria Chase,” Sean says. “This is extremely inappropriate…”

“What’s inappropriate is you throwing your weight around and fucking with our school just to make a point to your son,” Victoria says. “And guess what – he’s never going into business and he’s never going to be a shitty, gross suit like you are.”

“What the fuck is happening?” Chloe mouths to Max, who’s feeling the exact same way.

“Nathan is good at art. Get that through your head, man,” Victoria says. “He’s going to be a photographer, and he’s going to be great at it. The world doesn’t need more businessmen, it needs more artists.”

To emphasize her point, Victoria grabs the bottle of vodka once again and throws it at Sean. It misses, thankfully, and shatters against the broken-down car behind him.

“Victoria, your parents will hear about this!” Sean says.

“Oh, who cares,” Victoria says. “My parents love me. I just need to tell them that Sean Prescott goes around threatening my friends and they’ll believe me.”

“You will not escape the consequences here,” Sean says, jabbing his pointer finger towards Victoria.

“If you have such a hard-on for someone getting punished, then fine,” Victoria says. “Tell your little police officer to arrest me. I’m the one who brought the alcohol. I don’t care. I have parents who can throw their weight around, too.”

The whole crowd is stunned into silence. Even Sean doesn’t have a pithy remark to give.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Victoria?” the officer asks, finally breaking through the silence.

“Whatever,” Victoria says. “If it’ll get Sean to leave everyone alone.”

The police officer looks at Sean for confirmation.

“It’s better than nothing, I suppose,” Sean growls.

“Alright then,” the officer says, shaking his head.
He takes a few steps forward, looking to escort Victoria to the police cruiser, when Max suddenly steps in front of her.

“Wait, wait,” Max says, holding her hands up. “I organized this party. It was all me. Really, I should be the one to get in trouble from all of this. I – I asked Victoria to bring the alcohol.”

It strikes Max that this is entirely ridiculous, that all of this conflict comes from Nathan wanting to continue to be a photographer, and it’s all crystallized in the form of one, single, half-empty vodka bottle that’s since been smashed into nothingness. But, at the same time, she can’t just let Victoria take all of the blame. The police officer sighs, this evening clearly not going the way he had protected.

“Are you telling the truth, Max?” the officer asks.

Max nods emphatically.

“I am,” Max says.

“Well…” Chloe says, butting in. “Really, I helped plan this thing, too. And you know me, classic bad influence.”

“Yeah, me too,” Rachel says. “It’s probably my fault that Max even thought to ask for alcohol, anyway. You know what I always say, ‘it’s not a real party without drinks.’”

“Guys, what are you doing?” Max whispers, looking back at Rachel and Chloe.

“Stronger together,” Rachel whispers back.

“And down with the fucking man,” Chloe whispers.

The police officer sighs.

“Okay, I know what you’re all trying to do,” he says. “But, I can’t bring you all in.”

“Why not?” Dana asks. “We’re all to blame.”

“We all planned this party,” Kate says, her voice shaking from more than just the cold, but she powers through. “In pretty open defiance of the school, and of what Mr. Prescott wanted.”

“You’re not getting in trouble for throwing a party,” the officer says.

“We are, though,” Victoria says. “That’s clearly what Sean wants.”

Slowly, more and more people step forward, staring in open defiance at Sean Prescott. Max can’t help but smile – she’s more than okay with taking the fall for everything, her fault or otherwise, but that her friends and classmates so readily have her back is a good feeling.

“What’s it going to be, Sean?” Rachel asks. “You want to take us all down?”

Sean frowns, seemingly considering what Rachel is saying. Though, behind him, silently and slowly, Nathan takes a few tentative steps forward, and then a few more. Before long, his feet are carrying him over to the students’ side, and he finds his spot next to Victoria. She puts his arm around his shoulders. Nathan still can’t meet anyone’s gaze, though, and seems more than happy to just stare at the ground.

“Nathan, what are you doing?” Sean asks.
“Victoria is right,” Nathan says. “I don’t want anything to do with your business. I’m so tired of you telling me what I want or what I need to become.”

Nathan draws in a trembling breath.

“I should’ve listened to my sister all along,” Nathan says. “You are a bad influence on me, and you’ve never really had my best interests in mind.”

“Nathan, think about what you’re saying,” Sean says. “You could find so much success in business. My company practically runs itself – even just four years of college under your belt and you can come in and take over, no problem. I’ll even still be there to help you.”

Nathan just shakes his head.

“It’s just not what I want, dad,” Nathan says. “I’m sorry about the uncertainty that causes for the future of your business, but I just can’t do it.”

“No,” Sean says. “I can’t allow this. I can’t allow my son to waste his life and not carry on the family business.”

“I…” Nathan says, faltering. He’s clearly unused to standing up to his father like this.

“He’d be wasting his life by just doing what you expect of him,” Max says, finding her voice when Nathan can’t.

“This doesn’t concern you,” Sean says. “It’s Max, right? Max Caulfield? Don’t think that I’ve forgotten what you’ve done.”

“That was me, actually,” Rachel says, taking another few steps forward. “And, frankly, I don’t care what you think about me.”

Sean actually laughs, though it’s a dark, ugly, humorless sound.

“Ah, Rachel Amber,” he says. “I should have known. You just can’t stay out of trouble, can you? And how has that worked out for you? How is your future looking?”

Rachel’s expression darkens, and it seems as if she has a million insults on the tip of her tongue, but Chloe grabs her hand and just slightly shakes her head. Rachel looks furious, but doesn’t say anything more. The police officer sighs – something he’s been doing a lot throughout this entire exchange – and turns to the man in the overalls.

“Sir, do you want me to do anything here?” the officer asks. “This is your property, after all. Do you want me to press charges?”

“No, heavens, no,” the man says. “Look, this has all gone way out of hand. Mr. Prescott, sir, if you’re having disagreements with your son – and I don’t want to overextend here – but if you’re having disagreements with your son, I think that’s a conversation you need to have in private. Again, this is not what I wanted at all. I’ll be happy if you kids just don’t play your music so loud.”

Max feels the urge to laugh, and almost actually does so. She’s not entirely sure when Sean Prescott got involved in this whole situation – perhaps he even encouraged this man to call in the noise complaint to begin with, or somehow coerced him into this very scenario, but the mere fact that this can all be traced back to a noise complaint seems so absurd.

“Mr. Prescott, could we leave it at that?” the police officer asks. “What do you think?”
Sean is furious, and though he’s trying his hardest not to let it show, his rigid posture and clenched jaw give him away. He looks at the police officer, then to Nathan, then back to the police officer. He clearly expected both of them to fall in line, and he’s a man unused to things not going his way.

“Fine,” Sean says. “This is not our last discussion about this, Nathan. Let’s go.”

Sean snaps his fingers and points towards the car. Nathan flinches, but doesn’t move. Victoria, with her arm still around Nathan’s shoulders, only squeezes him tighter.

“Nathan, stop fooling around,” Sean says.


“Unbelievable,” Sean says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “There will be consequences. For all of this.”

Chloe groans and throws her hands up in the air.

“Take your fucking consequences and shove it, asshole,” Chloe says.

Sean frowns, supremely displeased, and walks back to his car – but not before seething in the police officer’s ear: “what do I even pay you for?” He gets into his car and slams the door shut. The engine rumbles, and soon, the sleek, black luxury sedan gets swallowed up by the night.

“Sorry about all of this,” the officer says, addressing the remaining partygoers. “Just keep it down, and I don’t think we’ll have any more problems. Enjoy your night.”

He walks off as well, the man in the overalls following behind him. They get into the police car, which also disappears off into the night. Max finally breathes a sigh of relief, and it seems as if everyone around her does as well.

“Well, shit,” Chloe says loudly, and everyone around her laughs, the tension dissipating into the night.

“Did we all just tell Sean Prescott to go fuck himself?” Max asks.

“Fuck yeah we did,” Victoria says.

“Are we going to get in trouble for this?” Kate asks.

The group is silent for a moment.

“I’m really not sure what else he can do,” Rachel says. “Besides, we only have one more semester at Blackwell. What can he really do, anyway? The school can’t discipline us for having a party way, way off campus, especially since the police officer didn’t even charge us for anything.”

“I think we’re okay, guys,” Max says. “Sorry about your concert, Juliet. Guess we can’t do that anymore.”

Juliet shrugs.

“It’s fine,” Juliet says. “We frontloaded our setlist anyway.”

Everyone laughs once again, before dissolving back into silence.

“How are you feeling, Nathan?” Max asks, given that he is, whether he wants to or not, the man of
the hour.

“T’m fine,” Nathan grumbles, pointedly not looking at Max.

“He’ll be better once he processes all of this,” Victoria says. “Everything that was said tonight – it’s been a long time coming.”

“That was quite a speech, Vic,” Rachel says. “Pretty badass.”

Max thinks that Victoria is going to say something disparaging to Rachel, but she just grins instead.

“Yeah, I know you’re into that sort of thing,” Victoria says. “Truth to power, or whatever.”

Victoria sighs.

“Can we start partying again, or something?” she asks. “I don’t want to just stand around like a bunch of jerks.”

Max shrugs.

“Let’s do it,” Max says.

Everyone around her cheers.

“Quietly, though!” Kate says.

The party goes on, though, of course, much more quietly than it did before. It’s clear that some people want it to be just as loud and raucous as before, Sean Prescott and the police and the man who runs the junkyard be damned, but with Max running the show, it’s clear that isn’t going to happen. Max finds herself sitting atop the repainted school bus, with Chloe by her side. It’s cold, as it has been for the past couple of months, but Max can hardly feel it, especially with Chloe’s arms wrapped so tightly around her.

They’re both silent, though not uncomfortably so. In fact, Max loves being able to just be silent around another person, and not feel weird about it or feel judged because of it. She knows that while Chloe will probably always tease her about being quiet and withdrawn, she doesn’t actually mean anything by it. Chloe is mostly bark, with only a little bite. Max contests herself by watching the party rage on beneath her. The bus itself rocks and shakes from the dancing partygoers within it, though there’s no loud, bass-heavy music pumping from it anymore. Chloe found a way to rig up a quick and easy silent disco, and so people can enjoy their dance party without making too much noise.

Being later on in the night, though, it seems as if most people are happy with just hanging out and talking with their friends – though most of the food are long gone, it seems as if most partygoers have congregated around the refreshments table, by the crab restaurant sign. Max can see all of the friends she’s made this semester simply enjoying one another’s company. Even Rachel and Victoria seem to be tolerating each other, which seems like a small miracle in itself. Though Victoria has a mean streak that Rachel could never even hope to replicate, they’re really quite similar in many ways, something neither of them would ever admit. Max can’t help but think that’s why they’re at each other’s throats so often.

With then are Dana and Kate, who seem to be deeply enjoying being close to one another. Kate is leaning into Dana’s side, a small smile on her face, and Max can’t help but feel happy for the one girl on campus who might be even shyer than she is. As unlikely as it seemed at the beginning of the
semester, it just makes all the more sense now that they’re together, and Max couldn’t be happier. Juliet is with them, too, simply enjoying the night with her friends.

There are more faces that Max recognizes, though Max wouldn’t exactly say she’s friends with many of those people. For once, she regrets not making connections with even more people around campus, since she apparently has the ability to do just that. Max wonders what things would be like right now if she were back in Seattle with her parents. Probably alone in her room, no doubt, lamenting the fact that she didn’t have more friends but being unable to do anything about it. She wonders what things would be like if she never decided to start the Tobanga Club with Chloe and Rachel. Nowhere as good as she is now, certainly, and she wouldn’t have learned as much about herself or her friends. She wonders what things would be like if she never asked Chloe out. That has an easy answer, though. She wouldn’t be nearly as happy as she is right now.

“Max, your thoughts are hella loud right now,” Chloe says.

Max almost apologizes, but catches herself before that dreaded “sorry” can escape from her lips. Instead, she just smiles and leans her head against Chloe’s shoulder.

“I know,” Max says.

“A penny for them?” Chloe asks.

“I’m just thinking about the way this semester has gone,” Max says. “And what things would be like if none of it happened, or if half of it did. Something along those lines.”

Chloe is silent for a moment.


Max grins.

“Just taking stock of where I am right now,” Max says. “I can’t believe we have a whole semester of school after this.”

Chloe groans.

“Don’t remind me,” Chloe says.


“I wouldn’t mind actually seeing the sun for once,” Chloe says. “I have a strong aversion to everything else you just listed, though.”

“You love it,” Max says.

Chloe just grins, staring off into the night sky.

“Yeah, whatever,” Chloe says.

They fall back into silence once again.

“Hey, with all that stock you’re taking,” Chloe says, shattering right through the brief moment of silence that had passed over them. “Where do we fall into, y’know, the grand scheme of everything?”
“What do you mean?” Max asks.

“Well, what do you think of us?” Chloe asks, her voice just slightly too loud, like she’s trying her hardest to come off as confident. “I mean, technically, this is our first date. How do you, I don’t know, place us in the overall scope of the semester?”

Max smiles.

“I think that I care a lot about you, and that I’m having a lot of fun here tonight, with you,” Max says. “Even with everything that’s happened. I think we should’ve done this a lot sooner, too.”

Chloe laughs, letting the sound drift into the night sky.

“Yeah, probably,” Chloe says, staring down at her hands. “I thought that I was dreaming when you said you were coming back to Arcadia Bay, and it didn’t exactly get better when I actually saw you for the first time in five years.”

Max digests what Chloe is saying before reaching out and pinching her side. Chloe winces slightly and shoves Max’s shoulder.

“What was that for?” Chloe asks, before realization dawns over her. “Oh, right. You little shit.”

Max just beams at her.

“Anyway, yeah, here we are,” Chloe says. “Not dreaming.”

“Not dreaming,” Max echoes.

Though, as Max looks at Chloe, with her electric-blue hair and her sad, beautiful eyes, and the whole junkyard behind her, lit up with glowing paper lanterns and the light from the disco ball, escaping through the windows of the repurposed school bus, it feels like something out of a dream. It feels like magic. Chloe looks as if she has some witty, sly remark to say, something to defuse the tension that’s been building up between them for the entire night (and the entire semester, really), but it dies somewhere in her throat, and instead she just looks back at Max, a striking intensity in her eyes.

“Can I ask you something?” Max blurts out.

The sound of Max’s voice startles Chloe, who jumps slightly, a short, quiet burst of laughter escaping her lips.

“Yeah, what’s up?” Chloe asks.

Max feels even more nervous than she was before, and as such finds it harder and harder to get any words out – or, at least, to get the words she really wants to say out, so she settles on other words, instead, hoping that she’ll eventually be able to wind and weave her way to the point she wants to make.

“I – I guess I’ve been looking for the right moment for this,” Max says, folding up her hands in her lap. “And, I don’t really know what that would even be, or what it would look like, since I’ve never done this before. I thought that moment would just appear over Thanksgiving or something, but it never did.”

Max exhales, her breath taking a form against the cold, night air. Her words still aren’t becoming a thing that makes sense.
“And, I don’t even know what I’m trying to say anymore,” Max says. “This feels weird, in the sense that, y’know, do people even ask before doing this? I just…”

Max can’t continue her rambling, though, because, Chloe grabs her cheeks, regards her for a moment, and leans in to kiss her. Max is so surprised that she doesn’t even remember to close her eyes, but the rest of her seems to react automatically, her lips moving against Chloe’s. Her body grows warm, a glowing star against the night sky, and eventually she feels herself melting into the kiss, her eyes fluttering shut. She brings her hand up to Chloe’s cheek and caresses her smooth skin with careful, shimmering touches of her fingertips. Max is feeling so much at once she realizes she needs to focus on one thing to avoid being overwhelmed entirely, so she chooses to focus on her lips, and the way they move against Chloe’s lips, slow and careful and sweet, exploring, probing without ever being insistent.

Time speeds up and slows down, and by the time they both pull away, it takes Max a moment to realize where she is and what’s going on around her, like she’s just woken up from a very pleasant, mid-afternoon nap. She blinks a couple of times, her eyes needing time to refocus. Her mind immediately puts the kiss up against the expectations she had about what her first kiss would be like, and what first kisses are like in general, and she finds herself unable to fully pull her thoughts together. Really, it’s magical, but not lifechanging in the way first kisses are sometimes are described as. Max thinks that might be even better, though, because there’s that bright little part of her brain that thinks that her next kiss with Chloe is the one that changes her life, or the one after that, or the one after that, stretching into forever.

“Oh,” Max says, finally finding her voice. “I’m glad you got what I was talking about.”

Chloe laughs, and she laughs and laughs, and Max marvels at hearing such a joyous sound.

“Me too,” Chloe says. “I was kind of taking a shot in the dark there. Your rambling could’ve been about anything, really. You could’ve been talking about knitting, or something.”

Max laughs, and playfully punches Chloe’s arm.

“Knitting? Really?” Max asks.

“Actually, no, that wouldn’t work,” Chloe says. “I know you’ve knit stuff before.”

“You’re impossible,” Max says.

“Hey, you knew what you signed up for,” Chloe says.

“That I did,” Max says, grinning.

Chloe smiles, staring out into the night sky. The paper lanterns gift their light to the alabaster skin and the gentle arch of her cheekbones, making her look something wonderful.

“So, that was your first kiss, right?” Chloe asks. “Thoughts?”

Max pauses and thinks for a moment, before a smile overtakes her face, like all of the happiness in her chest can’t stay there and it needs some way to express itself.

“Too hard to explain,” Max says. “It was perfect, though.”

Chloe nods once, apparently satisfied with that answer.

“Good.”
Eventually, far past midnight, the party comes to a close. It’s like a long, slow exhale, with people slowly realizing that they’re tired and leaving in groups or chunks or even one-by-one. Of the “planning committee,” Victoria and her friends, Nathan included, are actually first to lead, though they’re almost certainly going to continue imbibing alcohol back in Victoria’s room, a sort of last huzzah before they all leave for winter break. Nathan looks like if he’s going to say something to Max before they leave, but he seemingly chooses not to at the last moment, instead giving Max a strange, sad, half-smile.

Juliet and her band are next to go. They promise to let everyone (especially Chloe) know about their next gig. Max and co. all chip in to help them pack up their gear, and they’re off as well. Kate and Dana linger a little longer, mostly because Kate and Max need to have a serious conversation about their next tea date. Finally, though, they take their departure from the junkyard, leaving just Rachel, Chloe, and Max. There are a few other partygoers, of course, but they too quickly exit stage left.

Though she’s never been one for parties, and is certainly quick to describe herself as a classic introvert in nature, Max feels a certain sadness now that everyone is gone. Almost a hollowness. The junkyard looks completely different now, even beyond the obvious changes that they’ve made to the place. It looks bigger, as if having so many people within its confines stretched out its dimensions. There was such a warmth she felt from simply being with her classmates, all in the hallowed space that is the junkyard, all there to have a good time and see the semester, and the whole year, off right. Now that everyone is gone, everything seems so empty. With just Rachel and Chloe, though, there’s now a level of quiet intimacy that Max treasures as well.

“I don’t want to leave,” Max says, her thoughts finding a voice.

Rachel and Chloe look at one another.

“You know, we actually planned for that,” Rachel says as she looks meaningfully at Chloe.

“Just wait here for a sec,” Chloe says.

They both bound over to where her truck is parked, just outside of the junkyard. Max just watches them, an amused expression on her face. Chloe comes back with two overstuffed duffel bags in her hands and a big grin on her face; Rachel’s carrying huge sleeping bags beneath her arms.

“Sleepover, assholes,” Chloe says. “In the concrete prison!

Max laughs, and Rachel puts her arms around her and Chloe’s shoulders as they walk over to the small, concrete building towards the opposite edge of the junkyard. The original décor that Chloe and Rachel had put up who knows how many years ago is looking a little rough, but they’ve clearly considered that. Chloe throws the duffels onto the ground and unzips them both – one of them contains their pajamas and a change of clothes for the next day, and the other contains some of the Tobanga Club decorations from the music building. There are the tapestries that were hung up on the walls and a few of the smaller throw pillows.

They all work together to get rid of all the old, raggedy decorations, and hang up the new. It looks wonderful, of course, and with the puffy sleeping bags rolled out on the ground, it looks positively cozy. The three friends quickly change into their pajamas and tuck themselves into the sleeping bags, doing their best to avoid the cold. Luckily, Taylor left her heat lamps behind, and they situate it just outside with the hope that at least some of the heat will get pumped inside. Chloe and Max share a sleeping bag, naturally, and they certainly do their best to keep each other warm.

“You guys used to sleep out here?” Max asks.
“Definitely,” Rachel says. “More than was probably good for us.”

“We did it whenever I wanted to escape my step-douche, or Rachel wanted to escape her parents, or just when we wanted to leave normal life behind, just for a little bit,” Chloe says. “This is the only place we had sometimes. Which is maybe a little gross?”

Max asks.


“That’s certainly one way to put it,” Rachel says, smiling.

“Hey, I want to thank you guys for this semester,” Max says. “It was crazy and dramatic and, y’know, some bad and flat-out weird things happened, but I’ll never forget it.”

Chloe laughs.

“Yeah, it’s been quite a ride,” Chloe says. “I hope next semester will be as interesting.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to be the one to say this, but I hope it’s not,” Rachel says. “I hope we have a nice, average, safe semester.”

“No chance of that, sister,” Chloe says. “Not with us.”

“Yeah, no way,” Max says.

Rachel grins.

“I guess you guys are right,” Rachel says. “In that case, may our lives ever be interesting.”

“ Fucking amen to that,” Chloe says.

“Hear, hear!” Max says.
…and, again, I’m very disappointed in all of you,” Principal Wells said. “I just don’t understand it. Taking over a junkyard? Having the police called on you? A noise complaint?”

Principal Wells slowly shakes his head, as if it’s the only way he can truly impart his disappointment in the whole student body. Or, at least, the entire student body still on campus, given that it’s Saturday and winter break has technically started already. There were vague threats of punishment for anyone not attending the meeting, though those threats seem to be exceptionally empty. In fact, no one is really sure what the point of this assembly is, since it’s becoming clear that Wells isn’t actually punishing them for the Winter Ball anyway – he’s just reiterating, over and over and over again, how disappointed he is.

“This is not the way that our prestigious institution should be represented around this wonderful town,” Wells says. “We’re very lucky that so many members of the wonderful, vibrant Arcadia Bay community –” (Chloe takes this moment to loudly snicker) “– generously donate to this school, year after year.”

There’s no doubt in Max’s mind that he’s talking mostly about Sean Prescott, who almost certainly encouraged Principal Wells to give this very speech. At the same time, though, Max can’t help but wonder who the other big donors of the school are. Victoria Chase parents, by her own words, are also people who can throw their weight around, and Max wonders if they’ve had any part in the student body not actually getting punished.

“I hope you all seriously consider the effect your actions have on the reputation of this school, and the reputation of your fellow students,” Wells says. “You should have pride in this institution, and of your place within this institution. Going to Blackwell Academy, learning from our wonderful professors – this is a privilege, not a right.”

Max sighs. A sensation like buzzing bees seems to gather in her gut, and she finds herself feeling more and more agitated.

“And, while this message applies mostly to our seniors, who are so close to graduating, I want to extend this to the entire student body. You all need to seriously consider the effect your actions have on your future, and to weigh the costs of the choices you make now,” Wells says. “Everything you do now, every choice you make, they all carry consequences that you must hold with you. This is something you should never forget.”

Suddenly, Max finds herself standing up. There’s a rustling in the crowd around her as everyone turns to look. Even Principal Wells falters, stumbling to try to regain his train of thought before stopping entirely. Chloe is looking up at her, an expression halfway between confusion and awe. The room is now wholly silent.

Max doesn’t say a word – she’s never been much for speaking, anyway. She doesn’t make eye contact with a single person, even though all eyes are on her. No, she calmly and measuredly walks out of the auditorium. Her hands make contact with the door, and yet, she still doesn’t really register what she’s doing. She feels like she’s both on autopilot and that she’s doing exactly what she wants to be doing at this point in time. The door creaks as she opens it and whines as it slowly swings shut, before the lock catches with an audible, metallic clatter that echoes across the auditorium.
It’s then that it hits her. Her hands begin to shake, uncontrollably, and it threatens to spread to the rest of her body. She folds her arms across her chest, tucking her hands safely away. Though this might not be an act of rebellion greater than any other she’s taken part of this past semester, this one feels like it might be the most direct and audacious. There’s no way that Wells is just going to forget this.

Max tries not to think about it too much, and just keeps walking down the hallway. It takes her a moment before she realizes that more footfalls are joining her own. The reality of what she just did hits her as she turns around and sees that Chloe is following after her, with Rachel just a hair behind her. Her anxiety and fear begin to melt away, drop by drop.

A smile graces Max’s face as the door whines once more and Dana and Kate join them. Kate looks more than a little freaked out, but she’s walking with purpose and holding Dana’s hand tightly. After them come Victoria, Taylor, and Courtney, and it seems like that breaks the floodgates. Students come pouring out of the auditorium, and Wells attempts to get everyone to stay are drowned out by the sound of footfalls.

Chloe reaches Max’s side and holds her hand. With a big grin on her face, Chloe throws her head back and whoops loudly as she kicks the door to the outside open. Max cheers as well, and Chloe throws her fist into the sky, triumphantly.

Following that, everyone reconvenes at the Two Whales diner. It is, once again, a cold, gray day, the saturation having been drained from the already droll city streets and the fading paint of the old, seawind-bitten buildings, but the diner is so suffused with warmth that Max hardly minds the weather. The whole group has become such a usual fixture that the staff knows to push tables together and get their usual orders ready as soon as they see them walking in. Perhaps for the first time, Victoria and her friends seem like a totally natural part of Max’s group. It’s a good feeling.

With everyone still buzzing with excitement, everyone relays their plans for the winter break. Most people are going home, of course, and there are varying levels of excitement surrounding that. Taylor is thrilled to see her mom, naturally, while Kate is aware that her house is going to be uncomfortable for the time being. Max hopes she’s going to be okay; she’d go with her, if that were even possible. Victoria is going on a vacation to Europe with her family, because of course she is, while Dana is going to escape the cold of the Northern Hemisphere by travelling to Australia and New Zealand. Chloe and Rachel are resigned to staying in Arcadia Bay to enjoy the area’s coldest winter in a hundred years.

“What are you doing, Max?” Victoria asks.

It’s not until just then that Max realizes that she’s been zoning in and out of the conversation, picking up the most important information but missing almost everything else. Even now, there’s a lot still on her mind – their Winter Ball (still), her reaction to Wells’ speech, and something else, something huge and vital that now she can’t quite put her finger on.

“I’m sorry?” Max asks.

Victoria rolls her eyes, but Max now sees this as less of a judgmental gesture and just a natural Victoria-response to the world around her.

“I’m asking what you’re doing over winter break,” Victoria says. “You’re a total space-case today. Did defying authority hurt your brain a little bit?”

“At least she has a brain to be hurt, mean girl,” Chloe says, grinning.
“Oh, shut up,” Victoria says.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, actually,” Max says, making sure to speak loudly and cut off any more insults. “I mean, I’m going back home for Christmas and New Year’s, but our break is pretty long. I might stay here for a bit, just since the dorms are going to stay open.”

“Oh my god, please,” Chloe says. “Please don’t leave me here with just Rachel. She’s going to make me do crimes, Max. Crimes.”

Rachel playfully slugs Chloe’s shoulder.

“Right, I’m the bad influence here,” Rachel says.

“Well…” Victoria exhales.

“Don’t start,” Max says. “I might stay for a bit, actually. This place feels so much more like home than Seattle ever did.”

“Damn straight,” Chloe says. “What does Seattle have to offer that Arcadia Bay can’t, besides a bustling city life, a storied history, a vibrant music scene, and not smelling like fish every time the wind blows in from the ocean?”

Everyone around the table laughs.

“You love Arcadia Bay,” Max says. “I think it’s your favorite place in the entire world.”

“Gross, don’t say things like that, Max,” Chloe says.

Max just smiles knowingly at Chloe.

“Oh, shit!” Victoria suddenly blurts out.

The whole diner turns to look at her, though Victoria doesn’t even realize the scene she’s causing. Her eyes are glued to her phone, her mouth agape.

“What the fuck, man?” Chloe asks. “Is your barber offering a discount for swoopy boy-bang haircuts?”

“Shut up,” Victoria says. “With all the excitement, I totally forgot. The photo contest winner is going to be announced tonight! The notification just popped up on my phone.


Max thinks for a moment.

“Wait, how is it being announced?” she asks. “I’ve had a lot of other things on my mind, I guess.”

Max rubs the back of her neck as Victoria sighs, like she’s being forced to explain a very basic concept to a young child.

“Ms. Burch was just going to email us, but she thought that would be lame,” Victoria says. “So, she invited all the students who were still around to meet her at that bar where Juliet’s band played.”

“Just try it on, Max.”
“Are you sure?” Max asks. “This thing is like your baby.”

Chloe is holding out her favorite leather jacket, a worn, black double-rider with patches sewn into it and pins and buttons affixed to its lapels.

“Don’t you want to look cool for Ms. Burch?” Chloe asks. “Also, leather is a good deterrent to getting stabbed.”

“Chloe, are you ever going to tell me the whole story behind that incident?” Max asks.

“What’s to tell?” Chloe asks. “People get stabbed at dive bars all the time. Now, c’mon, just try it on.”

“Alright, if you’re sure,” Max says.

Max takes the jacket and just holds it in her hands for a moment. The jacket is soft and Max’s fingers sink into it without much resistant, though the leather is also cracked in some places from age, and those places are hard and surprisingly jagged. Max runs her fingertips across the cracks as well, realizing that the leather wouldn’t have nearly as much depth or character without them. As she slides the jacket on, she realizes how much it smells like Chloe – a strange blend of cigarette smoke, weed, and whatever sweet-smelling, floral shampoo that she uses. It’s a little big for her, but she doesn’t mind. To Max, it feels a bit like body armor.

“How do I look?” Max asks.

“Absolutely amazing,” Chloe says.

Chloe grabs the lapels of her jacket and pulls her in close, so that she can kiss her on the lips. Max sinks into it like a daydream, and only comes up to the surface when she hears someone knocking on the open door to Chloe’s room. They both turn to see Rachel standing in the doorway, and amused expression on her face.

“C’mon, lovebirds,” Rachel says. “We have to go see Max win this photo competition.”

Max’s cheeks grow pink.

“You guys know that I’m probably not going to win, right?” Max asks.

Chloe and Rachel look at one another.

“That’s a possibility?” Chloe asks, feigning true incredulity.

“The thought never crossed my mind,” Rachel says with a grin.

Max just shakes her head.

“Let’s just go, then,” Max says.

Max is surprised by the turnout. Ms. Burch is sitting at a large corner booth towards the back of the bar, and it seems as if nearly the entire photography class is there. It must be a strange sight, all of these high school students huddled around a booth, but the bar has certainly seen stranger things. Ms. Burch is sitting at the center of everything, with a crisp, white envelope in her hands that certainly contains the name of the winner of the contest. Max is surprised by just how fast and hard her heart is beating – it’s thudding away at her ribcage as a cold sweat covers her skin. She stills her hands by shoving them in the pockets of her jacket.
“Alright, thank you for joining me,” Ms. Burch says. “While I’m surprised that you aren’t all enjoying your break, I can’t say that I’m not happy to see you all one more time before the new year.”

Ms. Burch taps the envelope against the table, drawing everyone’s attention further in.

“Before I announce the winner of the photography contest, I just want to say a few things,” Ms. Burch says.

Everyone groans.

“Alright, alright, I know,” Ms. Burch says. “But I think you’ll all want to hear this. I know you kids might think this is lame, but to me, you’re already all winners. All of you have done great work in this class, and it’s been an absolute joy and a privilege to see all of you grow over the course of the semester, both as artists but, more importantly, as people.”

Ms. Burch clears her throat.

“I also want to remind you that this contest is voted on by a panel of photographers and artists, and that many schools across the state are participating. The winner might not even be from this school, but at the same time, I don’t think they’d send me this nice letter just to tell me that none of my students won,” Ms. Burch says. “Anyway, without further ado…”

Ms. Burch opens the envelope and unfolds the letter within. A smile grows on her face as she reads the contents of the letter.

“I’m very happy to announce that one of our very own has won the contest,” Ms. Burch says. “Chloe Price – congratulations. For understanding empathy and for submitting one hell of a polaroid picture, you’ve won the photography contest.”

The whole crowd of students is silent for a moment, until Max cheers and starts clapping. Everyone else joins in as well, and there’s no way that the entire bar doesn’t hate them by this point. Even Victoria, who looks supremely disappointed and clearly wanted to win herself, claps and pats Chloe on the back. Chloe looks more surprised than anyone else that she won, but deep down, Max isn’t surprised. She always knew that Chloe had it in her – it’s nice to see her being rewarded for it.


“Well, Chloe, you must have learned something from my class after all, despite pretending to not care about it,” Ms. Burch says, a playful grin on her lips. “If you want a real answer, though, I can give one to you.”

Chloe had very begrudgingly shown her submission to Max just before she turned it in. The photo. The photo has a messy composition, in classic Chloe style, but at the same time a lot of warmth and life comes through because of it. Chloe had taken the photo, somehow without anyone realizing it, on Thanksgiving Day. The photo captures the Price household kitchen with Chloe’s mom featured on the left side of the frame, her hand on David’s shoulder and a look of simple fondness on her face. On the other side of the photo are Max’s parents, laughing at something said. Max’s mom has her arm wrapped around her husband’s lower back, and he has his arm around her shoulders. Max herself is there as well, next to her parents, nearly looking into the lens, but not quite. There’s a fond look on her face, the kind she gets just from being near Chloe. The lighting is warm and gentle, the simple white glow of the overhead fluorescent light source mixing with the cool, gray light from outside. There’s a slight haze to the photo, a kind of nostalgic-feeling mistiness that’s probably just a result of the heat from the kitchen. Still, it works perfectly, giving the scene a sort of impressionistic,
far-away feeling, like a song drenched in reverb.

“Your photograph is perhaps not the most technically proficient that I’ve ever seen, but it captures the feeling of the theme – empathy – more than any other submission,” Ms. Burch says. “You capture that sense of familial belonging and interpersonal connection so wonderfully. I don’t think anyone captured the admittedly very broad theme so well. So, congratulations, Chloe.”

Chloe looks close to tears, and Max slides her arm around her back, beaming up at her. Suddenly, Chloe breaks out into a big, wavering smile, before pressing her lips to Max’s cheek.

“I never doubted myself for a moment!” Chloe says, to which the gathered crowd of students laugh.

Max walks the hallways of Blackwell Academy. Even though finals ended just a couple of days ago, Max finds the hallways almost unrecognizable. Most students have gone home for Winter Break already, and certainly none of them are wandering around the hallways and classrooms like Max is. There’s a certain, specific, strange quality that a normally-busy place gains when it’s completely empty, and the hallways are certainly imbued with that quality now. Max walks slowly, letting her footsteps echo and idly tracing her finger against the cool metal of the lockers. The light outside is still cold and gray, and little filters through the few windows that actually look to the outside.

Max finds her way to the photography classroom. She tries the door, somewhat surprised to find it unlocked given David’s usual obsession with security. Perhaps he takes it easy during Winter Break, which sounds absolutely ludicrous to Max. Still, Max isn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. She steps into the classroom.

The tall windows to one side of the classroom let the winter’s light flood into the familiar space, and the icy light somehow looks warm and inviting here. Max’s feet carry her to her usual spot towards the back of the classroom, and she pulls her seat back with the screech of metal feet against linoleum and sits down.

For a long time, Max just sits there, allowing the atmosphere of the classroom wash over her in waves. Even though, that morning, she was absolutely certain in her desire to come here, she doesn’t quite understand why she feels so strongly about it or where that desire even came from to begin with. Still, though, there’s no doubt in her mind that this is exactly where she needs to be at this very point in time. So, Max sits there, drums her fingers against the desk, and waits for Arcadia Bay to reveal the significance of her being there to her.

When that doesn’t happen, because of course it doesn’t, Max grabs her camera instead from out of her trusty shoulder bag. She aims it towards the front of the classroom, vaguely in line with where Chloe would sit and where Ms. Burch would stand and lecture. She depresses the shutter, the flash briefly capturing the classroom with its harsh, stark light. In that very same moment, the door opens, the lock mechanism sounding something like a gunshot. Max jumps in her seat and nearly drops her camera.

Chloe, of all people, pokes her head through the doorway, a smile on her face, before walking in and jumping onto the desk in a seated position. Max smiles up at her in return.

“What are you doing in here, weirdo?” Chloe asks. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Sorry, Chloe,” Max says. “I know we were supposed to hang out, but I just really felt like coming here.”

“It’s all good, brah,” Chloe says. “What were you taking a picture of?”
Max rubs the back of her neck.

“The classroom?” Max answers.

Chloe just laughs.

“You should take a picture of us instead,” Chloe says.

Max taps her fingers against the body of her camera, thoughtfully.

“That’s not a bad idea, actually,” Max says. “C’mere.”

Chloe dutifully crouches next to Max’s seat and smooshes her face up against Max’s. Max giggles and holds her camera out, carefully aiming the lens at the two of them.

“Smile!” Max says.

Chloe beams, and Max takes the picture.

The End.

Chapter End Notes

...holy crap, guys, I think this is it.

I might throw in a quick epilogue, and I’m almost certainly going to be writing about their spring semester, but this is it.

Though I certainly had a specific direction in mind for this story, and I had a lot of the larger story beats planned out, I never once thought that this thing would grow into the 100,000+ word beast that it is today. And, of course, I have to thank all of you for your comments and kudos and support and whatever else, all of which has certainly inspired me to dream bigger and to write more. I’ve said this before, but this has been a real labor of love for me. I love Life is Strange and its surrounding fandom, and I’m so glad that you guys seem to actually like this story of mine!

IDK what else to say, peeps. Chloe + Max. Forever.
“Wow, I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it, Chloe. You’ve earned it.”

Chloe Price is standing right in front of her winning photograph, blown up to almost inhuman proportions, with Ms. Burch by her side. Emotions mix and churn in her gut – surprise, awe, appreciation, excitement, and more that she can’t even identify. Never did she imagine that her photography would garner any positive reactions at all, let alone be featured at one of the most prestigious galleries on the west coast.

“I guess I’ve never really seen myself as an artist,” Chloe says bashfully, fiddling idly with her beanie.

“Well, you are one,” Ms. Burch says. “Though you don’t need a photograph hanging in a gallery to prove that, nor do you need the approval of me and my fellow photographers.”

Chloe chuckles.

“What, then?” Chloe asks. “What makes me an artist?”

“Just the desire to create,” Ms. Burch says. “The desire to make something that’s true to yourself.”

“Seems like a broad definition,” Chloe says.

“It is,” Ms. Burch says. “I needed something broad enough that I could include your sharpie graffiti as part of your ‘portfolio.’”

Chloe’s eyes go wide, and a slight tinge of pink appears on her cheeks.

“You’re, uh, you’re aware of that?” Chloe asks.

Ms. Burch laughs softly.

“Of course,” Ms. Burch says. “You’d be surprised by how much us teachers know about our students.”

“Oh man,” Chloe says, mostly to herself.

“Don’t worry,” Ms. Burch says. “I’m not going to blab to Principal Wells.”

“Thank goodness,” Chloe says. “That dude is seriously out to get me.”

“Wells is – he’s trying his best,” Ms. Burch says.

Chloe pulls a face at that.

“It’s an unenviable position, having to balance the needs of his students with the demands of the board and of prominent donors,” Ms. Burch says. “He does tend to be a little, let’s say, overenthusiastic with his punishments and threats of punishment, though.”

Chloe scoffs, the memory of his telling off of the student body over the Winter Ball still fresh on her mind.
“You can say that again,” Chloe says.

“Speaking of which, though,” Ms. Burch says. “You’ve certainly had an exciting semester.”

A smile grows across Chloe’s face.

“That it has,” Chloe says, before her smile falters. “Wait – how much of my semester do you know about?”

Ms. Burch laughs, and pats Chloe’s shoulder.

“Just the broad strokes, let’s say,” Ms. Burch says. “Though I’m not happy how it turned out, I’m glad that you and your friends tried to start an alternative to the Vortex Club. Having just one exclusive group lording over the school always struck me as being, well, a bit unfair.”

“Yeah, it was a good idea,” Chloe says. “I don’t know if Max is going to go for it, but I want to bring it back full-force for the spring semester. Or something like it, at least.”

“Well, I think it’s a good idea,” Ms. Burch says. “It’s always nice to have a club for weirdos. It’s what I would’ve wanted in high school.”

“Are you saying you weren’t always cool?” Chloe asks. “You didn’t always take dope pictures and have a hip sidecut hairdo?”

Ms. Burch can’t help but laugh again.

“I was an openly gay girl who was obsessed with her camera and wanted to talk about art since I was in middle school,” Ms. Burch. “I was definitely uncool. So, I see the need for a club like yours. You just need to engage in less open warfare with the ‘cool kids.’”

“Yeah, that was probably our downfall,” Chloe says. “Plus, we’re friends with Victoria now, and I think that Nathan doesn’t completely hate us, so that’s something.”

“That’s good to hear,” Ms. Burch says. “High school students can spend so much time at one another’s throats. I understand the animosity between you all, but it’s nice that, now, you all seem to be trying to be friends.”

“Yeah, friends,” Chloe says. “Right before we all go away to college.”

Chloe sighs and puts her hands on her hips, purposefully staring forward, avoiding Ms. Burch’s gaze.

“Hey, it’ll be okay,” Ms. Burch says. “Keeping in touch with your friends is hard, I’m not going to lie. But, it seems like you have relationships worth preserving. You just have to put in the effort.”

“Something that I’m famously bad at,” Chloe says.

Ms. Burch studies Chloe for a moment.

“Maybe,” Ms. Burch says. “You just need the proper motivation. And I think you have plenty of motivation to keep in touch with, say, Max, right?”

Chloe smiles and stares down at her boots.

Ms. Burch smiles in turn.

“I’m not sure if it’s really my place to say this, but you two seem good together,” Ms. Burch says. “You two seem pretty inseparable already. I don’t think that graduating from high school is going to change that.”

“You’re probably right,” Chloe says. “I don’t know. I’m just worrying about nothing. I guess I should just enjoy my spring semester, right?”

“You definitely should,” Ms. Burch says. “There should be plenty to enjoy. I hear we might be throwing a big Spring Carnival this year. Should be fun. Do you want to see some of the other photographs?”

Chloe takes a moment to process what was just said. Meanwhile, Ms. Burch moves on to see the rest of the exhibit, leaving Chloe standing in front of her winning photograph.

“Wait, Ms. Burch, what did you say?” Chloe asks. “Spring Carnival? What’s that?”

Ms. Burch just grins in response.

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